The Blumenfeld Education Letter

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." HOSEA 4:6

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The purpose of this newsletter is to provide knowledge for parents and educators who want to save the children of America from the destructive forces that endanger them. Our children in the public schools are at grave risk in 4 ways: academically, spiritually, morally, and physically — and only a well-informed public will be able to reduce these risks. "Without vision, the people perish."

Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Public Schooling

No one in America today is better qualified to report on the true condition of our government education system than John Taylor Gatto, the now-famous educator who spent 26 years teaching in six different schools in New York City and quit because he could no longer take part in a system that destroys lives by destroying minds.

In 1990 the New York Senate named Mr. Gatto New York City Teacher of the Year. The speech he gave at that occasion, "The Psychopathic School," amounted to a devastating indictment of public education (reprinted in BEL, May 1991, under the title "Why Schools Don't Educate"). In 1991 Mr. Gatto was named New York State Teacher of the Year, at which occasion he gave a speech, "The Seven-Lesson Schoolteacher," so insightful of the wrongheadedness of public education that it will probably become a classic in educational literature.

These two remarkable speeches, plus several others, including one entitled "We Need Less School, Not More," were published in book form last year. And what a powerful book it is, only 104 pages long, readable in one or two sittings. With Outcome-Based Education being imposed on schools across America, we will get much more school, not less, and the content of that schooling will produce far more confusion than we already have.

Gatto was born in Monongahela, Pennsylvania, an industrial river town forty miles southeast of Pittsburgh. He writes: "It was a place where independence, toughness, and self-reliance were honored, a place where pride in ethnic and local culture was very intense. It was an altogether wonderful place to grow up, even to grow up poor." Gatto's grandfather was the town printer and, for a time, the publisher of the town newspaper, *The Daily Republican*, a source of independent thinking in a stronghold of the Democratic party.

The move from Monongahela to Manhattan was quite a jolt for Gatto. The difference in society and values turned Gatto into an anthropologist and in the next twenty-six years he used his classes "as a laboratory where I could learn a broader range of what human possibility is . . . and also as a place where I could study what releases and what inhibits human power."

Like so many university students, Gatto was taught by his professors that intelli-

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gence and talent were distributed throughout the population in bell curve predictability. But his experience as a teacher taught him differently. He writes:

The trouble was that the unlikeliest kids kept demonstrating to me at random moments so many of the hallmarks of human excellence—insight, wisdom, justice, resourcefulness, courage, originality—that I became confused. They didn't do this often enough to make my teaching easy, but they did it often enough that I began to wonder, reluctantly, whether it was possible that being in school itself was what was dumbing them down. Was it possible I had been hired not to enlarge children's power, but to diminish it? That seemed crazy on the face of it, but slowly I began to realize that the bells and confinement, the crazy sequences, the age-segregation, the lack of privacy, the constant surveillance, and all the rest of the national curriculum of schooling were designed exactly as if someone had set out to prevent children from learning how to think and act, to coax them into addiction and dependent behavior.

These insights led Gatto to develop a teaching style completely opposite to the methodology taught in the university. He writes:

Bit by bit I began to devise guerrilla exercises to allow the kids I taught—as many as I was able—the raw material people have always used to educate themselves: privacy, choice, freedom from surveillance, and as broad a range of situations and human associations as my limited power and resources could manage. . . . I dropped the idea that I was an expert, whose job it was to fill the little heads with my expertise, and began to explore how I could remove those obstacles that prevented the inherent genius of children from gathering itself.

Naturally, Gatto's methods put him more and more at odds with the system. He explains:

The sociology of government monopoly schools has evolved in such a way that a premise like mine jeopardizes the total institution if it spreads. . . . But once loose the idea could imperil the central assumptions which allow the institutional school to sustain itself, such as the false assumption that it is difficult to learn to read, or that kids resist learning, and many more.

In his speech, "The Seven-Lesson Schoolteacher," Gatto describes the seven lessons that are taught in all public schools by all teachers in America, whether they know it or not. He writes:

The first lesson I teach is confusion. Everything I teach is out of context. I teach the un-relating of everything. I teach dis-connections. . . . Even in the best of schools a close examination of curriculum and its sequences turns up a lack of coherence, full of internal contradictions. . . . Confusion is thrust upon kids by too many strange adults, each working alone with only the thinnest relationship with each other, pretending, for the most part, to an expertise they do not possess. . . . In a world where home is only a ghost, because both parents work, . . . or because something else has left everybody too confused to maintain a family relation, I teach you how to accept confusion as your destiny.

