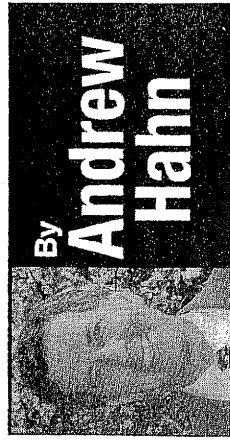


# The End of Youth?



At a time when many foundations are supporting education reform and millions of philanthropic dollars are going to fund youth development programs, Newt Gingrich is reappearing in the limelight to push an anti-poverty strategy that's long on ideology and short on thoughtfulness.

The conservative icon and former speaker of the House of Representatives is calling for the end of youth as a fundamental component of eradicating poverty.

Gingrich argues that adolescence is a socially constructed phase of life that has outlived its original purpose. Once designed to protect children from dangerous work when the U.S. economy was industrializing, it is now, according to Gingrich, a largely useless phase that delays teens getting on with their careers or college, and coddles them with substitute leisure activities such as drugs, hip hop, phony service opportunities and teen sex.

His answer to these challenges? Get kids out of youth, pronto.

Gingrich might be rightfully concerned about the leisurely pace that takes most American youths through adolescence. But ask the parents of

teenagers, and they are more likely to lament how incredibly over-programmed their kids are. Gingrich's proposals need close scrutiny.

To speed up youth development, he wants to pay youth for completing high school in less than four years. He wants them to load up on required courses and test out of others, in order to earn a high school degree in only two years. For those who do, he proposes to redirect the money that might have been spent on them in high school over four years to help them pay for post-secondary education.

Where he goes way off base is when he worries about ethnic enclaves wallowing in leisure and lacking in work ethic. These generalizations are dangerously close to what some might see as racial stereotypes. In the Gingrich world, some ethnicities apparently have the entrepreneurial spirit and supporting culture to escape chronic and lingering poverty, while other groups need to be "incentivized" to unlock their latent ambitions.

But many youngsters from underrepresented minority groups are anything but lazy. They volunteer in huge numbers, and they work hard in school and at jobs (when jobs are available to them). In the Gingrich framework, liberals have a special place of shame and blame. Apparently, they

are to blame for social welfare policies that prop up failing public schools and other institutions, further robbing youth of personal responsibility and the desire to work hard. The unions in particular, as part of the liberal establishment, are said to dominate our urban school systems to such a degree as to make widespread school reform difficult, costly and in some cases impossible. That is why charter schools, vouchers and pilot schools hold such appeal for conservatives.

I am cautiously in favor of raising the speed limit on the road through youth, if what we want to accomplish during these years can be done in a wise and effective manner. I don't share the Gingrich idea that liberals, schools and teachers' unions reflect some sort of conspiracy to deprive youth of healthy youth and education experiences by providing redundant jobs for adults who work in these institutions and make-work youth experiences for the kids. His proposals to pay youths to start their adult lives at age 16 will just carry more youthful struggles into the work force and college. Compressing the time for adolescent development (and experimentation) will just push drugs, sex and rock and roll into colleges and employment settings. In any case, who wants a 16-year-old fixing your air

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conditioning system or repairing your car?

Youth is a developmental phase with a biological basis, not a time sink invented by flaky liberals, as Gingrich would have us believe. Everything we have learned about youth programs suggests that young people from every imaginable ethnic group will line up for good programs and make sacrifices to participate and succeed, if the programs really work.

Youth need constructive opportunities and supports in school and during non-school hours. Research demonstrates that positive outcomes, such as employment and college enrollment, are linked to excellent school and program experiences at earlier ages, including tutoring, sports and church-related activities.

The key is promoting access and high-quality opportunities in schools and in after-school programs – not tearing down so-called liberal institutions and promoting facile remedies to combat the alleged lack of entrepreneurial culture in whole ethnic groups.

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