

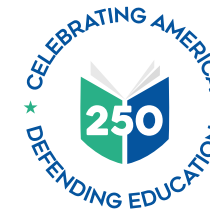


THE
Founders' Almanac
ON EDUCATION





DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, JOHN TRUMBULL

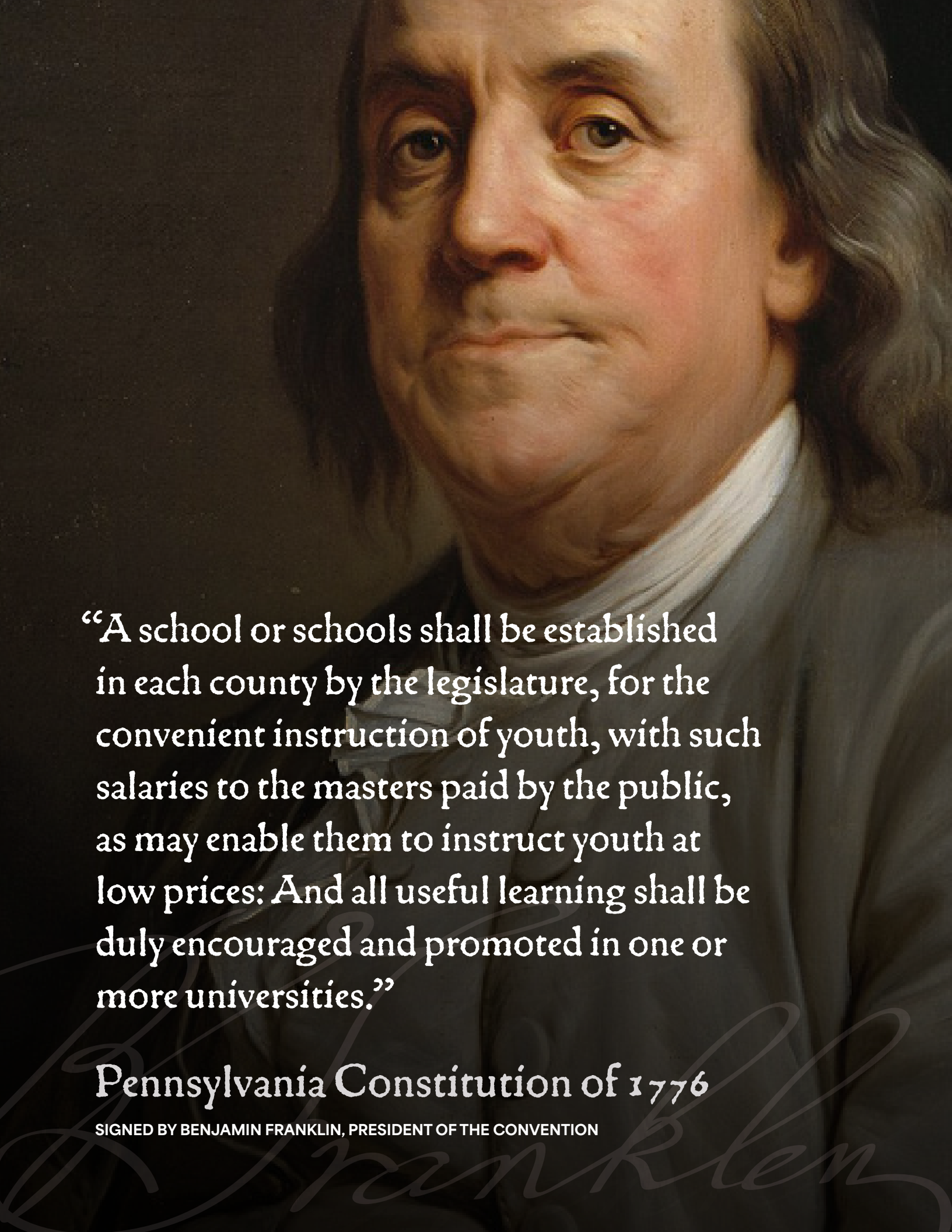


Introduction

As the United States celebrates its 250th anniversary, Defending Education revisits a question that many of the nation's founding fathers deliberated: what is the role of education in a constitutional republic? The Founders' Almanac on Education serves as a reminder of what education looked like at the time of America's birth, and how the nation's founders believed the citizenry should be educated.

From the inception of the American experiment, leaders such as John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington thought about education as connected to citizenship and American identity. For the founding fathers, education was not about just accruing knowledge—it was intertwined with freedom, liberty, and the strength of the republic itself.

By exploring The Founders' Almanac on Education, We the People can renew our pursuit of a strong, value-neutral, and high quality system of education—a system that equips students with knowledge, character, and the tools to be better citizens.



“A school or schools shall be established in each county by the legislature, for the convenient instruction of youth, with such salaries to the masters paid by the public, as may enable them to instruct youth at low prices: And all useful learning shall be duly encouraged and promoted in one or more universities.”

Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776

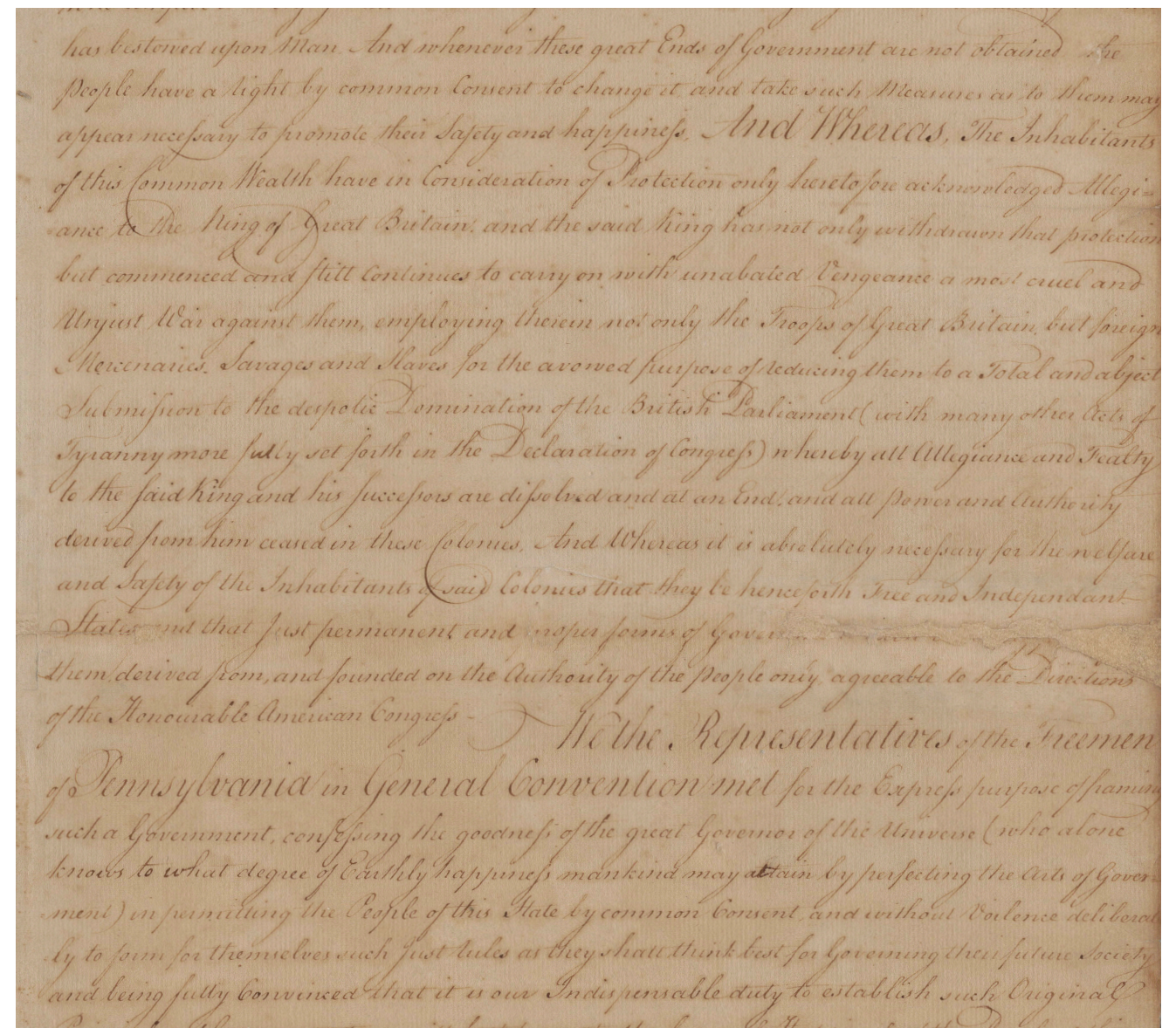
SIGNED BY BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, PRESIDENT OF THE CONVENTION

