

# What Can We Do to Improve Education?

By Samuel L. Blumenfeld

It's a great pleasure to be with you and have the opportunity to share with you some ideas on how to improve education in New Hampshire. You are the primary teachers of your children, especially during those first five years when your children are at home under your loving care. During those years you would be insane to teach them anything that would harm them. But when you put them in the public schools, you are giving them up to an institution that consciously or unconsciously will inflict life-long damage that you may or may not become aware of.

George Bancroft, the great historian, was called upon by Congress in 1866 to give a memorial address about President Abraham Lincoln who had been assassinated. His opening sentence was: "That God rules in the affairs of men is as certain as any truth of physical science." (Put that on your refrigerator!)

The sorry truth is that no teacher can say that in a public school. And that is why American public schools are failing our nation. They are ruled and regulated by educators who no longer believe that God has any place in our education system. Thus, they inflict serious moral and spiritual harm on our children whether they admit it or not.

And so, many children emerge from the system as atheists, humanists, nihilists, deprived of a knowledge of "the great moving power" which Bancroft spoke of.

As an Octogenarian, I can recall what it was like to be educated in the public schools of New York City back in the 1930's. At assembly our principal actually read the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm to the entire student body. And I remembered those words when I was serving in the army in World War II. I believed those words then, and still do.

But how many of today's school children have heard or read those words? If your children haven't heard them from you, their first teacher, or at church, they will not know them and will have been deprived of God's promise of love and protection.

Well, you might say, the schools do not teach about God, but at least they teach the children to read. Please fasten your seat belts! Last November, the National Endowment for the Arts released a shocking report on the decline of literacy among young Americans. Entitled *Reading at Risk*, it reported that the number of 17-year-olds

who never read for pleasure increased from 9 percent in 1984 to 19 percent in 2004. Almost half of Americans between ages 18 and 24 never read books for pleasure.

Endowment Chairman Dana Gioia, sounding the alarm, stated: "This is a massive social problem. We are losing the majority of the new generation. They will not achieve anything close to their potential because of poor reading."

The survey also tells us that only a third of high school seniors read at a proficient level. "And proficiency is not a high standard," said Gioia. "We're not asking them to be able to read Proust in the original. We're talking about reading the daily newspaper."

And, of course, you all know about the decline in newspaper readership. And things are not much better among college students. Among college graduates, reading proficiency declined from 40 percent in 1992 to 31 percent in 2003.

As you know, all of our fourth and eighth graders must take the National Assessment tests, which report on their academic achievements. I have the state-by-state report published in the Boston Globe of November 14, 2003. Guess which states had the highest scores in reading. Connecticut, Massachusetts and New Hampshire. And what were those scores? In Connecticut, 43 percent of 4<sup>th</sup> graders and 37 percent of 8<sup>th</sup> graders were proficient in reading. In Massachusetts 40 percent of 4<sup>th</sup> graders and 43 percent of 8<sup>th</sup> graders were proficient in reading. In New Hampshire, 40 percent of 4<sup>th</sup> graders and 40 percent of 8<sup>th</sup> graders were proficient in reading. But what about the other 60 percent? Obviously, they are they the functional illiterates of tomorrow.

By the way, only 10 percent of the students in the schools of Washington DC were proficient readers, and in California only 21 percent were proficient.

And those test scores haven't changed much since 2004. My colleague Bill McNally and I recently visited a charter school outside of Manchester created by a teacher concerned about the other 60 percent of the children who don't learn to read in our public schools. We presented her with one of my reading kits and an Alpha-Phonics book as gifts of the Samuel L. Blumenfeld Literacy Foundation. All of these materials were created in response to our reading crisis. I wanted parents to be able to raise literate kids at home by teaching them to read in the proper phonetic manner.

Well, you might ask, why don't the public schools teach children to read in the proper phonetic manner? The answer is that high literacy is not part of the system's social or academic agenda. Neither is good cursive handwriting and basic arithmetic. Have you noticed the decline in handwriting. I recently gave a gift to a 13-year-old Bar Mitzvah

boy, and got back a thank you note written in chicken scratches. He had attended the public schools of an affluent suburban community.

