

LETTER

Response to Anderson

by Jennifer Hochschild

July 25, 2005

To the Editors of the *Du Bois Review*:

I'm writing in response to "Can Public Schools Save America? Culture, Race, Academic Achievement, and the American Dream," a review essay published in the *Du Bois Review* (Volume 2, no. 1, 2005, pp. 127–136) by James Anderson, which includes a discussion of my book (co-authored with Nathan Scovronick), *The American Dream and the Public Schools* (2003). We are, of course, very pleased to have the book reviewed in this journal since it is read by many people with whom we would like to discuss these issues. The review, however, distorts our argument in ways that warrant correction.

Professor Anderson says that we are "opposed to the teaching of any ethnic history and culture that might challenge or reject the national ideology that they call the American Dream," and that, in our view, "experiences and beliefs that might challenge or reject the American dream should be relegated to the arenas of home, churches, and community organizations." That is not our position. The book says, for example, that "in this new, multicultural America. . . schools will need to begin the hard work of developing a meaningful curriculum that teaches students to understand and respect the history and perspectives of a broad spectrum of groups. Students will have to learn that members of different cultures have different norms, that differences are legitimate, and that most occur within a common framework" (p. 198). Even more directly, we argue that "public schools . . . have an obligation to teach critical thinking. . . ; that must include questioning the ideology and practice of the American dream" (p. 180).

Professor Anderson does raise an important issue, however. In our book, we do not endorse the idea that public schools should include programs organized around complete separation from or hostility to mainstream American society and politics, as occasionally happens in Afrocentric or religiously fundamentalist classrooms, or those oriented toward very strong forms of cultural maintenance or leftist rebellion.

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No polity has a responsibility to pay the salaries of people who oppose its very existence and teach how to overthrow it. Where that line should be drawn is a good question, to be resolved politically rather than abstractly.

Similarly, Professor Anderson points to the fascinating question of whether residents of the United States should accept the American dream, for better and for worse, as the dominant American ideology and try to work with it, or whether we should simply reject it as irremediably flawed. Scovronick and I choose the former, but our penultimate sentence in the book worries that without serious school reform, “the ideology of the American dream will be just a cover for systematic injustice” (p. 201).

I would also like to point out to your readers that Professor Anderson’s discussion of *The American Dream and the Public Schools* addresses only about one-third of one of the eight chapters. The other chapters cover topics ranging from school desegregation, finance equalization, and systematic school reform, to issues of bilingual education, special education, ability grouping, and school choice. We would welcome comments from your readers on all of the issues required to promote genuine equity through public schooling.

Thanks for your attention, and for a great journal.

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