



Devin Foley of Intellectual Takeout, and Better Ed

Family breakdown causing instability in society, public institutions

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Civic Process Interview

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Present

John Adams, Steve Anderson, Janis Clay, Devin Foley, Paul Gilje (executive director), Randy Johnson, Dan Loritz (chair), Bill Rudelius, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, Tom Spitznagle. By phone: Dave Broden (vice chair).

Summary

The disintegration of the family in our society is a fundamental public-policy institution breakdown, according to Devin Foley of Intellectual Takeout and Better Ed. He asserts that family breakdown is causing instability for our entire society and for our public institutions-our policy institutions, our government and our schools.

High out-of-wedlock birthrates in Hennepin and Ramsey Counties, especially among minority communities, highlight the destruction of the family, Foley states. He points to large achievement gaps between whites and minorities in Minneapolis and St. Paul public schools as results of both family breakdown and schools that don't work, despite high rates of spending per student. He says public schools cannot replace families.

But he praises three successful schools located in Minneapolis, but not part of the school district. They offer different models and assume a different role in their students' lives. He sees a critical need for school choice for families.

He takes a close look at millennials, saying that since a large number of them come from broken homes, they've learned that family doesn't really matter. He notes that half of all births to millennials are out of wedlock. He claims millennials are a lost, lonely and adrift generation. They have a strong longing for community at the local level, but because of the atomization of society, they don't know how to achieve it. He concludes by saying older generations should be horrified that as they age, the millennials will be the people in charge.

Biography

Devin Foley is cofounder and president of the Minnesota nonprofits Intellectual Takeout and Better Ed. He oversees content development and marketing, works with academics and experts to assure quality, and publicly promotes the site.

Intellectual Takeout (ITO) is a national nonprofit educational organization based in Minnesota. Its vision is a cultural renaissance in America, based on the ideals of freedom, justice and subsidiarity, i. e., the principle that political decisions should be made at the local level if possible, rather than by a central authority. Better Ed is a nonprofit education reform project dedicated to bringing about a new education system in Minnesota.

Prior to co-founding Intellectual Takeout and Better Ed, Foley served as director of development at the Center of the American Experiment, a Minnesota think tank. He has eight years of fundraising and policy experience working for candidates and nonprofit organizations. He studied history and political science at Hillsdale College in Michigan.

Background

This interview with Devin Foley is part of a new focus for the Civic Caucus on reviewing the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future civic process for anticipating, defining and resolving major public problems. The Caucus asked Foley to discuss the involvement of millennials in the civic process.

Intellectual Takeout (ITO) began in 2003 as a project of the Minnesota-based **Center of the American Experiment**. In 2009, it spun off from the Center and no longer has any formal connection with it. The mission of ITO is to provide an online, one-stop shop of resources for all those interested in learning about freedom. ITO gathers published materials on topics of interest to college students and synthesizes them at its website. Its **digital library** is compiled with the assistance of 30 student researchers.

Intellectual Takeout aims to "feed minds, foster discussion and inspire action, based on the principles and virtues necessary for human flourishing." Its website asserts that the organization has a national audience that is almost equal parts conservative and liberal and consists of 1.2 million people on social media.

The mission of **Better Ed** is to creatively enlighten the public about the data and ideas that currently shape American education and introduce them to ideas that can help improve it. Better Ed has been a vocal critic of achievement levels in the Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS). By creating greater public awareness, Better Ed hopes to generate the desire for an educational renaissance in Minnesota that recaptures the wisdom and methods of the past and applies them to the present. The organization has 42,000 subscribers, primarily local.

Discussion

If the general public is to take a larger role in shaping public policy, it's important to communicate with them and engage them directly. According to Devin Foley, cofounder and

president of Intellectual Takeout and Better Ed, a small cadre of people has been shaping public policy and often the public has been secondary in those conversations. He said the general public needs a larger role in shaping public policy. During his work at the Center of the American Experiment (CAE), a Minnesota-based public policy think tank, Foley said he saw a need to communicate with the general public. "We wanted to go in and engage them directly," he said.

When Intellectual Takeout (ITO), which started in 2003 as a project of CAE, spun off from the Center in 2009, Foley said social media was coming into its own. ITO started its own website and now has 1.2 million subscribers on Facebook. He said the audience, made up mostly of millennials, is diverse politically, with a large number of independents.