Now where did this atrocious curriculum come from? It didn't come from outer space, nor was it the result of accident. It came from an agenda developed back at the turn of the last century by some of the most intelligent men in America.

It started in the 1890s, when the Progressives began working on a new socialist agenda for the public schools that would promote collectivist ideas through a new curriculum.

Who were the Progressives? They were members of the Protestant academic elite who no longer believed in the religion of their fathers. They now put their faith in science, evolution and psychology. Science explained the material world. Evolution explained the origin of living matter, and psychology provided a new scientific way of understanding and controlling human behavior.

But what about the problems of evil and sin? As socialists they rejected the biblical explanation and instead believed that evil was caused by ignorance, poverty, and social injustice. Socialism, they were convinced, would eliminate all three.

And so they embarked on a progressive education crusade that would prove they were right and Bible believers were wrong. Education would eliminate ignorance, which would then eliminate poverty, which in turn would do away with social injustice.

The first step in their crusade was to change the way children were being taught in primary schools. The emphasis on teaching reading had to be replaced with an emphasis on socialization. John Dewey, the philosophical leader of the Progressives, explained it all in an article he wrote in 1898 entitled "The Primary School Fetic." He wrote:

The plea for the predominance of learning to read in early school life because of the great importance attaching to literature seems to me a perversion.

A perversion, mind you. To him the emphasis on learning to read was a perversion! And because Dewey knew that this view would be considered dangerously radical by parents and traditional teachers, he wrote:

Change must come gradually. To force it unduly would compromise its final success by favoring a violent reaction. What is needed in the first place, is that there should be a full and frank statement of conviction with regard to the matter from physiologists and psychologists and from those school administrators who are conscious of the evils of the present regime.

In other words, deceiving parents was necessary if they were to succeed. And psychologists, of whom Dewey was one, would be used to carry out this elaborate conspiracy of deception. Dewey then wrote:

There are already in existence a considerable number of educational "experiment stations," which represent the outposts of educational progress. If these schools can be adequately supported for a number of years they will perform a great vicarious service.

Indeed, Dewey himself conducted such an experimental school at the University of Chicago, and the book he wrote about that experiment, *The School and Society*, became the bible of Progressive Education and the basis of 20<sup>th</sup> century school reform.

And so, the major work of reform would not be done just by educators, but by psychologists, who found in education a lucrative source of support for their profession.

The new behavioral psychology was born in the laboratories of Professor Wilhelm Wundt at the University of Leipzig. His two American students, G. Stanley Hall (1844-1924) and James McKeen Cattell (1860-1944), came back to America anxious to apply scientific psychology to American education. Hall became a professor of psychology at Johns Hopkins University where he taught the new psychology to his student John Dewey. He later founded Clark University. Cattell introduced mental testing in education as part of the new scientific racism called Eugenics. He later founded the Psychological Corporation.

But it was Edward L. Thorndike (1874-1949) who, after studying psychology under William James at Harvard, went on to become the chief implementer of behavioral psychology in American education. At Harvard he had studied the learning behavior of chickens by using the reinforcement technique, which he later decided should be used to teach children.

After his book, *Animal Intelligence* was published in 1898, he became a leading light at Teacher's College, Columbia University. His much celebrated stimulus-response (SR) technique of teaching children, based on animal training, now dominates American education. He wrote in 1928:

Our experiments on learning in the lower animals have probably contributed more to knowledge of education per hour or per unit of intellect spent, than experiments on children.... The best way with children may often be, in the pompous words of an animal trainer, "to arrange everything in connection with

the trick so that the animal will be compelled by the laws of his own nature to perform it.”

But it was John B. Watson, the most arrogant behaviorist of them all, who revealed the true contempt that he and his fellow behaviorists had toward their fellow human beings. In his book, *Behaviorism*, published in 1924, he wrote:

Human beings do not want to class themselves with other animals. They are willing to admit that they are animals but “something else in addition.” It is this “something else” that causes the trouble. In this “something else” is bound up everything that is classed as religion, the life hereafter, morals, love of children, parents, country, and the like. The raw fact that you, as a psychologist, if you are to remain scientific, must describe the behavior of man in no other terms than those you would use describing the behavior of the ox you slaughter, drove and still drives many timid souls away from behaviorism.