The second lesson I teach is class position. . . . The children are numbered so that if any get away they can be returned to the right class. . . . My job is to make them like being locked together with children who bear numbers like their own. . . . If I do my job well, the kids can't even imagine themselves somewhereelse, because I've shown them how to envy and fear the better classes and how to have contempt for the dumb classes. . . . That's the real lesson of any rigged competition like school. You come to know your place.

The third lesson I teach is indifference. . . . [W]hen the bell rings I insist they drop whatever it is we have been doing and proceed quickly to the next work station. They must turn on and off like a light switch. . . . Bells inoculate each undertaking with indifference.

The fourth lesson I teach is emotional dependency. By stars and red checks, smiles and frowns, prizes, honors, and disgraces, I teach kids to surrender their will to the predestinated chain of command.

The fifth lesson I teach is intellectual dependency. . . . It is the most important lesson, that we must wait for other people better trained than ourselves, to make the meanings of our lives. . . . [O]nly I, the teacher, can determine what my kids must study, or

rather, only the people who pay me can make those decisions, which I then enforce. If I'm told that evolution is a fact instead of a theory, I transmit that as ordered, punishing deviants who resist what I have been told to tell them to think. . . . Successful children do the thinking I assign them with a minimum of resistance and a decent show of enthusiasm. ... Bad kids fight this, of course, even though they lack the concepts to know what they are fighting, struggling to make decisions for themselves about what they will learn and when they will learn it. . . . Fortunately there are tested procedures to break the will of those who resist; it is more difficult, naturally, if the kids have respectable parents who come to their aid, but that happens less and less in spite of the bad reputation of schools. No middle-class parents I have ever met actually believe that their kid's school is one of the bad ones. Not one single parent in twenty-six years of teaching.

The sixth lesson I teach is provisional self-esteem. . . . The lesson of report cards, and tests is that children should not trust themselves or their parents but should instead rely on the evaluation of certified officials. People need to be told what they are worth.

The seventh lesson I teach is that one can't hide. I teach students they are always watched, that each is under constant surveillance by myself and my colleagues.... The meaning of constant surveillance and denial of privacy is that no one can be trusted, that privacy is not legitimate.

OBE and the Seven Lessons

It is obvious that Outcome-Based Education will reinforce the seven deadly lessons. Confusion will be taught by the arbitrary content of the curriculum, beginning with whole language and invented spelling and ending with a confusing mishmash called social-studies. Class position will be enhanced by separating the gifted and talented (the rulers of tomorrow) from the vocational proles whose future place in society will have been determined by the psycho-visionaries of OBE. Indifference will be reinforced through mastery learning which turns the student into a parrot who must demonstrate what he has learned in order to move up to the next level. Emotional dependency will be instilled since the student-prisoner will have to demonstrate competency in what he has learned in order to be released from compulsory attendance, no matter how old he is. Intellectual dependency will be taught by the requirement that the student learn exactly what he or she has been taught. The OBE visionaries will determine what vocation, what lifestyle that student will have and will design the curriculum to fit that predetermined future. Provisional self-esteem will be taught in order to get the student to do what the psycho-educators require, or else. And finally the student will discover that in OBE no one can hide because the student will be monitored as closely as any prisoner in a penitentiary and a permanent record will be kept in the federal computer available to all future controllers.

In other words, what Gatto now sees as a stifling, inhuman education system will simply get worse and more oppressive under the OBE plan. Can the system be reformed? Gatto writes:

The current debate about whether we should have a national curriculum is phony. We already have a national curriculum locked up in the seven lessons I have just outlined. Such a curriculum produces physical, moral, and intellectual paralysis, and no curriculum of content will be sufficient to reverse its hideous effects.... Schools teach exactly what they are intended to teach and they do it well: how to be a good Egyptian and remain in your place in the pyramid. . . .

Look again at the seven lessons of schoolteaching . . . all of these lessons are prime training for permanent underclasses, people deprived forever of finding the center of their own special genius.

Of course, things were not always this way. Back in the 1930s, when your editor attended public school in New York City, one was taught to read, write and do arithmetic in a well-organized, systematic, traditional way. There was no confusion in what we were being taught. In studying American

history, we started at the beginning and proceeded chronologically to the current period. It all made sense. The same was true of every other subject. Whatever was taught was very much worth learning. Nor was the teacher interested in how we felt, or what the political leanings of our parents were, or what our values were. These were clearly no concern of hers. Gatto writes:

> Only a few lifetimes ago things were very different in the United States. Originality and variety were common currency; our freedom from regimentation made us the miracle of the world; social-class boundaries were relatively easy to cross; our citizenry was marvelously confident, inventive, and able to do much for themselves independently, and to think for themselves. We were something special, we Americans, all by ourselves, without government sticking its nose into and measuring every aspect of our lives, without institutions and social agencies telling us how to think and feel. . . . [T]here are some studies that suggest literacy at the time of the American Revolution, at least for non-slaves on the Eastern seaboard, was close to total. Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* sold 600,000 copies to a population of 3,000,000, twenty percent of whom were slaves, and fifty percent indentured servants. . . .