The associated Better Ed organization, focused on education reform in Minnesota, has 42,000 mostly local subscribers.

"In one week we can reach up to 30 million people nationwide," he said. "It's shocking the number of people you can engage through digital means."

The millennials make up a large generation, almost matching the baby boomers in size. Foley defined the millennials as ranging in age from about 20 to 37. He said the in-between generation, Gen X, is significantly smaller than either the baby boomer or millennial generations.

"Because of their generation's size, it's important to consider what the millennials are looking at, what their experiences are and what the reality is for even younger Americans coming up," he said. Some question why youth aren't organizing and aren't more engaged with organizations like the Civic Caucus.

If there is disorder in the family, there will be disorder in society. "I was asked what public policy institutions I would draw attention to," Foley said. "I would have to say that it's the family. We have a significant challenge ahead of us."

He said the traditional family has a mother and a father and their children. In such a traditional family, he said, the father and mother have different roles, driven by science and nature. The family is where a child learns justice, discipline and how organizations work and experiences security in the home.

"But the family unit has broken down," he said. Divorce is common. Millennials are having kids out of wedlock or are living together and not getting married. "If the family is the concrete foundation and source of stability for our entire society, for all other public institutions, including our policy institutions, our government, our schools, and the family collapses, we have a serious problem," Foley said.

The millennials have learned from previous generations that family doesn't really matter.

Nationally, half of all births to millennials are out of wedlock, Foley noted. He said a study called "**Wayward Sons**" by the Third Way Institute, which identifies itself as a centrist think tank, asserts that children from single-parent homes have worse outcomes on both academic and economic measures than their peers from two-parent families. The study notes a vast difference in resources and parental time and attention between one-parent and two-parent families. It says most single-parent families are headed by mothers and boys appear to do relatively worse in these families, perhaps due to the absence of fathers.

There are large disparities between whites and minorities in Hennepin and Ramsey Counties in births out of wedlock and academic achievement. According to the Minnesota Department of Health, Foley said, out-of-wedlock birthrates are as follows:

- In Hennepin County in 2014: 17 percent for whites and 84 percent for American-born African Americans. Between 2010 and 2014, 61 percent to 63 percent for Hispanics and in the high 80s to the 90s for American Indians.
- In Ramsey County, from 2010 to 2014: between 27 percent and 29 percent for whites; between 87 percent and 92 percent for American-born African Americans; and between 60 percent and 66 percent for Hispanics.

"You're looking at the utter destruction of the family, particularly for minorities," Foley said.

Gaps in academic achievement are also large:

- In Minneapolis public schools in 2015, 77 percent of whites in all grades were reading at or above grade level, compared with less than 25 percent of Hispanics, blacks and Native Americans.
- In St. Paul public schools in 2015, 67 percent of whites in 10th grade were reading at or above grade level, compared with 28 percent of Hispanics, 19 percent of blacks and 27 percent of Native Americans.

Foreign-born African American immigrants have much lower out-of-wedlock birthrates than American-born African Americans. An interviewer asked if new immigrants have a stronger sense of family than some native-born Americans. Foley responded that in Hennepin and Ramsey Counties in 2014, foreign-born African Americans have lower out-of-wedlock birthrates than American-born African Americans.

- Out-of-wedlock birthrates in Hennepin County in 2014: American-born African Americans, 84 percent; foreign-born African Americans, 37 percent.
- Out-of-wedlock birthrates in Ramsey County in 2014: American-born African Americans, 87 percent; foreign-born African Americans, 35 percent.

We have a fundamental public-policy institution breakdown: the self-organizing family.

Intellectual Takeout, Foley said, tries to point out how much it matters how people live. "Ultimately, our society is driven from the bottom up, he said. "It is not top down. That's what makes a republic. That's what makes a democratic society. You have to learn how to order yourself and that comes from your experience in family."

Foley asserted that the millennials are a lost, lonely and adrift generation. Many of them come from broken homes, which lead to a great sense of insecurity. "We have a significant psychosis problem for an entire generation," he said. "If we're going to talk about public-policy institutions that matter," he said, "we have to get back to the family. Looking at the millennial generation, a lot of challenges are rooted in the breakdown of the most basic foundation of our society."