Franklin

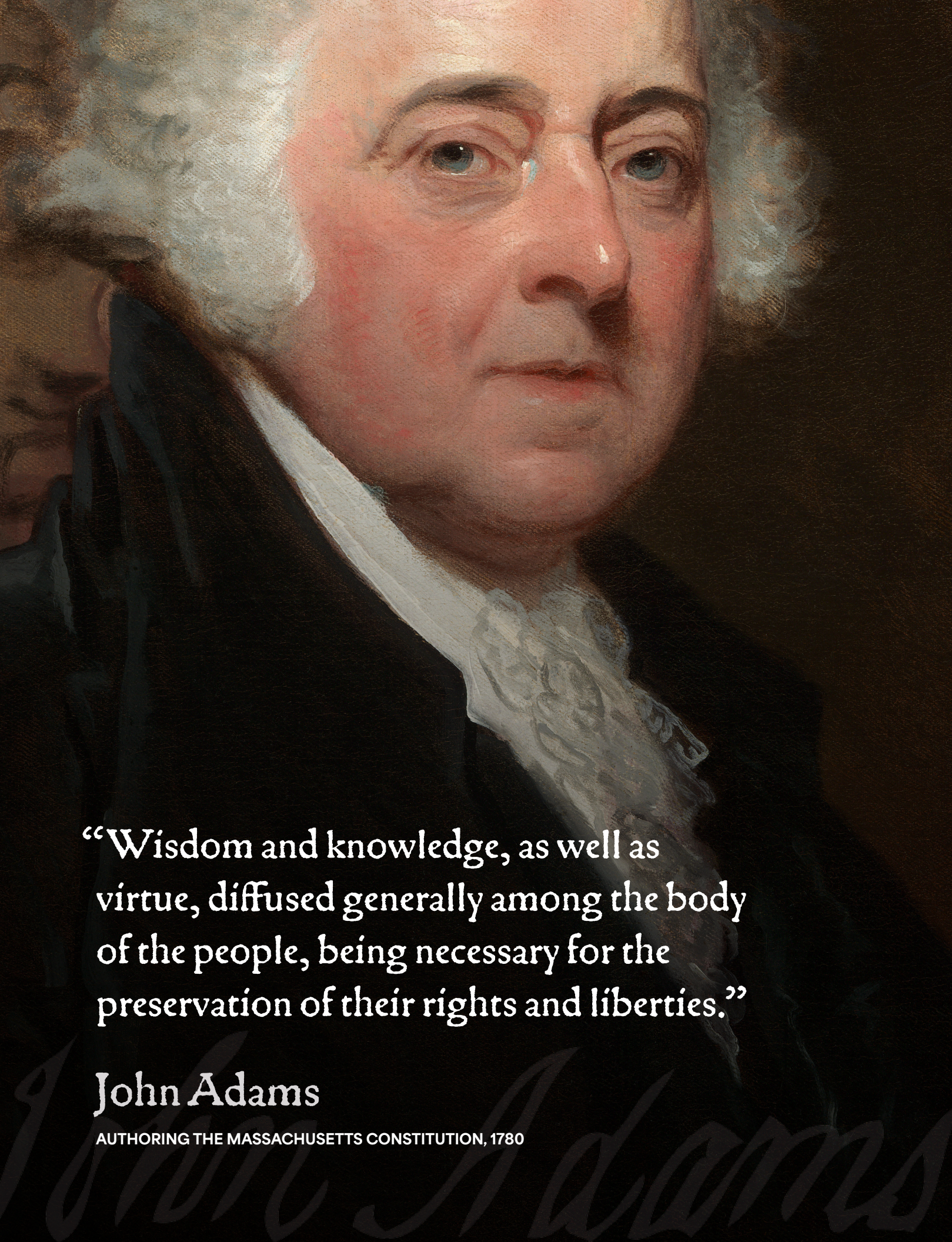
Discussions

Why do you think the Founders stressed the availability of public education from the nation’s earliest days?

How would you define “useful learning” in the context of schools today?



COURTESY OF PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL AND MUSEUM COMMISSION, PENNSYLVANIA STATE ARCHIVES, RECORD GROUP 10, OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR, PROCLAMATIONS (SERIES #10.3)



“Wisdom and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people, being necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties.”

John Adams

AUTHORING THE MASSACHUSETTS CONSTITUTION, 1780

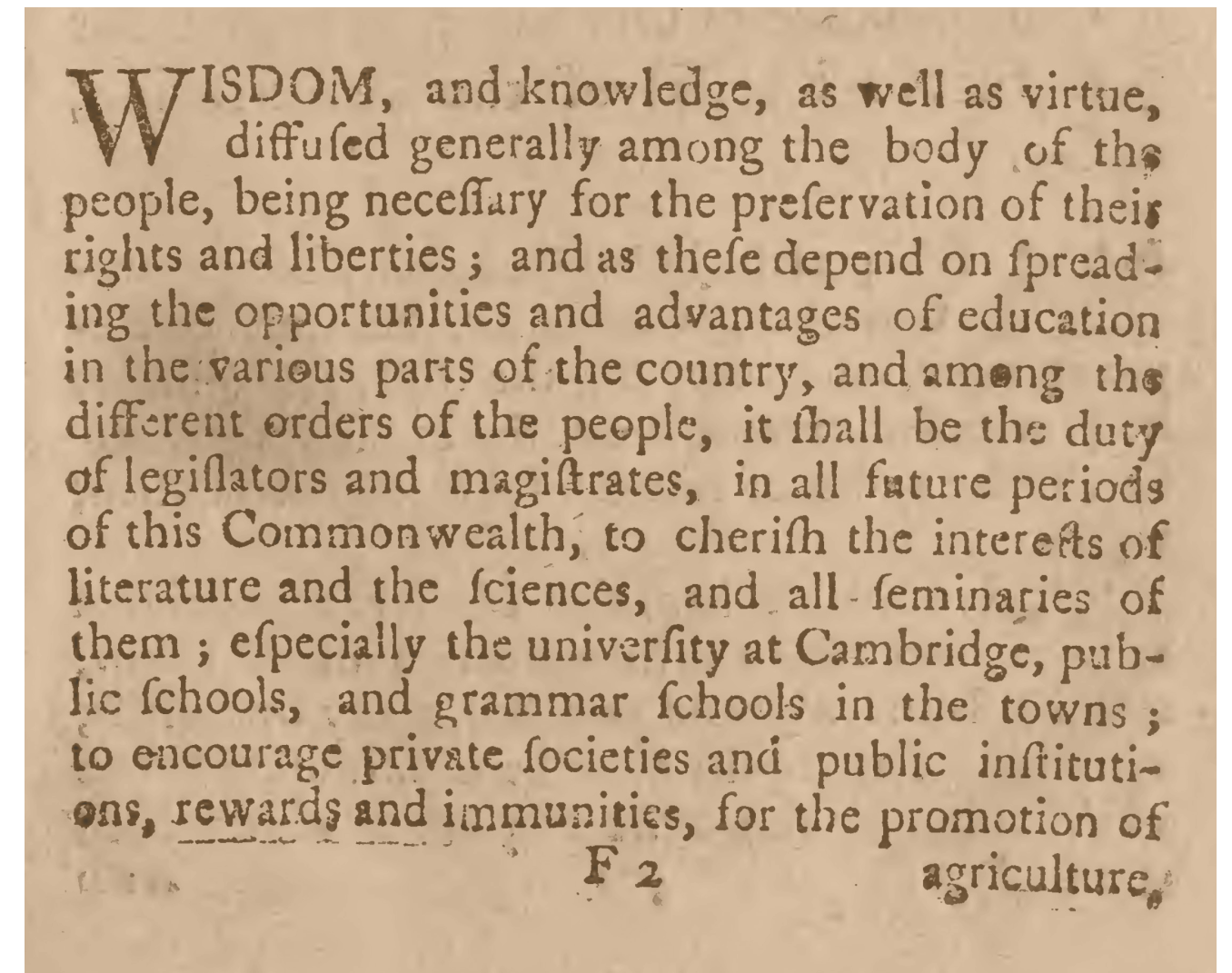
Discussions

What virtues are K-12 schools currently instilling in their students?

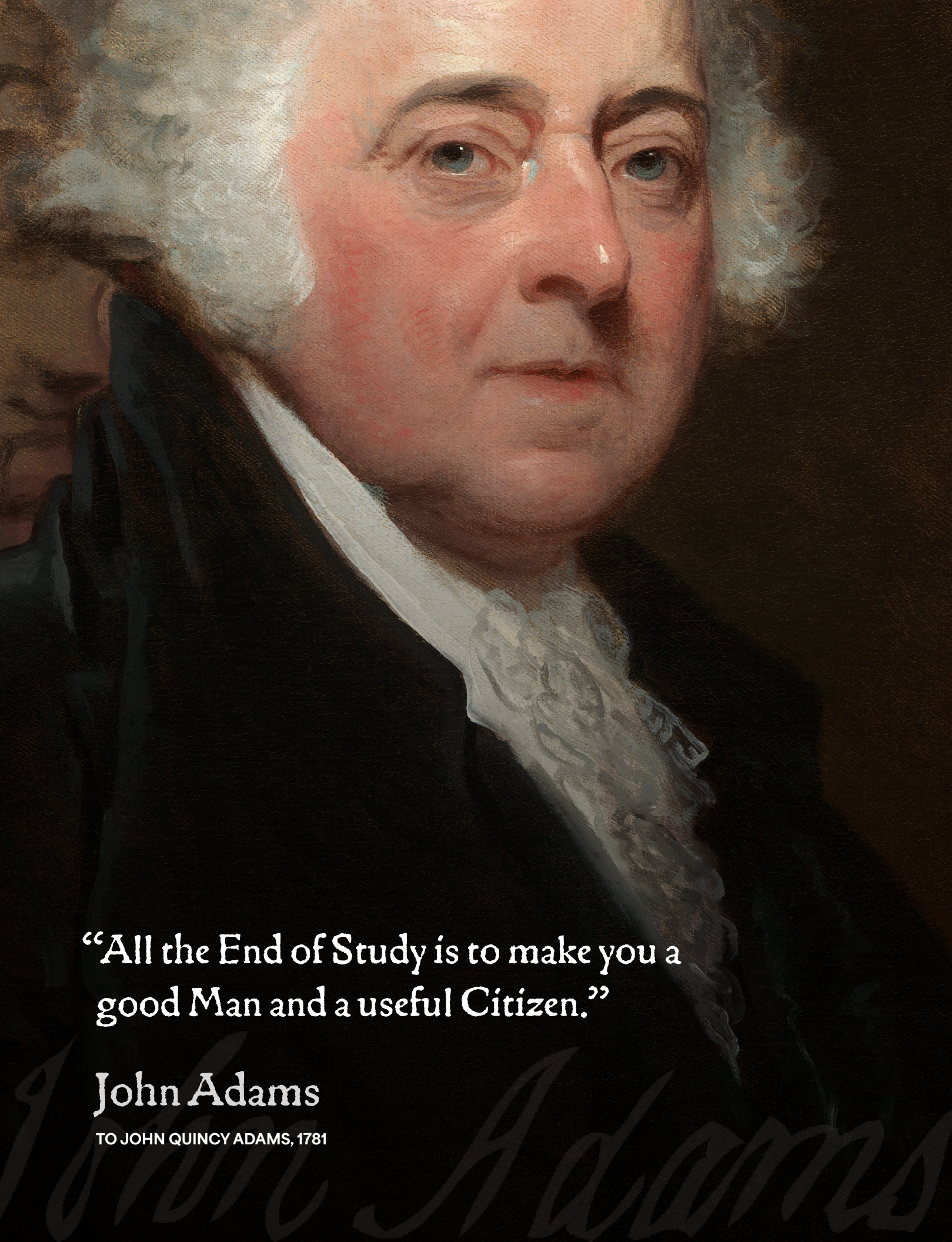
How can schools better impart wisdom and knowledge?

