

U.S. public education needs more joy, not more money

A network of charter schools offers a model for success

Happiness in school education illustration by Linas Garsys / The Washington Times

COMMENTARY

By Baker A. Mitchell Jr. - Monday, May 25, 2026



OPINION:

Most proposals for fixing America's broken public education system have a common thread: the demand for more. More money, more teachers, more school counselors, more technology and more curriculum updates.

But what American education needs most of all is more joy. And therein lies public education's problem: Joy is a barometer of an institution's culture and culture is something "more" cannot fix.

Most Americans probably understand, at least intuitively, that there's no direct correlation between student achievement and a school district's budget. Public education spending has

been rising steadily for decades and now approaches (and may already have passed) \$1 trillion a year.

But this isn't reflected in student achievement. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, for example, found in its 2024 testing program that nearly half of all 12th graders (45%) couldn't do basic math and one-third (32%) hadn't mastered basic reading.

If a high-school senior can't read, it's not because he or she wasn't provided an iPad. It's because the system is broken. Its culture tolerates (and perhaps unwittingly encourages) failure. What do we mean by education's "culture"? A Harvard Business

School article provides a standard academic definition, describing organizational culture as a "collection of the values, beliefs, assumptions, and norms that guide activity and mindset in an organization."

Here's an example. The Roger Bacon Academy (RBA), an organization I founded more than two decades ago, manages a network of four Title I charter schools — the Classical Charter Schools of America — serving 2,600 students from six counties in southeastern North Carolina. Several weeks ago, on May 1, thousands of state teachers went AWOL to participate in teachers' union protests in Raleigh. Many school districts had to cancel classes.

In New Hanover County — largest (by population) of the counties in which our students live — district school officials didn't cancel classes. However, because hundreds of county teachers apparently valued the “Kids Over Corporations” protests more highly than their teaching responsibilities, school officials were forced to call in some 200 substitute teachers and 100 office workers to staff classrooms.

This is their culture.

At the four schools we manage, May 1 was a normal Friday: Our teachers were teaching and our students were learning. This is our culture.

One good indicator of a positive culture is student achievement. As in other states, North Carolina measures student learning gains annually. If our four schools were considered an independent school district, our “district” would have ranked ninth out of 116 districts in the state's 2024-2025 end-of-grade English test.

Four local districts ranked below 70th place on the same test.

What is it about our culture that encourages student achievement, earned us national

recognition for reducing learning gaps between students from diverse economic, ethnic and racial backgrounds and enables our students to out-score students attending pricey private schools? What sets us apart?

It's our culture. We use phonics (sounding out the letters) to teach beginners how to read. We teach students to write in cursive because research shows writing connected script letters improves learning. We require rote memorization of classical poems, historical dates and names and math facts.

We have a code of conduct. We teach Latin to all students beginning in the fifth grade. Our students wear uniforms and, along with their teachers, recite the Pledge of Allegiance every morning — as well as our school pledge.

Most teachers enter the profession because they care about the children. Their careers begin with excitement and joy, but the culture changes their attitudes, breeding cynicism. This saps the students' joy of learning, breeding apathy. Learning suffers.

We don't let that happen. Our culture demands that teachers follow three simple laws. Law 1:

Reward good behavior; you'll get more of it. Law 2: Teach each step to mastery; every child will learn. Law 3: Watch the children; if they are not behaving or learning, you are not following the first two laws.

This too is our culture.

When a student is rewarded by an adult's smile, a pat on the shoulder or a high-five for virtuous acts (prudence, kindness, perseverance, honesty, curiosity, or effort, all of which we stress in our school pledge), he or she experiences a moment of joy. And when students experience that joy, they don't just repeat those behaviors, they internalize them.

Joy is not fluff. It is not a break from learning. Joy, foundational to our culture, is what makes learning take root. Every school — and every district — needs more of it.

• *Baker A. Mitchell Jr. is the founder of The Roger Bacon Academy, which manages the Classical Charter Schools of America, a network of Title I charter schools in southeastern North Carolina.*

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