

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PAIDEIA PHILOSOPHY

In 1982, philosopher Mortimer Adler (1902-2001) and a group of educators called the "Paideia Group" published a ground breaking book entitled *The Paideia Proposal: an Educational Manifesto*. (Paideia is the Greek word for the proper upbringing of children: it implies a school community that nurtures the ideal of a well-rounded human individual—emotional, spiritual, physical as well as intellectual health.) *The Paideia Proposal* offered a systemic critique of American public education. Adler argued that unless we managed to offer all American children the same high quality education, our democracy itself was in danger. He stated that in order to maintain our democratic society, we must simultaneously institute much higher academic standards and render that intellectual rigor accessible to all students.

Adler dedicated *The Paideia Proposal* to three well-known educators who had a profound effect on this thinking: Horace Mann, John Dewey, and Robert Maynard Hutchins.

Horace Mann (1796-1859) was the early American educational reformer who articulated the connection between effective "common" schools and democratic well-being. Mann's twelve annual reports (1837-48) as the first Massachusetts Secretary of Education are among the most significant primary documents in American educational history. Perhaps his most famous dictum was his insistence that "the best education for

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the best is the best education
for all."*

—Horace Mann

the best was the best education for all" (which became the third Paideia principle). Mann's arguments for universal (thus "common") public education as the foundation for a democratic society are as old as Jefferson and have survived into the 21st Century in part through the work of Adler.

The second significant influence on Adler is the most famous of all American philosophers—John Dewey (1859-1952). Dewey's "progressivism" provided all 20th Century educators with a coherent argument for classrooms that combined relevant curriculum with active student learning. His *Democracy and Education* (1916) has become a classic in part because it anticipates nearly all the problems facing public education at the dawn of the 21st Century. Dewey became the "liberal" influence on Adler that balanced Hutchins' focus on traditional academic rigor. Dewey's ideas led directly to the creation of the Paideia Coached Project.

Robert Maynard Hutchins (1899-1977) was the Chancellor of the University of



Chicago and a leader in the group of American intellectuals who, after World War II, created *The Great Books*. His Introduction to this series of Western classics was entitled *The Great Conversation: The Substance of a Liberal Education* (1952) and stressed the need for academic rigor based on the intellectual traditions of the human community. Further, he stressed the urgent need for formal and enlightened communication among the individuals and communities of the world—communication based on a common intellectual background. Hutchins became the “conservative” influence on Adler’s thinking, leading to the call to academic standards that have been at the core of the Paideia philosophy since the early 1980s. Hutchins’ demand for human community as a result of better communication contributed directly to the creation of the Paideia Seminar.

Thus, Paideia philosophy is a powerful fusion of conservative and liberal forces in our society, a synthesis of academic standards with the teaching and learning strategies that make those standards accessible to the diverse population of American school students. In more recent years, the core staff of the National Paideia Center, along with the National Paideia Faculty, have drawn on their own experience as public school teachers and administrators to translate the ideas of these educational giants into the realities of the public school classroom. The results—as exemplified in the Paideia school—are the strongest recipe for true school transformation currently available to American educators.

In short, the staff of the National Paideia Center uphold our philosophical forebears and in working throughout the country, maintain that schools should model our democracy, treat everyone as unique individuals, and focus on a rigorous core curriculum. The 12 Paideia Principles serve as a summary for the Paideia Proposal—a summation for guidance.