Are wisdom and knowledge currently being diffused among all U.S. citizens, or are some citizens being better educated than others?

Do you agree that a wise and knowledgeable citizenry is necessary to preserve rights and liberties?



WIKIMEDIA FOUNDATION



“All the End of Study is to make you a good Man and a useful Citizen.”

John Adams

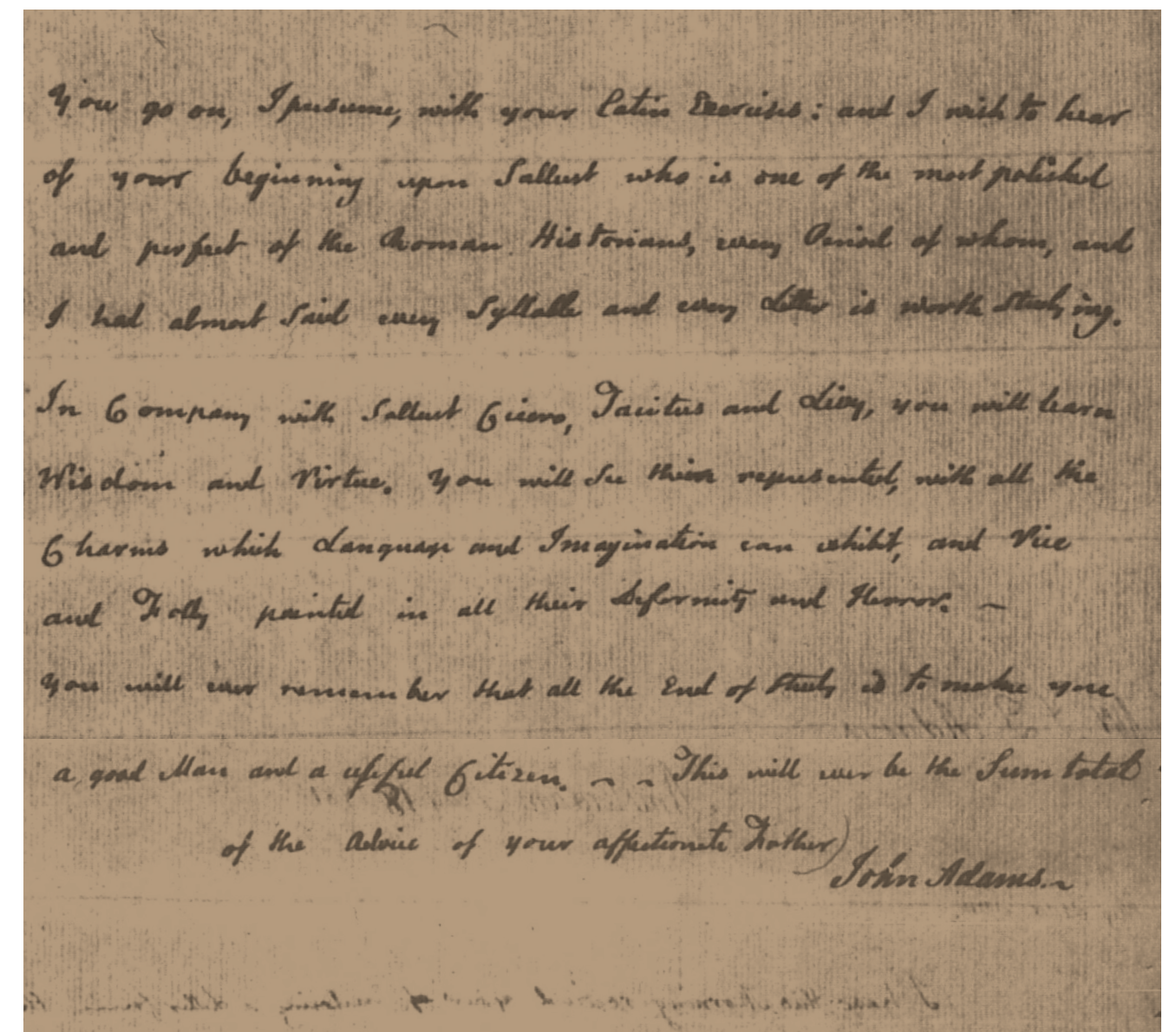
TO JOHN QUINCY ADAMS, 1781

Discussions

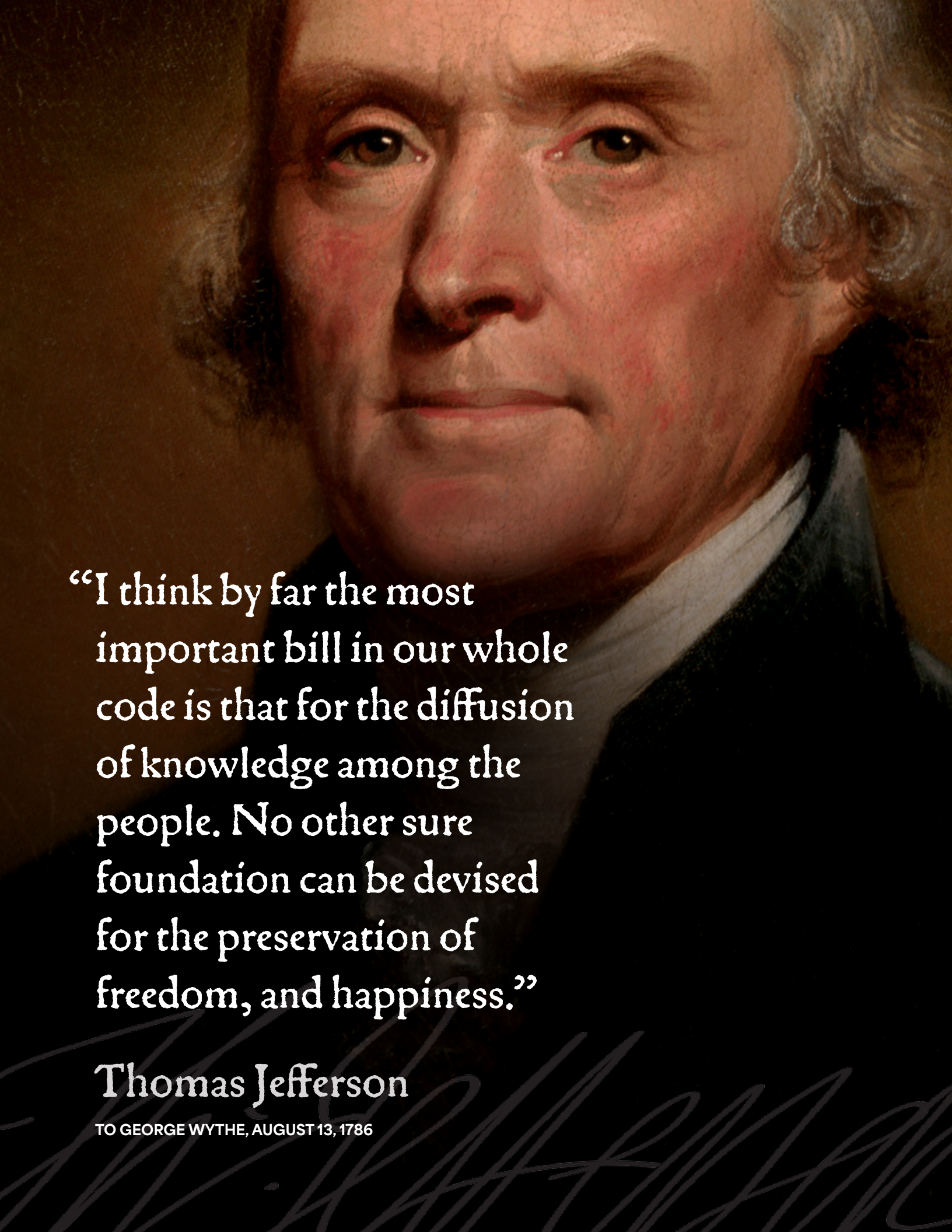
What is your local school district’s mission statement? Should it be revisited or revised?

Are K-12 schools focused on making good citizens today?

How does your local school define a “good” citizen? How should it?



COLLECTION OF THE MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY



“I think by far the most important bill in our whole code is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom, and happiness.”

