

CAN PUBLIC EDUCATION BE REFORMED?

by

Samuel L. Blumenfeld

All across America, in state after state, legislatures are passing education reform bills in response to public pressure that something be done to improve the quality of public education. Most of this pressure is the direct result of the now-famous report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, entitled "A Nation at Risk," released in April 1983. By now you probably know its two most shocking statements by heart:

The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.

and

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves.

Who is this "we" the Commission says that allowed this to happen to ourselves? Is it the parents who willingly or not send their children to the public schools in the hope that an education will be obtained? Parents want their children to learn. A recent survey by Highlights for Children magazine reported that the overwhelming majority of parents want the schools to emphasize the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic. In addition, every state in the Union has compulsory school attendance laws. So parents, obviously, are not the cause of the problem.

Is the "we" the long-suffering taxpayers who have been paying the ever-increasing tax bill for public education for all of these years with a minimum of complaint? In 1970 taxpayers contributed \$44.4-billion to educate 46 million students, an average expenditure of \$957 per student. In 1984 taxpayers spent \$134.5-billion to educate 39 million students -- 6 million fewer ~~students~~ than in 1970 at an additional cost of \$90.1-billion, bringing the average pupil expenditure to about \$3,450. Even if we take inflation into account, that is still a very substantial increase. So the taxpayer has done more than his share.

In addition, since 1965 the federal government has pumped billions of dollars into the public schools. Title One alone, since 1965, has financed compensatory education to the tune of 42 billion dollars. Yet, from 1965 to 1984 the SAT verbal scores declined 52 points! Obviously, money is not the cure for declining educational quality, for if ^{it} ~~it~~ were ~~it~~, the problem would have been solved a long time ago.

So we cannot blame the parents or the taxpayers. Can we blame the

politicians? To some extent we can because they are the lawmakers who have been dealing with public educators for years, giving them most of what they've wanted without any significant accountability. The legislators have tended to listen only to the education lobby and rarely to its critics. And thus, over the years, they've been content to hear only one side of the story. In fact, many politicians are only too happy to represent the interests of the teachers unions in order to get the support of their political machines. So the politicians must share some of the blame for the present sorry state of public education.

However, the people who are, without question, the most responsible for the rising tide of mediocrity in our schools are the educators themselves -- those educational leaders who have guided public education for the last fifty years, developed its curriculum, set its policies and implemented them in every school in the nation. What we have today is what the educators worked very hard to give us. It is not the result of aimless drift, accident, ignorance, or error.

For example, let's take the simple matter of how reading is taught in our primary schools. In the 1930s the educators changed the reading instruction methods from phonics to look-say -- that is, from the traditional alphabetic method to the "Dick and Jane" whole-word sight method. What they did, in effect, was concoct a method of teaching American children to read English as if it were Chinese, or Egyptian hieroglyphics. The result has been the creation of millions of functional illiterates and the general lowering of literacy skills among Americans.

Now, was all of this a terrible mistake, a gigantic error? Not

at all. The change in teaching methods was the result of intensive and careful planning by progressive educators for over a period of thirty years. In addition, this radical change was made quietly, without the public ever knowing that it was taking place. By the 1940s, so many children were having reading problems that Life magazine in April 1944 ran a major article on the subject. It reported:

Millions of children in the U.S. suffer from dyslexia which is the medical term for reading difficulties. It is responsible for about 70% of the school failures in 6- to 12-year-age group, and handicaps about 15% of all grade-school children. Dyslexia may stem from a variety of physical ailments or combination of them -- glandular imbalance, heart disease, eye or ear trouble -- or from a deep-seated psychological disturbance that "blocks" a child's ability to learn.

The article went on to describe the case of a little girl with an I.Q. of 118 who was being examined at the Dyslexia Institute of Northwestern University. After her tests, the doctors concluded that the little girl needed "thyroid treatments, removal of tonsils and adenoids, exercises to strengthen her eye muscles."

It wasn't until 1955, when Rudolf Flesch wrote his famous and startling book, Why Johnny Can't Read, that the public first became aware that a switch in instruction methods had even taken place. Flesch 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.

Nor was Flesch the first writer to make the educators aware that what they were doing might cause irreparable harm to untold numbers of children. Dr. Samuel T. Orton, a neuropathologist at Iowa State University, sounded the alarm in the February 1929 issue of the Journal of Educational Psychology in an article entitled "The 'Sight Reading' Method of Teaching Reading as a Source of Reading Disability." The doctor had been treating a large number of children with reading problems the genesis of which he traced to the new look-say method being used in some schools in Iowa. He wrote:

I wish to emphasize at the beginning that the strictures which I have to offer here do not apply to the use of the sight method of teaching reading as a whole but only to its effects on a restricted group of children for whom, as I think we can show, this technique is not only not adapted but often proves an actual obstacle to reading progress, and moreover I believe that this group is one of considerable size and because here faulty teaching methods may not only prevent the acquisition of academic education by children of average capacity but may also give rise to far reaching damage to their emotional life.

The warning to the educators could not have been more explicit. This is the kind of warning that gets drugs removed from the market overnight, that gets consumer groups up in arms, that provokes Congressional investigations and federal restrictions. Yet it had absolutely

no effect on the educators. They proceeded to introduce the look-say sight method in the schools of America with disastrous consequences and to this day have resisted every effort to get it out. In fact, the professors of education have been so successful in keeping their faulty teaching methods in place, that Rudolf Flesch felt compelled to write a new book in 1981 entitled Why Johnny Still Can't Read. He wrote with some sadness:

Twenty-five years ago I studied American methods of teaching reading and warned against educational catastrophe. Now it has happened.

