

# **A Short History of Government Education**

**By Samuel L. Blumenfeld**

Most Americans assume that we've always had public schools, that they came with the Constitution and are an indispensable part of our democratic system. But nothing could be farther from the truth as I discovered when I wrote my book, *Is Public Education Necessary?*, published in 1981. In writing that book I wanted to find out why the American people put education in the hands of government so early in their history. I was quite surprised to find that it had nothing to do with economics or the lack of literacy. It was the result of a philosophical change in the minds of the academic elite.

The U.S. Constitution does not mention education anywhere. It was left up to the states, parents, religious denominations, and school proprietors to deal with. True, in the early days of New England, towns were required to maintain common schools supported and controlled by the local citizenry. This had been done to make sure that children learned to read so that they could read the Bible and go on to higher education. But there was much homeschooling, private tutoring, private academies, church schools, and dames' schools for very young children. There were no compulsory school attendance laws, and no centralized state control over the curriculum.

This system, or lack of it, produced a highly literate population that could read the Federalist Papers, the King James Version of the Bible, and everything else that was published. All one has to do is read a Farmer's Journal of those early days to realize the high level of literacy that was enjoyed by the general population in America prior to the advent of the public schools.

What changed all of that was the change in the religious views of the intellectual elite centered at Harvard University, which had been founded in 1638 by Calvinists. By 1805, religious liberalism in the form of the Unitarian heresy had become so strong at Harvard, that the Calvinists were expelled. From then on Unitarianism reigned supreme at America's foremost university, and its influence spread slowly over the rest of the academic world.

The Unitarians no longer believed in salvation through Christ, whom they considered to be a great teacher but not divine. Salvation was now to be attained through an education controlled by government. Only government could provide the kind of secular, nonsectarian education that could lead to reason-based moral perfectibility. So believed the Unitarians.

The Unitarians also adopted the Prussian form of state-controlled education as their ideal model for America. Through unrelenting propaganda, social fervor, and political action they were able to enact laws that formed the foundation of centralized, state-owned and controlled education throughout America. Compulsory school attendance was then written into the constitutions of many of the new states, thus ensuring the creation and maintenance of a permanent state bureaucracy in control of education. By the 1870s, the

public school movement had triumphed, and most private academies went out of business.

Also imported from Europe was the idea of Hegelian statism, the idea that the state was God on earth. It was this idea that emboldened educators to believe that it was the state's duty to mold its children -- its "most precious natural resource" -- into obedient servants of the state.

Finally, at the turn of the century, the progressives became dominant. They were members of the Protestant academic elite who no longer believed in the religion of their fathers. They put their new faith in science, evolution, and psychology. Science explained the material world, evolution explained the origins of living matter, and psychology permitted man to scientifically study human nature and provided the scientific means to control human beings.

The progressives were also socialists because they had to deal with the problem of evil and decided that the Bible was all wrong about man's innate depravity. They believed that evil was caused by ignorance, poverty, and social injustice, and that the main cause of social injustice was our capitalist system. And so they embarked on a messianic crusade to change America from a religious, capitalist nation into an atheist or humanist socialist nation. They decided that the most effective way to attain their social utopia was through public education. And so, they began their great movement of education reform that changed our public schools into the moral, social, and academic mess they are today.

The formation of the U.S. Department of Education during the Carter administration was the fulfillment of a hundred-year dream by the educators. With the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, they finally gained unlimited access to the U.S. Treasury. It is obvious now to anyone who has studied public education at any depth that the system is taking us toward the New World Order in which UNESCO will become the world government's Board of Education.

That is why more and more parents are beginning to realize that the public schools are not interested in education but in social change and social control. A government education system is basically incompatible with the values of a free society. Eventually, one or the other must go.