Thomas Jefferson

TO GEORGE WYTHE, AUGUST 13, 1786

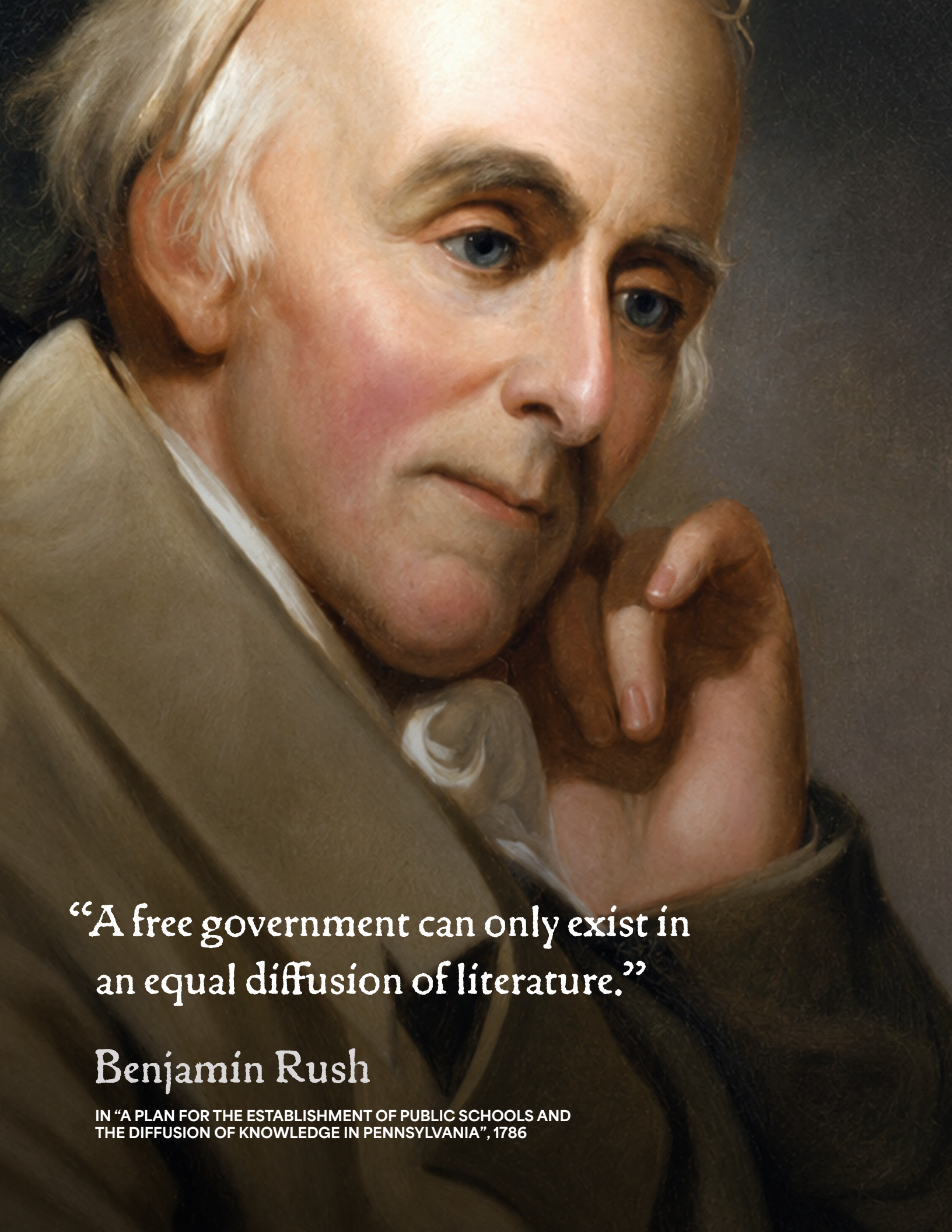
Discussions

The primary purpose of K-12 schools is to diffuse knowledge to students. Are most schools succeeding, and if not, what could they do better?

Why is knowledge so important to the preservation of freedom and happiness?

A snippet of a handwritten manuscript in cursive script, likely a letter from Thomas Jefferson. The text discusses the importance of knowledge and the diffusion of knowledge among the people for the preservation of freedom and happiness. It mentions that no other foundation can be devised for this purpose and that the diffusion of knowledge is the most important bill in the code. It also mentions that the diffusion of knowledge is the best school in the universe to cure them of that folly. The text is written on aged, yellowed paper.

as zealously as they now endeavor the contrary, a thousand years would not place them on that high ground on which our common people are now sitting out. ours could not have been so fairly put into the hands of their own common sense, had they not ^{been} separated from their parent stock & been kept from contamination, either ^{from} them, or the other people of the old world, by the intervention of so wide an ocean. to know the worth of this, one must see the want of it here. ~~it is~~ I think by far the most important bill in our whole code is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. no other ^{sure} foundation can be ~~devised~~ ^{devised} for the preservation of freedom, and happiness. if any body thinks that kings, nobles, or priests, ^{are good} ~~are good~~ conservators of the public happiness, send them here. it is the best school in the universe to cure them of that folly. they will see here with their own eyes that these descriptions of men are ^{an abandoned} ~~an abandoned~~ confederacy against the happiness of the mass of people. the omnipotence of their effect cannot be better proved than in this country particularly, where notwithstanding the finest soil upon earth, the finest climate under heaven, and a people



“A free government can only exist in an equal diffusion of literature.”

Benjamin Rush

IN “A PLAN FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND THE DIFFUSION OF KNOWLEDGE IN PENNSYLVANIA”, 1786

Discussions

What literary works are core to an understanding, knowledge, and appreciation of literature?

What relationship does literacy have to the acquisition of knowledge generally?

Why does a free government require the equal diffusion of literature, and how do we determine if it is equal?

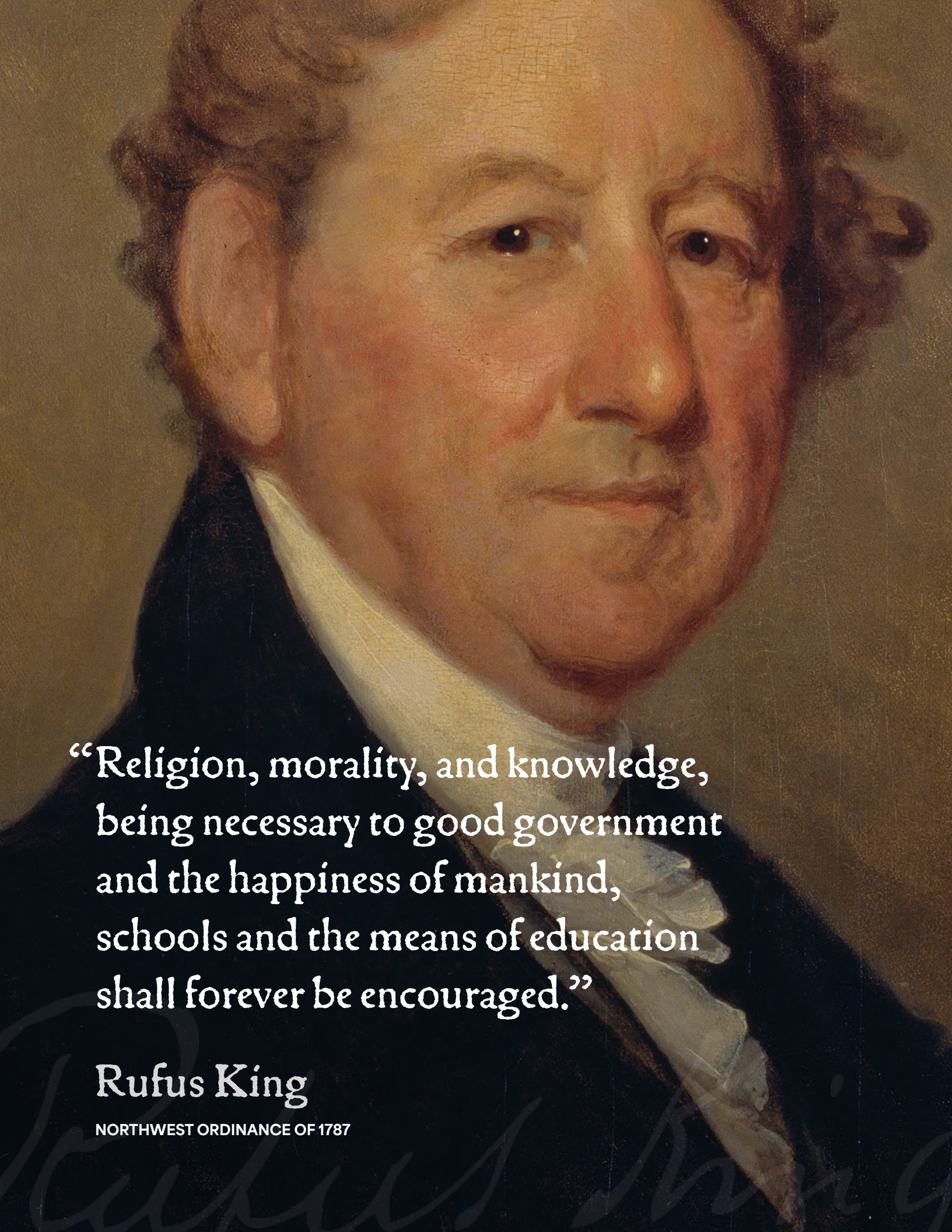
What do you think Benjamin Rush would say in relation to the nation’s flagging current literacy rates?

BEFORE I proceed to suggest a Plan for the establishment of public schools in Pennsylvania, I shall point out, in a few words, the influence and advantages of learning upon mankind.

I. It is friendly to religion, inasmuch as it assists in removing prejudice, superstition and enthusiasm, in promoting just notions of the Deity, and in enlarging our knowledge of his works.

II. It is favourable to liberty. A free government can only exist in an equal diffusion of literature. Without learning men become Savages or Barbarians, and where learning is confined to a few people, we always

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“Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”

Rufus King

NORTHWEST ORDINANCE OF 1787

Discussions

Do you agree religion, morality, and knowledge are necessary for good government and happiness? Why or why not?

Have schools shied away from imparting religious or moral principles in education? Do you think their approach burdens or benefits public education?

How can schools encourage religion, morality, and knowledge? Do your schools encourage this?

and governments, which forever hereafter may be formed in the said territory;—to provide and for the establishment of states, and permanent government therein, and for their admission to a share in the federal councils on an equal footing with the original states, at as early periods as may be consistent with the general interest:

It is hereby ordained and declared by the authority aforesaid, That the following articles shall be considered as articles of compact between the original states and the people and states in the said territory, and forever remain unalterable, unless by common consent, to wit:

Article the First. No person, demeaning himself in a peaceable and orderly manner, shall ever be molested on account of his mode of worship or religious sentiments in the said territory.