It becomes obvious that the institution of government education itself did much to lead us away from the values of independence and self-reliance that governed America in its early days. And the only way to recapture these values is to get the government out of the education business. Gatto writes:

> The character of large compulsory institutions is inevitable; they want more and more until there isn't any more to give. School takes our children away from any possibility of an active role in community life—in fact it destroys communities by relegating the training of children to the hands of certified experts—and by doing so it ensures our children cannot grow up fully human.

Is there a solution to the problem? Gatto offers the same solution this writer has been advocating for the last ten years. He writes:

> Some form of free-market system in public schooling is the likeliest place to look for answers, a free market where family schools and small entrepreneurial schools and religious schools and crafts schools and farm schools exist in profusion to compete with government education. I'm trying to describe a free market in schooling exactly like the one the country had until the Civil War, one in which students volunteer for the kind of education that suits them, even if that means self-education; it didn't hurt Benjamin Franklin that I can see. . . .
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> After an adult lifetime spent teaching school, I believe the *method* of mass-schooling is its only real content. Don't be fooled into thinking that good curriculum or good equipment or good teachers are the critical determinants of your son's or daughter's education. All the pathologies we've considered come about in large measure because the lessons of school prevent children keeping important appointments with themselves and with their families to learn lessons in self-motivation, perseverance, self-reliance, courage, dignity, and love—and lessons in service to others, too, which are among the key lessons of home and community life.

Finally, Gatto ends his discourse with this memorable line:

> School is a twelve-year jail sentence where bad habits are the only curriculum truly learned. I teach school and win awards doing it. I should know.

The Time factor

Recently, an old friend of mine called to ask my advice on where to send his home-schooled oldest son to college. I argued against sending him to the usual liberal arts college where liberal professors would inevitably require him to read all the wrong books in order to pass their courses. If he spends all of his college time reading all the wrong books, I asked, when will he get a chance to read the right books? Those of us who went to liberal arts colleges and came out as atheists or secular humanists with all sorts of misinformation about economics and philosophy spent years unlearning what we were taught in college. We did this by reading conservative writers in our spare time.

Would it not have been better had we spent those college years reading the good books rather than the bad books? In those days, however, there wasn't even a list of the good books available! The liberals and socialists had gained such complete control over education that students had no way of knowing that there were good writers who defended capitalism and criticized socialism. Most of the good books were not available anywhere. They were usually out of print and not in the public libraries. In fact, one of the projects Robert Welch launched in creating The John Birch Society in 1958 was the reprinting in paperback of many out-of-print conservative classics.

Today there are more conservative, libertarian, Christian and anti-socialist books available than even a conservative could find time to read. And there are also a handful of decent colleges and universities for conservatives: Hillsdale, Pensacola Christian, Bob Jones, Regents, and Liberty. Yet, in a society where liberals control most of the schools, colleges, universities and the national electronic and print media, it is more important than ever to read conservative literature, the most effective antidote to liberalism. And so, time becomes a crucial factor in the education of a conservative.

Gatto has some interesting things to say about time in his essay, "We Need Less School, Not More." He writes:

> A surprising number of otherwise sensible people find it hard to see why the scope and reach of our formal schooling networks should not be increased—by extending the school day or year, for instance—in order to provide an economical solution to the problems posed by the decay of the American family. One reason for their preference, I think, is that they have trouble understanding the real difference between communities and networks, or even the difference between families and networks. . . .
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> Networks like schools are not communities, just as school training is not education. By preempting fifty percent of the total time of the young, by locking young people up with other young people exactly their own age, by ringing bells to start and stop work, by asking people to think about the same thing at the same time in the same way, by grading people the way we grade vegetables—and in a dozen other vile and stupid ways—network schools steal the vitality of communities and replace it with an ugly mechanism. No one survives these places with their humanity intact, not kids, not teachers, not administrators, and not parents. . . .
>
> The feeding frenzy of formal schooling has already wounded us seriously in our ability to form families and communities, by bleeding away time we need with our children and our children need with us. That's why I say we need less school, not more. . . .
>
> Schools stifle family originality by appropriating the critical time needed for any sound idea of family to develop—then they blame the family for its failure to be a family.

