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## **Q&A: Leon Botstein**

***Author, conductor, president of Bard College***  
ASBJ Editors

For our September 2007 “What is Ready?” cover package, the editors of *ASBJ* interviewed educators, scholars, and researchers about the topic of student readiness for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Leon Botstein, music director and principal conductor of the American Symphony Orchestra and the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, has been president of Bard College since 1975. An advocate of progressive education, Botstein wrote *Jefferson's Children: Education and the Promise of American Culture*, in which he argues for abolishing high school education after 10<sup>th</sup> grade and establishing a national early college system.

**Editor:** What is ready?

Well, first and foremost, a real well grounded literacy. That is, the use of language to write, to formulate, to recognize and articulate thoughts they have, and (to be able to) do that in writing. And not in sort of the primitive shorthand of e-mail, but in a sustained argument, so they're able to explain what they think and why they think it. And then also an ability to read with some capacity: to ask questions about what they're reading, whether it is getting a better handle of the point of the writer or what's not being said, or what things imply.

To be, in the best sense, literate. That's, I think, first and foremost. Second is what I would call the parallel scientific literacy. Many of our public policy issues are increasingly contingent on some understanding of the natural world, whether it is what a stem cell is, what kinds of stem cells there are, what is DNA, what is the Human Genome, what is the atmosphere made of, how do you make sense out of all the competing claims about global warming, climate change, what is the nature of our understanding of disease and its spread and cure, how does disease work, how does the immune system work, Basic fundamental literacy about science.

Third I would call very old-fashioned civic literacy. Someone who understands exactly, what is the Constitution, what's in it. Some notion of global geography and some orientation about history and character of the world in which we live, historically, politically, economically and socially. All of these things are defined by the necessity of educating citizens and so the education has to be appropriate of the intelligent pursuit in one's obligation in a democracy.

**Editor:** What do you think of the increased emphasis on 21<sup>st</sup> century skills?

**Botstein:** There's nothing innovative about it. There's nothing new about it. Yes, people need to know what computers do and how computers work. But that's just subject matter. People need to know about China. People growing up in the 1940s didn't have to know about China.

[The rest of it is] nonsense. It's familiar attention-getting rhetoric that has no substance. There's nothing new in the world about love and death, there's nothing 21<sup>st</sup> Century about loving the love and death. And there's nothing 21<sup>st</sup> Century about learning either. Now the content of it, the character of it, changes because we live in a different time. But the fundamental character of it. ... that's why “Romeo and Juliet” makes sense to us although it was written centuries ago. It's why the fundamental human values, ones of love or loyalty or heroism or whatever virtue you want,

training the mind to think and to be curious, to acquire knowledge and use it has remained the same. What we think and what we worry about and what the state of our knowledge is changes, but there's nothing 21<sup>st</sup> century about that. Human nature has a kind of a powerful consistency to it.

**Editor:** How well are today's high schools doing?

**Botstein:** American high school is an atrocious failure. It's a scandal. And it has been made worse by the high-stakes testing movement. It's been worse by the sort of standardization. It's controlled by state regulation that is ignorant about what needs to be taught. We do not have the teaching personnel. We don't pay them well enough. The conditions of work are humiliating. We treat adolescents as if they were big children when they are really young adults. It is a horrendous failure.

In our culture today, when puberty meets the opportunity for education, the most vulgar parts of puberty – not the enthusiasm, the energy, the rapid learning pace – are utilized. I like to say, "When puberty meets education, puberty wins, education loses." And the high school system is getting worse, not better. It is the weakest link in educational structure.

Junior high schools and high schools are catastrophes. They promote anti-intellectualism. School boards are more interested in the sports teams. There is a kind of enforced uniformity to the lowest common denominator. It's a scandal.

**Editor:** How would you reform it?

**Botstein:** If I were to reform the system, I would simplify it. I would do simply an elementary and secondary system. I would get rid of the middle school and the junior high school. That has to do with the American discomfort with the coming of age and a kind of idealization of childhood innocence. So I would have an elementary system, K through six, and a secondary system, seven through 10, and end compulsory schooling at age 16. Instead of having a 12-grade concept, have a 10-grade concept.

**Editor:** Is there something wrong with the concept of a middle school?

**Botstein:** Oh yes, because it age-segregates young people. So, on the one hand, they no longer have the sort of innocence ... of childhood, but don't have the role model of adults. It's a ridiculous segregation. What we have done – especially now that we have, by and large, a country where families are small – we don't have any age integration. Young people don't learn from older peers. It's an artificial segregating of people by their age and grade.

**Editor:** What of the idea to separate middle-school-age students because of their needs?

**Botstein:** It's all pseudo-social science, psychology. It's way out of date. It has no evidence. The idea was to segregate the innocent child from the pubescent child, and the early puberty child from the late adolescent. For what reasons? None. In fact, people learn from role models – which are not only adults but are older young people. Also, the ideal of the obligation of getting older – so older students helping younger – all this kind of thing is just made impossible. That creates a peer group where cliques and popularity and ridiculously philistine notions of value are generated, by kind of hothouse of an artificial group. Adults don't function in an age-segregated world. You have colleagues who are your equals who are 20 years your senior and 20 years your junior.