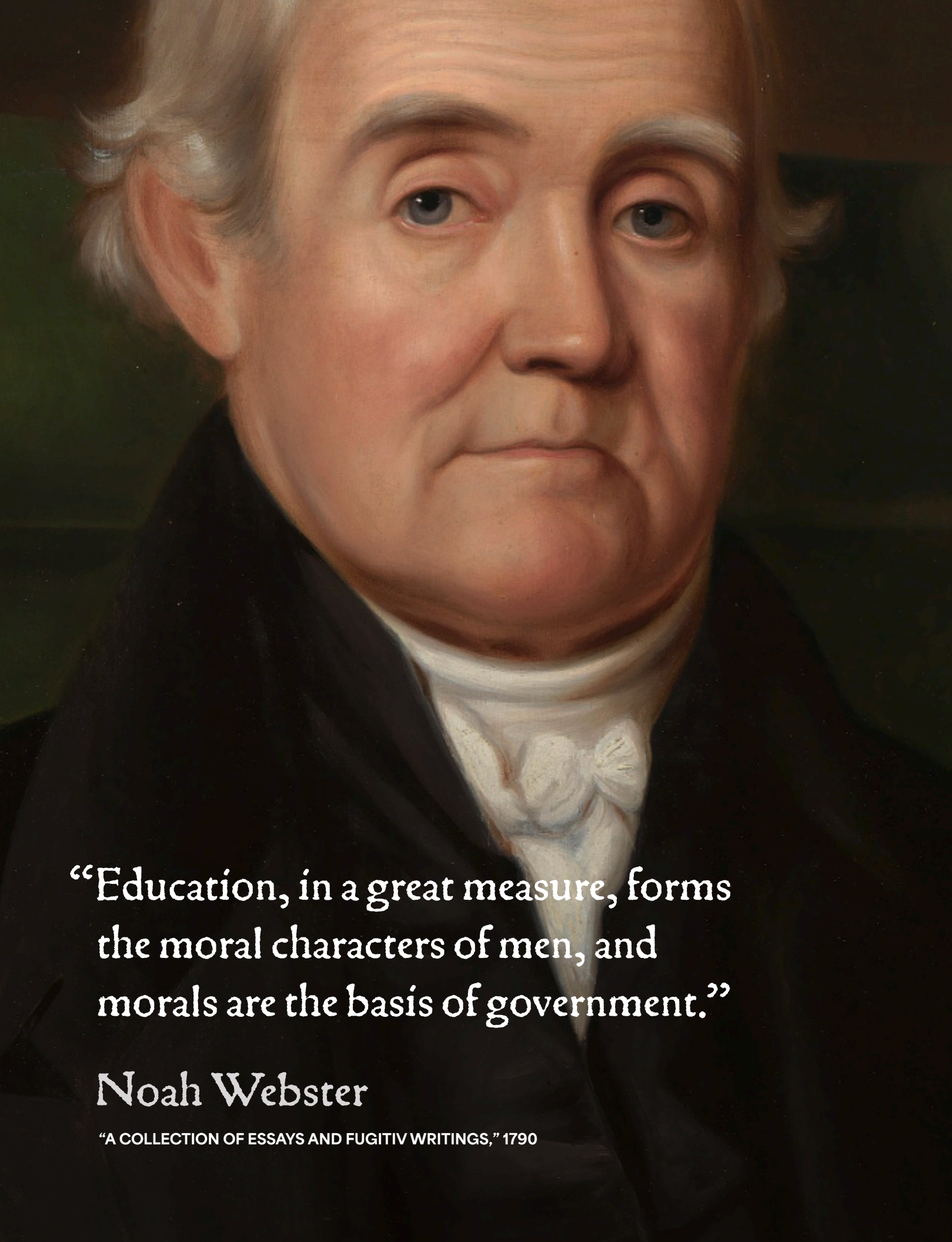
Article the Second. The inhabitants of the said territory shall always be entitled to the benefits of the writ of habeas corpus, and of the trial by jury; of a proportionate representation of the people in the legislature, and of judicial proceedings according to the course of the common law; all persons shall be bailable unless for capital offences, where the proof shall be evident, or the presumption great; all fines shall be moderate, and no cruel or unusual punishments shall be inflicted; no man shall be deprived of his liberty or property but by the judgment of his peers, or the law of the land; and should the public exigencies make it necessary for the common preservation to take any person's property, or to demand his particular services, full compensation shall be made for the same;— and in the just preservation of rights and property it is understood and declared, that no law ought ever to be made, or have force in the said territory, that shall in any manner whatever interfere with, or affect private contracts or engagements, bona fide and without fraud previously formed.

Article the Third. Religion, morality and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged. The utmost good faith shall always be observed towards the Indians; their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and in their property, rights and liberty, they never shall be invaded or disturbed, unless in just and lawful wars authorized by Congress; but laws founded in justice and humanity shall from time to time be made, for preventing wrongs being done to them, and for preserving peace and friendship with them.

Article the Fourth. The said territory, and the states which may be formed therein, shall forever remain a part of this confederacy of the United States of America, subject to the articles of confederation, and to such alterations therein as shall be constitutionally made; and to all the acts and ordinances of the United States in Congress assembled, conformable thereto. The inhabitants and settlers in the said territory, shall be subject to pay a part of the federal debts contracted or to be contracted, and a proportional part of the expences of government, to be apportioned on them by Congress, according to the same common rule and measure by which apportionments thereof shall be made on the other states; and the taxes for paying their proportion, shall be laid and levied by the authority and direction of the legislatures of the district or districts or new states, as in the original states, within the time agreed upon by the United States in Congress assembled. The legislatures of those districts, or new states, shall never interfere with the primary disposal of the soil by the United States in Congress assembled, nor with any regulations Congress may find necessary for securing the title in such soil to the bona fide purchasers. No tax shall be imposed on lands the property of the United States; and in no case shall non-resident proprietors be taxed higher than residents. The navigable waters leading into the Mississippi and St. Lawrence, and the carrying places between the same shall be common highways, and forever free, as well to the inhabitants of the said territory, as to the citizens of the United States, and those of any other states that may be admitted into the confederacy, without any tax, impost or duty therefor.

Article the Fifth. There shall be formed in the said territory, not less than three nor more than five states; and the boundaries of the states, as soon as Virginia shall alter her act of cession and consent to the same, shall become fixed and established as follows, to wit: The western state in the said territory, shall be bounded by the Mississippi, the Ohio and Wabash rivers; a direct line drawn from the Wabash and Pot Vincent's due north to the territorial line between the

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION



“Education, in a great measure, forms the moral characters of men, and morals are the basis of government.”

Noah Webster

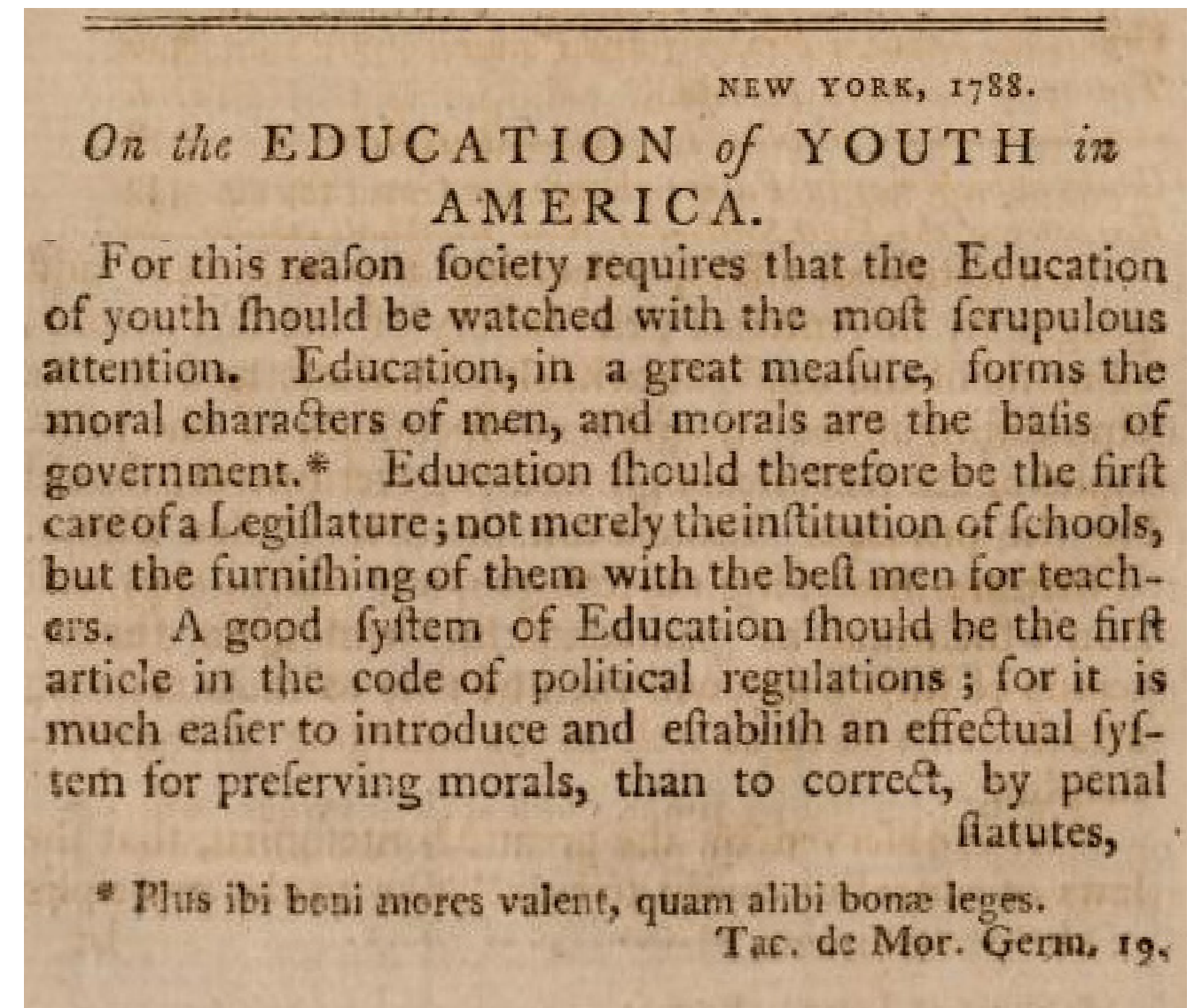
“A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS AND FUGITIVE WRITINGS,” 1790

Discussions

Do you think today’s K-12 schools are forming not just the minds, but the moral character of their students?

If so, what morals are K-12 schools currently imparting?

What are the characteristics of moral character? Do students know these characteristics?