The distinction Gatto makes between "institutions and networks" and "families and communities" is a very important one. He writes:

> Those of you who remember the wonderful closeness possible in army camp life or sports teams, and who have now forgotten those you were once close with, will understand what I mean. In contrast, have you ever forgotten an uncle or an aunt?

And perhaps that is one reason why homeschooling is becoming so popular. It consists of rediscovering the values of family life, values that had been inadvertently lost in the "feeding frenzy" of public education. And what the visionaries of Outcome-Based Education want is to steal more and more from the family so that the family resembles what's left of an orange after the juice has been sucked out. Gatto writes:

> I belong to some networks myself, of course, but the only ones I consider completely safe are the ones that reject their communal facade, acknowledge their limits, and concentrate solely on helping me do a specific and necessary task. But a vampire network like a school, which tears off huge chunks of time and energy needed for building community and family—and always asks for more—needs to have a stake driven through its heart and be nailed into its coffin. . . .

No matter how good the individuals are who manage an institution, institutions lack a conscience because they measure by accounting methods.... The deepest purposes of these gigantic networks is to regulate and to make uniform. Since the logic of family and community is to give scope to variety around a central theme, whenever institutions intervene significantly in personal affairs they cause much damage.

And that explains why Outcome-Based Education is so evil because it insists on destroying the independence of the family and the individualism of the child. Whatever the school does can only be done at the expense of the family. And that also explains why the education establishment is so hostile to homeschooling because it represents the family reasserting itself, taking back its power and integrity and educative functions and rejecting the institution which has indeed become, as Gatto describes, a vampire. "Perhaps," he suggests, "it is time to try something different."

(*Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling* can be obtained from: New Society Publishers, 4527 Springfield Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19143. Price $9.95 plus $2.50 for postage and handling.)

Drug Use Increases Among 8th Graders

According to the annual National High School Senior Survey on Drug Abuse released in mid-April, 8th graders reported increases in nearly every category of drug use from 1991 to 1992: cocaine use increased from 2.3 percent to 2.9 percent; marijuana use jumped from 10.2 percent to 11.2 percent; and use of L.S.D. rose from 2.7 percent to 3.2 percent.

The survey, funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse and conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan, questioned 50,000 8th, 10th and 12th graders on their use of 13 illegal substances. Among the senior class of 1992, 40.7 percent said they had used an illegal drug at least once in their lifetime, which represented a dramatic drop from 44.1 percent in 1991.

The survey also reported a decline in marijuana use among seniors from 23.9 percent in 1991 to 21.9 percent in 1992. Tenth-grade levels of drug use remained unchanged. But use of L.S.D. among high school seniors rose to 5.6 percent in 1992 from 5.2 percent in 1991, representing the highest level in seven years! The researchers warned that the new data represent "the newest wave" of adolescents who may foreshadow a reversal in the decline of drug use in this country.

Attitudes among students about drug use have also changed, the report says. In 1992, 8th graders were "significantly less likely" than those in 1991 to see cocaine and crack cocaine as dangerous. For example, in 1992, 89.6 percent of 8th graders said they "disapprove" of people who try cocaine once or twice, compared with 91.2 percent who expressed disapproval the previous year. This shift in tolerance levels may explain the increased use of these illegal substances by 13- and 14-year-olds, the researchers said. In another "troubling" finding, high school seniors were less likely to see experimentation with illicit substances as hazardous. (*Education Week*, 4/21/93)

Comment:

Why, after more than twenty years of drug education of one kind or another, do we still have a serious drug problem among school children? The answer is quite simple. Most of the drug education programs used over the years stress decision-making, self-esteem exercises, listening and communication skills in which moral judgments are

notably absent. To be judgmental is to be religious, bigoted, and intolerant of the behavior of others. Besides, the school building itself is a major marketplace for drugs with some students aggressively enticing their peers to try their products. A hooked student becomes a steady customer, and the peer pressure to experiment becomes irresistible to those students who crave to be accepted by their peers as cool.

The largest and best known drug education program used in American schools is called Quest. It is based on a nondirective therapeutic scheme developed by the late Carl Rogers, the father of intensive group therapy in which participants, in a nonjudgmental atmosphere, "get in touch with their feelings." Dr. William Coulson, who worked with Rogers in developing these therapeutic techniques, finally came to the conclusion that they were dangerous and destructive and should in no way be used with school children who need strong, authoritative moral guidance to help them avoid self-destructive behavior. But the nonjudgmental approach persists because it fits in with the humanistic philosophy of moral relativism, is used widely in sex education, and dovetails nicely with values clarification. And as long as this is the sort of drug education the children are getting, we can expect the drug problem to be with us for decades to come.

