

# History Survey Stumps U.S. Teens

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Published: February 26, 2008

Fewer than half of American teenagers who were asked basic questions about history and literature during a recent telephone survey knew when the Civil War was fought, and one-quarter thought that [Christopher Columbus](#) sailed to the New World sometime after 1750, not in 1492.

The results of the survey, released Tuesday, demonstrate that a significant proportion of American teenagers live in “stunning ignorance” of history and literature, according to the group that commissioned it. Known as Common Core, the organization describes itself as a new, nonpartisan research and advocacy organization that will press for more teaching of the liberal arts in American public schools.

The group argues that President Bush’s [No Child Left Behind](#) law has impoverished America’s public school curriculum by holding schools accountable for student scores on annual tests in reading and math but in no other subjects.

Politically, the group’s leaders are strange bedfellows. Its founding board includes Antonia Cortese, the executive vice president of the [American Federation of Teachers](#), the union that is a powerful force in the [Democratic Party](#), and [Diane Ravitch](#), an education professor at [New York University](#) who was assistant secretary of education under [George H.W. Bush](#). Its executive director is Lynne Munson, a former deputy chairman of the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#) and former special assistant to Vice President [Dick Cheney](#)’s wife, Lynne.

“We’re a truly diverse group,” Mrs. Munson said. “We almost certainly vote differently, and we have varying opinions about different aspects of educational reform. But when it comes to concern that all of America’s children receive a comprehensive liberal arts and science education, we all agree.”

In the survey, 1,200 17-year-olds were reached by telephone in January and asked to answer 33 multiple choice questions about history and literature, which were read aloud to them. The questions were drawn from a test administered by the federal government in 1986.

About a quarter of the teenagers surveyed were unable to correctly identify [Adolf Hitler](#) as Germany’s chancellor during World War II, instead identifying him variously as a munitions maker, an Austrian premier and the German Kaiser.

On literature, the teenagers fared even worse. Only four in 10 could pick the name of [Ralph Ellison](#)’s novel about a young man’s growing up in the south and moving to Harlem, “Invisible Man,” from a list of titles, and only about half knew that in the Bible,

Job is known for his patience in suffering. About as many said he was known for his skill as a builder, or his prowess in battle, or his prophetic abilities.

The history question that proved easiest asked the respondents to identify the man who declared, "I have a dream." Ninety-seven percent of teenagers correctly picked [Martin Luther King Jr.](#)

About eight in ten teenagers, a higher percentage than on any other literature question, knew that [Harper Lee](#)'s novel, "To Kill a Mockingbird," is about two children affected by the conflict in their community when their father defends a black man in court.

In a joint introduction to their report, Ms. Cortese and Dr. Ravitch did not directly blame the No Child law for the dismal survey results, but argued that the law has led schools to focus too narrowly on reading and math, thereby crowding time out of the school day for history, literature and other subjects.

"The nation's education system has become obsessed with testing and basic skills because of the requirements of federal law, and that is not healthy," Ms. Cortese and Dr. Ravitch said.

A string of studies have documented the narrowing of the American public school curriculum since President Bush signed the federal law in January 2002. Last week, the Center on Education Policy, a Washington research group that has closely studied the law's implementation, estimated, based on its own extensive survey, that 62 percent of school systems nationwide had added an average of three hours of math or reading instruction each week, at the expense of time spent on social studies, art and other subjects.

But the Bush administration and some business and civil rights groups warn against weakening the law, arguing that students need reading and math skills to succeed in other subjects.