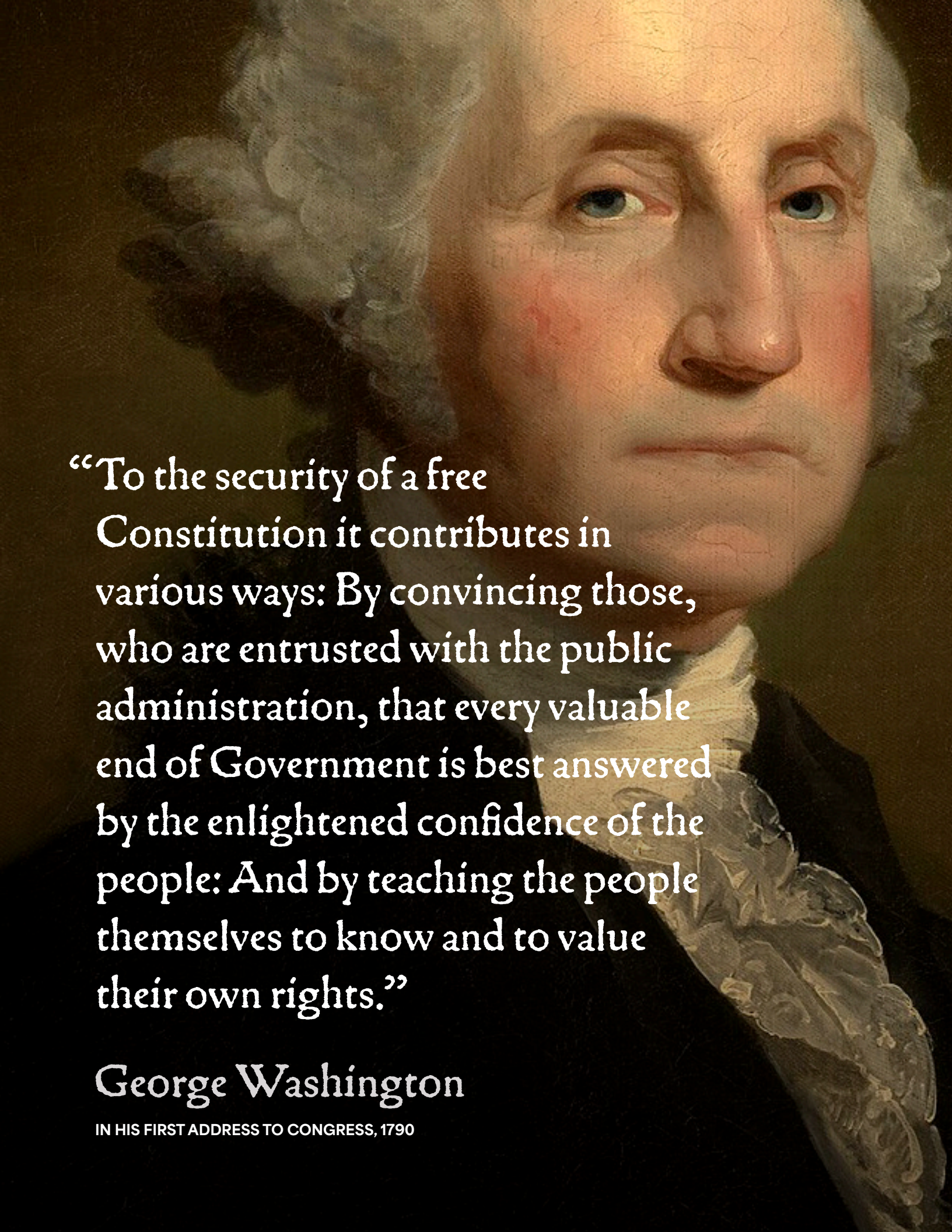
NEW YORK, 1788.

On the EDUCATION *of* YOUTH *in* AMERICA.

For this reason society requires that the Education of youth should be watched with the most scrupulous attention. Education, in a great measure, forms the moral characters of men, and morals are the basis of government.* Education should therefore be the first care of a Legislature; not merely the institution of schools, but the furnishing of them with the best men for teachers. A good system of Education should be the first article in the code of political regulations; for it is much easier to introduce and establish an effectual system for preserving morals, than to correct, by penal statutes,

* Plus ibi boni mores valent, quam alibi bonæ leges.

Tac. de Mor. Germ. 19.



“To the security of a free Constitution it contributes in various ways: By convincing those, who are entrusted with the public administration, that every valuable end of Government is best answered by the enlightened confidence of the people: And by teaching the people themselves to know and to value their own rights.”

George Washington

IN HIS FIRST ADDRESS TO CONGRESS, 1790

Discussions

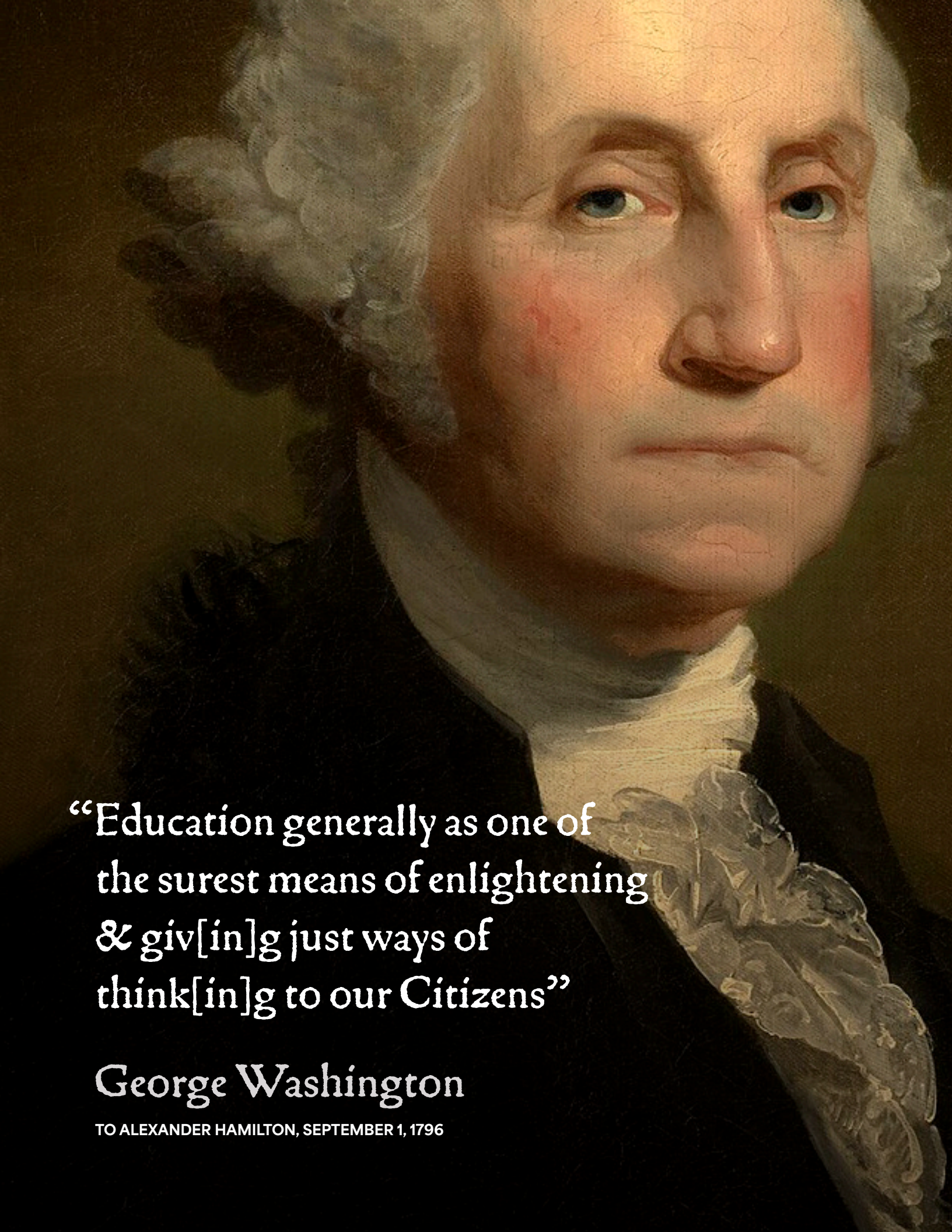
Do American citizens today know, value, and practice their own rights?

Do our current American institutions have the confidence of the people?

How has American education changed in 250 years?

of the Community as in ours, it is proportionably essential. — To the security of a free Constitution it contributes in various ways: By convincing those, who are entrusted with the public administration, that every valuable end of Government is best answered by the enlightened confidence of the people: and by teaching the people themselves to know and to value their own rights; to discern and provide against invasions of them; to distinguish between oppression and the necessary exercise of lawful authority; between burthens

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“Education generally as one of the surest means of enlightening & giv[ing] just ways of think[ing] to our Citizens”

George Washington

TO ALEXANDER HAMILTON, SEPTEMBER 1, 1796

Discussions

Do K-12 schools give students “just ways of thinking”?

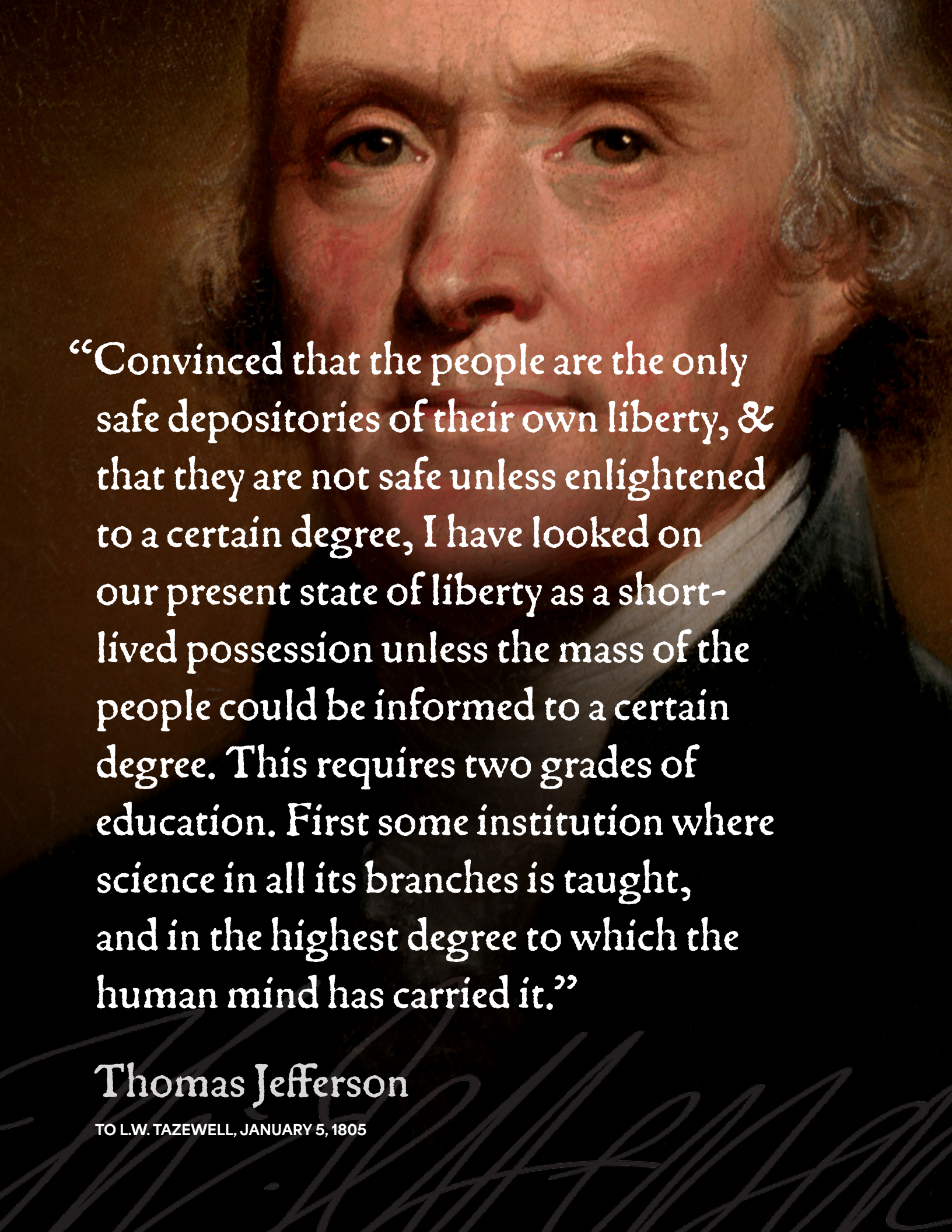
Why do you believe George Washington thought education was the surest means of enlightening citizens?