In other words, behavioral psychology was not for the timid. And that is why today’s behavioral psychologists will stick it to the parents. They are not timid. He further wrote:

The interest of the behaviorist in man’s doings is more than the interest of the spectator—he wants to control man’s reactions, as physical scientists want to control and manipulate other natural phenomena. It is the business of behavioristic psychology to be able to predict and control human activity.

But even as Dewey had cautioned that change must come slowly, it didn’t take long before an increasing number of discerning parents began to realize what was happening. Their children were being taught to read by the new whole-word method, better known as the Dick and Jane method. I’m sure that many of you can recall those great readers with such literary gems as:

Dick.

Look, Jane.

Look, look.

See Dick.

See, see.

Oh, see.

See Dick.

Oh, see Dick.

Oh, oh, oh.

Funny, funny Dick.

Of course, that kind of inane repetition does not teach a child to read. It is based on Thorndike's animal training conditioning method. Indeed, when this new method was introduced, a well-known neurophysiologist by the name of Samuel T. Orton wrote an article in the February 1929 *Journal of Educational Psychology*, warning the educators that this new teaching method would produce reading disability. But apparently that is what the educators wanted. And they got it.

In fact, by 1955 the reading problem had become so bad that Rudolf Flesch was compelled to write his famous book, *Why Johnny Can't Read*. In it he wrote:

The teaching of reading—all over the United States, in all the schools, in all the textbooks—is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense.

As for how the educators were able to perpetuate such “error” without effective reaction from conservative teachers, he explained:

It's a foolproof system all right. Every grade-school teacher in the country has to go to a teacher's college or school of education; every teachers' college gives at least one course on how to teach reading; every course on how to teach reading is based on a textbook; every one of those textbooks is written by one of the high priests of the word method. In the old days it was impossible to keep a good teacher from following her own common sense and practical knowledge; today the phonetic system of teaching reading is kept out of our schools as effectively as if we had a dictatorship with an all-powerful Ministry of Education.

And if you think anything has changed much since 1955, try getting a good intensive phonics program into your local school. As an author of a very effective intensive phonics reading program used successfully by thousands of homeschooling parents, I have tried to get the program adopted by local schools, only to be told, thanks but no thanks.

There is indeed a Ministry of Education in America, and it is called the National Society for the Study of Education. It was founded in 1901 by John Dewey and colleagues who were interested in psycho-education and the application of science to educational

issues. The Society publishes an annual two-volume Yearbook filled with discussions of educational interests. By the way, you won't find the yearbooks in your local library. You'll have to go to a university library to find them.

The NSSE describes itself as "an organization of education scholars, professional educators, and policy makers dedicated to the improvement of education research, policy and practice." On its board of directors is a former president of the NEA, Mary Hatwood Futrell. The membership list in the 1969 Yearbook is 94 pages long, and you've probably never even heard of the organization. The subject for their 2008 Yearbook is "Why Do We Educate?" It's a question the educators seem to be totally confused about.

But some of them are not confused at all. One of them is Professor Anthony G. Oettinger of Harvard University, Professor of Information Resources Policy, and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. He said the following at a conference of communications executives in 1982:

The present "traditional" concept of literacy has to do with the ability to read and write. But the real question that confronts us today is: How do we help citizens function well in their society? How can they acquire the skills necessary to solve their problems?

Do we, for example, really want to teach people to do a lot of sums or write in "a fine round hand" when they have a five-dollar hand-held calculator or a word processor to work with? Or, do we really have to have everybody literate—writing and reading in the traditional sense—when we have the means through our technology to achieve a new flowering of oral communication?

What is speech recognition and speech synthesis all about if it does not lead to ways of reducing the burden on the individual of the imposed notions of literacy that were a product of nineteenth century economics and technology? ...

It is the traditional idea that says certain forms of communication, such as comic books, are "bad." But in the modern context of functionalism they may not be all that bad.

I doubt that there are any parents in America who send their children to school to learn to read comic books. If anything, they want their children to be taught to read and write in the traditional manner. They don't consider learning to read as a burden imposed on the individual. Rather, if taught properly, learning to read can be a joyful