

Going to School Back in the Great Depression

By Samuel L. Blumenfeld

One of the great advantages to being 83 years old is that I have lived through a great deal of history and have a perspective on life that you, my younger readers, do not have. I remember the days when I would look around and find myself perhaps the youngest person in the crowd. I took great delight in that. Today I look around and I am usually the oldest. But I know that God has kept me around for a purpose, and I suspect that He wants me to keep doing what I have been doing for the last forty years: writing about education and promoting homeschooling.

How different is education today from what it was when I first attended a public school back in New York City in the early 1930s! That was during the Great Depression, but I don't remember anyone I knew being depressed. My father was in the produce business and thus we always had plenty of food to eat. My mother actually made her own noodles for chicken soup. I was able to walk to school and come home for lunch. I remember admiring the smiling policeman who stopped traffic so that we could cross the avenue on our way to school.

On Saturdays my friends and I went to the movies. Price of admission? Ten cents. In those days a penny could get you a Tootsie Roll, a package of gum, a bun. Five cents could get you a hotdog.

At school we all sat in desks bolted to the floor. The desks were arranged in rows so that you only saw the back of the head of the pupil in front of you. If you coughed, you didn't cough in anyone's face. Today, with kids seated around tables, they are coughing into each others faces and spreading disease.

Back then, the teacher had her desk at the front of the class and she taught us all the same thing. There was no such thing as an "individual learning plan." We learned to read with phonics because it was the Depression and the schools could not afford the new Dick and Jane look-say books. We were taught penmanship, cursive writing, which helped us learn to read because it taught us directionality and manual discipline. By connecting the letters in a word, we learned the word's spelling and how different combinations of letters made different sounds.

Back then in elementary school we were taught arithmetic, not math. Arithmetic is a counting system. In addition you count forward. In subtraction you count backwards. In Multiplication you count forward in multiples, and in division you count backwards in multiples. The teachers knew then that only by memorizing the arithmetic facts could you become efficient at using this ingenious place-value counting system. And so we memorized the arithmetic tables. Mathematics, which dealt with relationships, came later.

Of course, some of us learned the 3Rs better than others. Some of our teachers were not terribly good at teaching. Others were great, and we loved them. I remember being humiliated in front of a class because, for some reason, I could not remember some simple arithmetic function, and that angered the teacher.

From that experience, I have always advised tutors and homeschooling parents to never get angry when a child is having difficulty learning something. Be patient, and explain what it is that you want the student to learn. The brain is a very remarkable instrument and can do both amazing and silly things--often at the same time!

So we all learned reading, writing, and arithmetic. And because we could read, we then learned history and geography. We learned all about the history of New York and its five boroughs. It was a happy time for us kids. No one had dyslexia, or ADD, or ADHD. No one was on Ritalin. There was no sex ed or death ed, no multiculturalism, no values clarification, no secular humanism. The schools did not try to undermine our religious beliefs or morals. They were teaching us to become good patriotic Americans. Since most of us came from immigrant families, becoming good Americans was very important. The only decoration in our classroom was a portrait of George Washington. Moreover, Biblical religion was respected, and the Principal recited the 23rd Psalm at each assembly.

In Third Grade, we had Music Appreciation. The teacher brought out her hand driven Victrola from the closet and played classical music for us. I still remember some of the pieces she played: The Swan by Saint-Saens. March Slav by Tchaikovsky. And I know that that's where I acquired my taste for classical music.

So I had a very decent primary and elementary education. And the public school was an institution which instilled great patriotic values and love of country. They did not dumb us down; they lifted us up. But those days are long gone, and today I tell parents: do not put your child in a public school. If you want to preserve their mental sanity, teach them at home.

Today's public schools have become criminal enterprises where children's brains are deliberately crippled by whole-language and look-say, where drugs are pushed on millions of children who must ingest Ritalin, where a child's religious beliefs are undermined by the practices of behavioral psychology, where pornography is foisted on the students in the name of sex education, where money is extorted from taxpayers to pay for the dumbing down of the future generation. Children in such a system will suffer lifelong deficits, and that is why home schooling is so important, and why homeschoolers should bless their parents for keeping out of such a harmful system.