New Book Studies Condoms in the Schools

A new book, *Condoms in the Schools*, published by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, reveals that 68 percent of adults believe that public schools should distribute condoms, according to a Gallup poll taken last summer. But only 8 percent of high and middle school students are in districts that have approved condom-distribution, according to a 1992 survey of 299 high school officials conducted by Lou Harris a Associates.

Condom-availability programs are concentrated in large urban areas, in the East and West, in low-income districts, and in areas with larger minority student populations, the survey says. Some programs are informal ones in which teachers keep condom supplies in a desk drawer, while others are administered by nurses or counselors in school-based clinics.

No research exists on whether condom programs have had an impact on teenage sexual activity, according to an article in the book by Douglas Kirby, director of research at E.T.R. Associates in Scotts Valley, Calif. He suggests that schools should begin to keep track of how many condoms are distributed and participate in studies to measure student behavior before and after condoms are made available.

The condoms are supposed to help sexually active teenagers protect themselves from unwanted pregnancy and disease. According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, one million, or one in 10 teenage girls become pregnant each year, and eight in 10 teenage pregnancies are unintended.

The book is available free of charge from the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2400 Sand Hill Road, Menlo Park, CA 94025; (415) 854-9400. (*Education Week*, 4/21/93)

Philly Combats School Violence

In an effort to combat increasing violence in the Philadelphia public schools, the city's police department has loaned the district a top official to revamp its security operations. Chief Inspector William T. Bergman Jr. will temporarily serve as the district's executive director for school safety.

Violence in the district is on the increase, school officials say. In November, a student opened fire in a South Philadelphia high school, wounding two students. In December, another student was stabbed during a fight. In February, one high school student was found slain and another charged with murder in connection with a carjacking incident. (*Education Week*, 3/10/93)

Letter From a Teacher

Dear Mr. Blumenfeld:

I am writing first to express my sincere admiration for all of your fine work in the cause of education. Secondly, I have used *Alpha-Phonics* on one of my students and have seen dramatic, and at times miraculous, results. Finally, I have enclosed an article of mine printed in Westchester Gannett Papers of New York. As you can see, I've been greatly influenced by you.

Please continue all that you do. I will continue to do my part via back-to-basics teaching, publications, and spreading the word.

Carlo T. DiNota
Cardinal Hayes High School
Bronx, New York

Comment: I called Mr. DiNota to thank him for his letter and to find out what is going on in Catholic high schools these days. He is only 25 and has been teaching for about three years and is very pessimistic about the future of Catholic education which, he observes, is resembling public education more and more. What follows are some extracts from his article of 4/8/93 in the Westchester Gannett Papers:

Three years ago, I was an idealistic high school English teacher in the South Bronx. I was fresh out of graduate school and filled with grand ideas, convinced that my youth, vigor and passion for English would somehow quickly rectify whatever weaknesses my students might have. I was a bit naive.

Never did I expect that so many of the freshmen whom I would be teaching would have such difficulty reading, identifying nouns and verbs, and placing periods after sentences. Although my enthusiasm remains, my idealism has waned because I must spend most of the year introducing and continually reinforcing the fundamentals that should have been taught and mastered at the elementary level.

That a ninth-grader can call "and" a verb and London a country no longer surprises me because, as anyone remotely involved in education knows, our primary schools have moved away from the basics. This problem can be traced to the disturbing fact that our teachers themselves are no longer being taught the basics in their training courses. . . .

Education students are treated to such high doses of psychology and value-oriented teaching techniques in their training courses that an outsider might think they are being groomed to be amateur psychiatrists rather than academic instructors. . . .

Our children's intellectual development has been stifled from too many airy-fairy progressive methods that often border on dopiness and whose academic merits are a joke. . . .

For 12 years, the press has scrutinized Republican economic gurus and their supply-side/trickle-down theories when examining the country's fiscal mess. Where have they been in inspecting the uniformly liberal ideology of teachers' colleges when trying to sort out the pathetic and embarrassing state of our schools?

Education Secretary's Son Guilty in Drug Charges

Richard Riley Jr., son of Pres. Clinton's new Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley, pleaded guilty on 2/12/93 to drug charges, the U.S. Attorney's office announced. The younger Riley and about 25 others were indicted in November on charges of conspiracy to possess and distribute cocaine and marijuana.

Riley Jr., 34, and the others are free on bond until sentencing. The younger Riley admitted to holding less than 25 grams of cocaine and about 100 grams of marijuana. Sentencing has been deferred pending the completion of presentencing reports. The charges carry a maximum sentence of 20 years and a $1 million fine. (*Florence Morning News*, Florence, S.C., 2/13/93)