There are no institutions today devoted specifically to strengthening the family. An interviewer noted that until 30 years ago, we took strong families as a given. But now there has been a weakening of family bonds. Foley said he knew of no organizations today devoted to strengthening the family.

"Churches aren't doing this," he said. "It's not there. People are walking away from the churches. In addition to the family breaking down, we've atomized as a society."

The interviewer asked what is at the root of families breaking up or not being formed in the first place. Foley responded that it's interesting how many of the millennials aren't getting married, aren't engaging. "They're living solitary lives," he said. "Lots of millennials are choosing not to have families, because all they can deal with is their own lives. They're massively in debt; the cost of living is exceedingly high. The economy has changed. You compound that with a sense of insecurity in your very being and it's about all you can handle to manage your own life."

"We can't ignore the impact of fundamental changes in the economy and in technology on our society," he said. "Capitalism has brought us wonderful things, but in doing that, it fundamentally ripped apart all of our society. Industrialism fundamentally changed the nature of our society. The car changed the nature of our society. We don't have to know our neighbors because we don't walk past people anymore. We just drive."

The atomization of society has affected the family and civic organizations. Foley said millennials have a strong longing for community at the local level, but they don't know how to achieve it. The civic organizations that people used to be involved in started with the family, the church and the neighborhood. There were common bonds that brought people together.

"As much as we want to be a pluralistic society, it's those unique threads of fabric that draw people together," he said. "The destruction of any sort of tradition goes against our human nature."

President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal brought an enormous disruption to civil society during the 1930s. Foley said people told Roosevelt he was fundamentally changing the role of civil society. They said the Federal government was coming in and displacing and weakening these organizations.

Foley said the problem has been compounded over the years with more and more laws that make it difficult for people to self-organize on the commonalities that draw people together, like religion and ethnicity. "If we don't have those things to draw us together, it's really hard to be able to stand strong against the tidal wave of consumerism and everything else that's hitting you," he said.

An interviewer asked about **former Congressman Tim Penny's suggestions in a recent Civic Caucus interview** that requiring universal service or helping students register to vote before they finish high school could help young people identify with the larger society. Foley responded that the suggestions raise red flags for him. "As real or perceived societal disorder becomes felt among people, there is a desire to create order," he said. "Often times, you get a greater government presence that comes in to create that order. That creates further disorder, because people feel the pressure of it and revolt in different ways."

There is a clash between the education system and family organization. Foley noted that John Dewey (1859-1952), an education reformer whose ideas have been influential in education and social reform, admitted the existence of this clash. Foley pointed to [Ascension Catholic School](#) in North Minneapolis as an example of a school trying to reverse course. He said the school goes door-to-door in North Minneapolis to recruit kids to the school.

Foley said the students wear uniforms and "you can hear a pin drop" in the school, which serves overwhelmingly poor minority kids. "The school tells the parents that to have their kids at Ascension, the parents must limit the amount of screen time they allow their kids and must read to their kids so many hours a week or have their kids read to them."

Stanford University just released a report saying that young children in early childhood programs are going to school too early. Foley referred to the report and said that Canada has also found that early childhood education programs are causing problems because they're taking the children away from their parents too early.

"We need to look at this and at the welfare system and think about how we can actually build strong families," he said. "Are we incentivizing the wrong behavior? Do we need to do something different?"

Social media doesn't offer the organizing force we'd hoped it would, but it's the tool that we have. When an interviewer asked whether there is something in technology that could be an organizing force in the community, Foley responded, "I hate social media." He said it is not the organizing force we'd hoped it would be. "It's the tool that we have because we have such shattered communities. We don't have local community any more."

But on the positive side, his organizations use social media to try to re-engage the population at large with the way things used to be, offering things like history and an introduction to the cardinal virtues, such as fortitude. "If you want to see societal change," he said, "people have to want that change. We either teach young people how to govern themselves, how to raise families, how to actually have strong neighborhoods or we will have to have strong government coming in and organizing them. History would indicate that is often a prescription for some very bad situations taking place."