What do you think George Washington’s opinion would be of today’s K-12 schools?

A photograph of a handwritten letter on aged paper. The handwriting is in cursive and matches the quote on the left. The text discusses the importance of education and the establishment of a university in the United States.

Week I wrote to you; - and that it might escape the eye of the Inquisitive (for some of my letters have lately been pried into) I took the liberty of putting it under a cover to Mr. Jay.

Since then, revolving on the Paper that was enclosed therein; - on the various matters it contained; - and on the just expression of the advice or recommendation which was given in it, I have regretted that another subject (which in my estimation is of first interest & concern to the well being of this country) was not touched upon also. I mean Education as one of the surest means of enlightening & giving just ways of thinking to our Citizens generally, but particularly the establishment of a University; where the youth from all parts of the United States might receive the polish of Education in the Arts Sciences & Belle Lettres; and where those who were disposed to run a pole



“Convinced that the people are the only safe depositories of their own liberty, & that they are not safe unless enlightened to a certain degree, I have looked on our present state of liberty as a short-lived possession unless the mass of the people could be informed to a certain degree. This requires two grades of education. First some institution where science in all its branches is taught, and in the highest degree to which the human mind has carried it.”

Thomas Jefferson

TO L.W. TAZEVELL, JANUARY 5, 1805

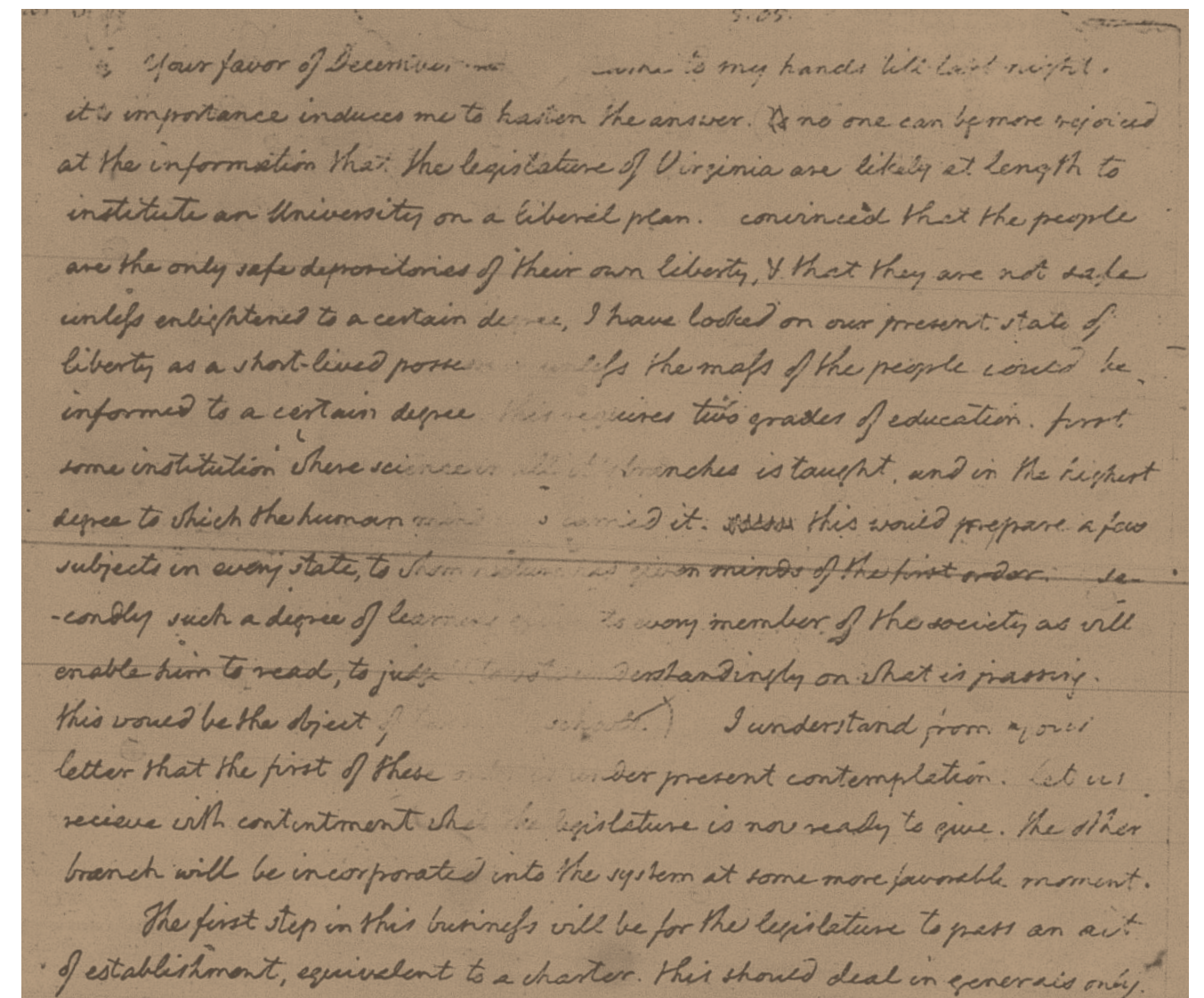
Discussions

What does it mean for citizens to be informed and “enlightened to a certain degree”?

How does Jefferson consider education connected to freedom and liberty?

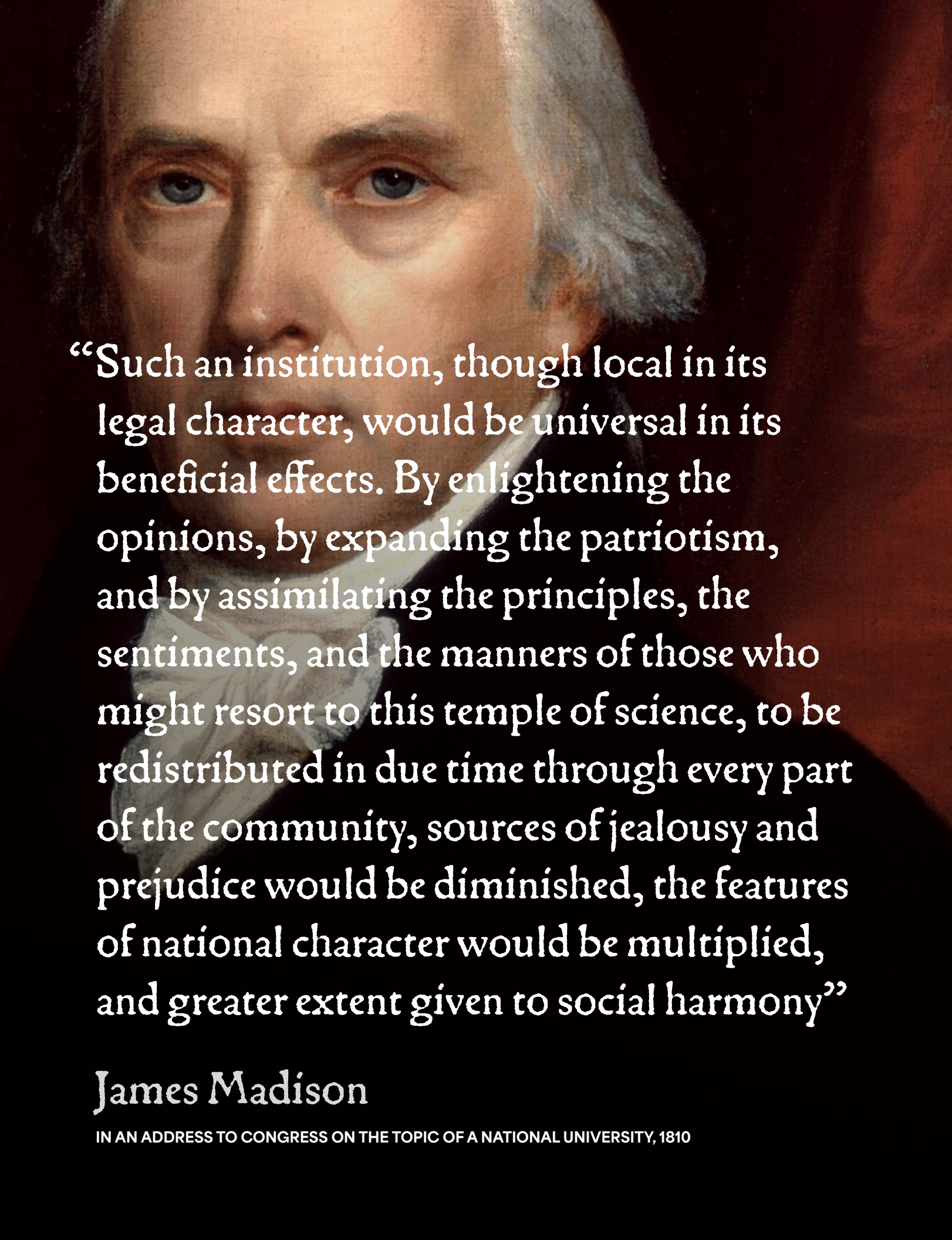
What changes to education might Jefferson make if he were alive today?

What do you think Jefferson meant by the second grade of education?



Your favor of December 20th came to my hands late last night. its importance induces me to hasten the answer. No one can be more rejoiced at the information that the legislature of Virginia are likely at length to institute an University on a liberal plan. convinced that the people are the only safe depositories of their own liberty, & that they are not safe unless enlightened to a certain degree, I have looked on our present state of liberty as a short-lived possession unless the mass of the people could be informed to a certain degree. This requires two grades of education. first some institution where science in all its branches is taught, and in the highest degree to which the human mind has carried it. secondly such a degree of learning as will enable every member of the society as will enable him to read, to judge, to understand, on what is passing. This would be the object of the first grade. I understand from your letter that the first of these is under present contemplation. Let us receive with contentment what the legislature is now ready to give. The other branch will be incorporated into the system at some more favorable moment. The first step in this business will be for the legislature to pass an act of establishment, equivalent to a charter. This should deal in generalis only.

MORRISTOWN NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK



“Such an institution, though local in its legal character, would be universal in its beneficial effects. By enlightening the opinions, by expanding the patriotism, and by assimilating the principles, the sentiments, and the manners of those who might resort to this temple of science, to be redistributed in due time through every part of the community, sources of jealousy and prejudice would be diminished, the features of national character would be multiplied, and greater extent given to social harmony”

James Madison

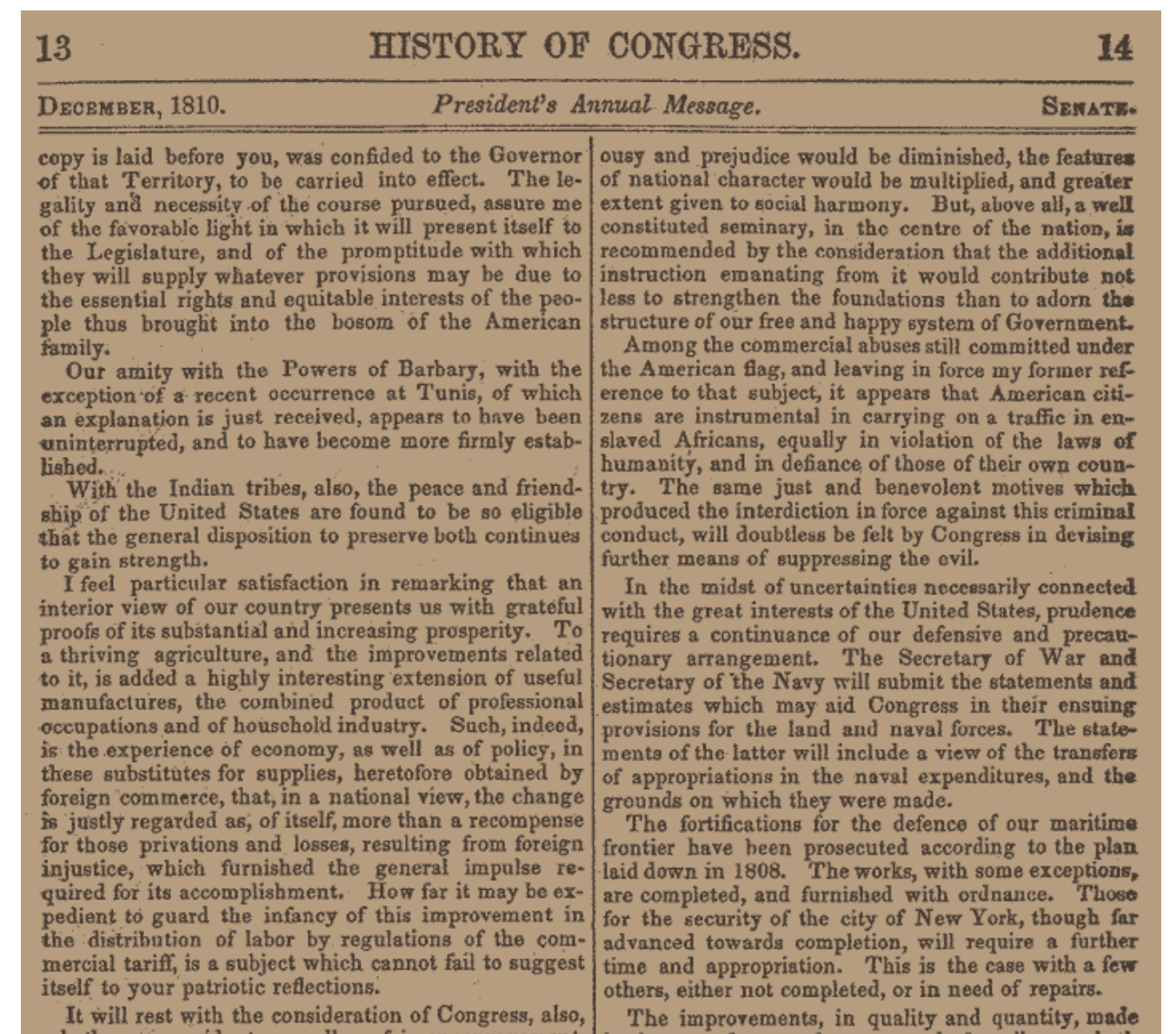
IN AN ADDRESS TO CONGRESS ON THE TOPIC OF A NATIONAL UNIVERSITY, 1810

Discussions

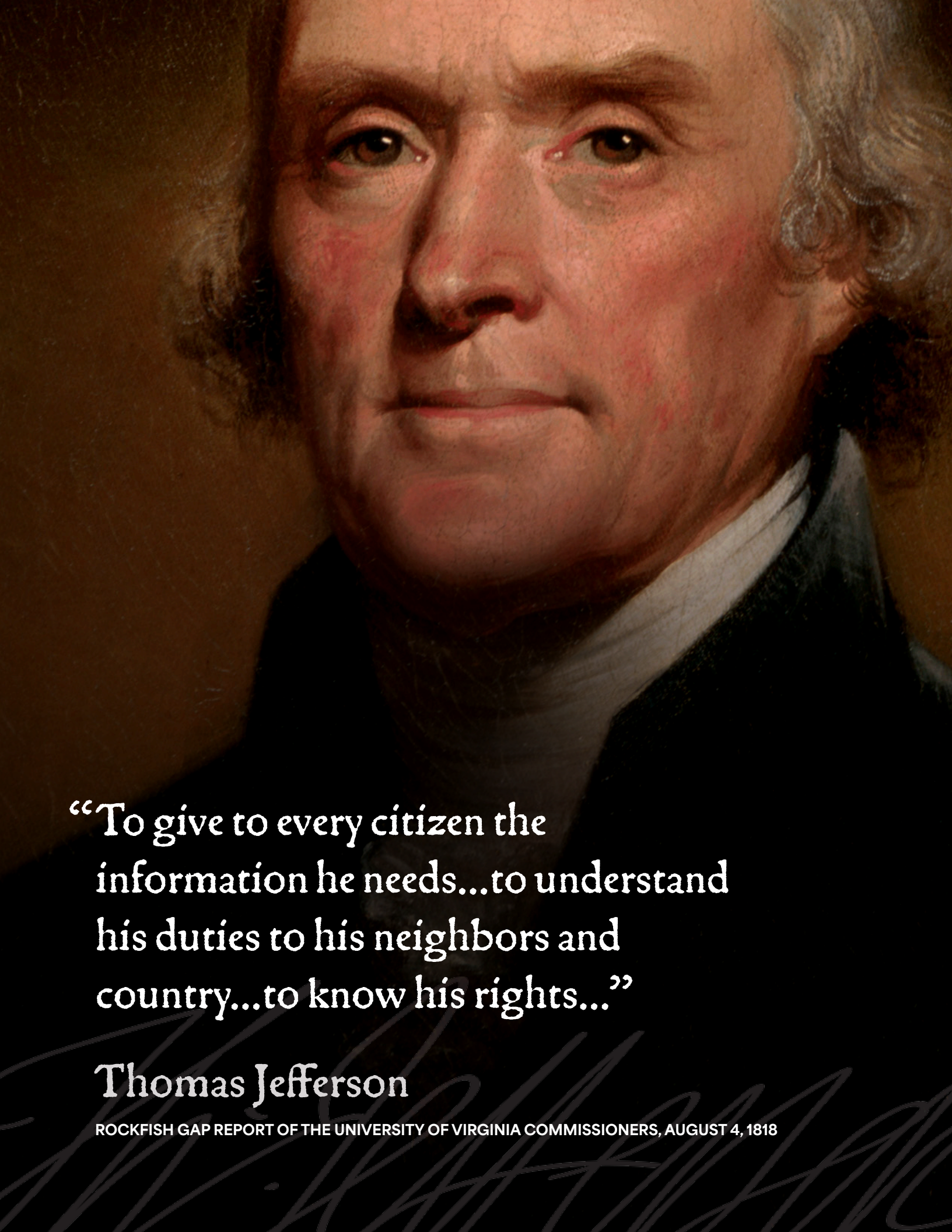
How might K-12 schools encourage patriotism in their students?

Can schools create more social harmony in America? If so, how?

Why might Madison have believed that via education “sources of jealousy and prejudice would be diminished?”



LAW LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



“To give to every citizen the information he needs...to understand his duties to his neighbors and country...to know his rights...”

Thomas Jefferson

ROCKFISH GAP REPORT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA COMMISSIONERS, AUGUST 4, 1818

Discussions

Do students fully understand the rights outlined in our founding documents?

Do citizens, largely formed by K-12 public schools, understand their duties to their nation?

What does Jefferson consider to be the role of education in relation to the country?

nations, for a Library, for the schools of Music, Drawing, and other associated purposes.

3. 4. In proceeding to the third, and fourth duties prescribed by the Legislature, of reporting “the branches of learning, which should be taught in the University, and the number and description of the professorships they will require” the commissioners were first to consider at what point it was understood that University education should commence? Certainly not with the Alphabet, for reasons of expediency and impracticability, as well as from the obvious sense of the Legislature, who, in the same act make other provision for the primary instruction of poor children, expecting doubtless that, in other cases it would be provided by the parent, or become perhaps a subject of future, and further attention of the Legislature. The objects of this primary education determine its character and limits. These objects would be,

To give to every citizen the information he needs for the transaction of his own business :

To enable him to calculate for himself, and to express and preserve his ideas, his contracts and accounts in writing :

To improve by reading his morals, and faculties :

To understand his duties to his neighbours, and country, and to discharge with competence the functions confided to him by either :

To know his rights; to exercise with order and justice those he retains; to choose with discretion the fiduciaries of those he delegates; and to notice their conduct with diligence, with candour, and judgment :

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