Some of the schools that are succeeding employ different models of education and acknowledge that they have a different role. An interviewer asked what can be done for kids of all ages who have not had the benefit of strong families. Foley responded by noting three examples of successful schools located in Minneapolis that offer different models and are taking on a different role in their students' lives: Ascension, [Cristo Rey Jesuit High School](#) and [Hope Academy](#). (See also the Dec. 6, 2013, [Civic Caucus interview with Cristo Rey President Fr. Tim Manatt](#).)

"Quite often, we have conned ourselves into believing that education is neutral," Foley said. "It is not. All education is biased, has an objective and a goal to it. There's a purpose to this thing we do. We have to re-evaluate exactly what that purpose is. Getting kids to do reading, writing and math isn't enough. Education has been the passing on of our culture and traditions. The reading, writing and math are just the ways to engage in the culture, the traditions and the economy."

"It's a sad day when we've come to the point where the family has so disintegrated that people don't know how to be a family," he continued. Government and other forces now have to reteach people

how to be a family. But to do that, society will have to agree that it's important. "Right now, you have a very big chunk of people who don't see the value of family, because they never were a part of it or they didn't find it to be the secure environment it was supposed to be."

School choice matters. Foley said school choice is important, because parents need to have control over what ideas and values are presented to their children. Otherwise, there's a danger of government taking that control. "We must self-organize organically to talk about the importance of family and to help children have a better chance at life or, eventually, Caesar comes and the disintegration of society will overwhelm us."

It's important to know what organizations that work with kids are communicating to those kids. An interviewer asked about the impact of groups like the YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs and scouting. Foley said we must see what those organizations are communicating to the kids. He thinks the organizations are increasingly feeling pressure to conform to the dominant trends in society and to not offend, as opposed to standing firm on certain ideas.

"They do good work," he said, "but we must plant a very firm flag in the soil and say, 'You need a Mom and a Dad to actually take responsibility for what they created. It's a moral crime against both the children and society for parents to fail to actually do their duty.' How many of us, how many in the media, how many corporations are willing to take that stand and offend a whole swath of their consumers?"

We should preserve whatever remnant of people is out there holding onto the ideas of the past. "It may be that strengthening a remnant is necessary and that remnant can then pick up the pieces, just like it did after Rome fell," Foley said.

We've spent trillions of dollars on the War on Poverty. Foley said we've spent trillions of dollars attempting to fight these problems with bureaucracies. "Has the situation improved?" he asked. "I think it would be better if these programs didn't exist."

Minneapolis public schools are spending as much or more per student as some private schools and getting poor outcomes. Foley asked why the media are not bringing to light the poor outcomes for minority students in Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS). In 2015, less than 25 percent of black, Hispanic and Native American students in MPS were reading at grade level. "This should be a headline," he said.

MPS are producing these poor outcomes, Foley said, despite spending more per student than some private schools. He said Better Ed has calculated the amount of total spending per student in MPS by taking the school district's total expenditures and dividing them by the number of students. The total spending is \$21,000 per student. Suburban districts, he said, spend around \$13,000 to \$15,000 per student.

The Minneapolis school district claims the spending per student is only \$13,000 to \$15,000, but Foley points out that includes only general operations spending, not total spending.

Homeschooling families will represent a significant proportion of the people who come back and hold things together down the road. In response to an interviewer's question about the impact

of homeschooling, Foley said his children are being homeschooled. "It's a grueling endeavor," he said. "It's an enormous burden on the wives who are doing it. There's a lot of stress for all of the family. They're willing to make the sacrifice because they believe they're bettering their own children's future and maintaining the culture and traditions."

He said the group of homeschoolers is growing and includes people on both sides of the aisle. "People are fleeing the public schools," he said.

The public schools can't replace family. Foley said early childhood education is attempting to replace family and it can't. Recent studies, he noted, say that early childhood education cannot replace the parent and that it's detrimental to take the child away from the parent at an early age. The only thing schools can do is to give people the grounding they need to actually be good parents, Foley said, and to teach what it means to be a good person.

We're at the end stage of the Enlightenment. Foley said the Enlightenment was grounded on freedom and equality. Freedom meant people were free to do what is right and good, which was defined by the culture. He said freedom now means, "Do whatever I want. No one should have authority over me. I create my own set of values, my own morals." That leads to chaos, he argued. Young people have been taught that the world will conform to what they want instead of them conforming to the world.

He concluded by saying older generations should be horrified that as they age, the millennials will be the people in charge.