Two years later the National Commission on Excellence in Education confirmed Flesch's prognosis. We are a "Nation at risk," it said, and we'd better do something about it.

But so far we haven't ^{done} much of anything about it. Yes, reform bills have been passed. Teachers salaries have been increased, collective bargaining for teachers has been approved in some states, smaller class size has been mandated, kindergarten and preschool facilities have been mandated, the compulsory school attendance age has been lowered in some states, merit pay has been approved, longer school days and longer school years have been proposed, and in some states competency testing is now required. But none of these reforms will have the slightest effect on the academic quality of public education, none of them will reverse the tide of mediocrity let alone put us on the road to excellence. In fact, some of them will make matters a lot worse.

Let me say without equivocation, that until we straighten out this

reading instruction mess, no meaningful reform will be possible. The goal of excellence will remain unattainable. As long as the look-say, sight method is the dominant teaching method in our primary schools we shall be plagued with declining literacy, a growing army of functional illiterates, a permanent epidemic of learning disabilities.

And who is responsible for all of this? The educators. All educators? No. The controlling educators, those progressive-humanist-behaviorist doctors of education who control the graduate schools of education, the psych labs, the teachers colleges, the professional organizations such as the International Reading Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the professional publications issued by these very same organizations.

I defy any state legislature to try to get look-say thrown out of the primary schools and intensive phonics mandated in its place. Even if such a law is passed, the educators will resist implementing it. Why? I asked that question for twenty years before I finally found out the answer while doing research for my most recent book on the National Education Association. Until then I could never understand why the educators rejected Dr. Orton's warnings, why they castigated Rudolf Flesch and other critics, why they've disregarded all scientific evidence proving that look-say can cause the symptoms of dyslexia, why they've resisted any and all attempts to bring back intensive phonics, and why they persist to this day in promoting the whole-word method as the preferred and superior way of teaching reading.

Well finally I know the answer, and it may very well shock you as it shocked me when I found it out. The reason why the progressives are doing what they are doing is because they want to lower the literacy

level of the American people in general.

What? you ask. Our educators want to lower the level of literacy in America? What kind of nonsense is this man talking about? Is he nuts? Well I'm not crazy, and what I'm telling you can be proven by an overwhelming body of evidence. But before you begin to discount what I say, please read my book. Then try to refute it. And until you do that, please extend to me the courtesy of a fair hearing. I assume you came to this conference because you want to know the facts. I can assure you that the sole reason why I am here is so that you may indeed get the facts.

What are the motives of our educators? To understand them you have to know what's in their minds, and the progressives over the last hundred years have, in their writings, abundantly revealed their thoughts, plans and ideas. Today their disciples articulate the same philosophy with a slightly different vocabulary.

Who were the progressives who started all of this? Some of their names will be familiar to you: John Dewey, G. Stanley Hall, James McKeen Cattell, Edward L. Thorndike, James Earl Russell, William F. Russell, Charles H. Judd, William Scott Gray, Arthur I. Gates and others. They were a highly influential and sophisticated group, many of whom had studied in the psychology laboratories of Dr. Wilhelm Wundt in Leipzig, Germany, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They returned to the United States imbued with a passion to apply the principles of experimental psychology and science to education with the aim of using education as the means of transforming America from a capitalist to a socialist society.

The progressives believed that man was the product of evolution and that the traditional religions were based on mythology and fairy tales and that a new system of humanist moral values based on science was needed in the modern world. They also believed that since man was an animal, they could apply to children the new learning theories they developed based on laboratory experiments with animals. Edward L. Thorndike at Teachers College, Ivan Pavlov in Russia, John B. Watson at the University of Chicago and more recently B. F. Skinner at Harvard were the major contributors to these new learning theories. The result was that intellectual training in our schools was replaced by new teaching methods based on behaviorism, that is, the stimulus-response technique and the conditioned reflex.

The progressives also rejected individualism and capitalism in favor of collectivism and socialism. Why? Because their rejection of Christianity and the notion of sin made it necessary for them to seek other explanations for the cause of evil. They chose the explanations of the Marxists and Fabians who decided that capitalism, individualism and supernatural religion were the chief causes of social evil and therefore they had to be done away with. Marxism and Fabian Socialism were particularly compatible with ^{the progressives'} their scientific, evolutionary, and ^{an}atheist view of the world.

The progressives also decided that revolution would not be the way to socialism in America. ^{They believed that} The Fabian strategy of evolutionary social change was more suited to America and ^{it} became the progressives' program. The first crucial step, ^{they decided} however, was to take control of public education and get rid of the curriculum and methodology that produced highly literate

independent individuals and replace it with a curriculum and methodology that would produce collectivists.

In 1896 Dewey created his famous Laboratory School at the University of Chicago in which he experimented with a new activities-centered curriculum sharply de-emphasizing the academic skills. He wrote in 1899 in his famous book, School and Society:

The tragic weakness of the present school is that it endeavors to prepare future members of the social order in a medium in which the conditions of the social spirit are eminently wanting. . . .

The mere absorbing of facts and truths is so exclusively individual an affair that it tends very naturally to pass into selfishness. There is no obvious social motive for the acquirement of mere learning, there is no clear social gain in success thereat.

Some pages later Dewey wrote:

The introduction of active occupations, of nature-study, of elementary science, of art, of history; the relegation of the merely symbolic and formal to a secondary position; the change in the moral school atmosphere . . . are not mere accidents, they are necessities of the larger social evolution. It remains but to organize all these factors, to appreciate them in their fulness of meaning, and to put the ideas and ideals involved into complete, uncompromising possession of our school system.

In criticizing traditional education, Dewey wrote in 1898:

There is . . . a false educational god whose idolators are legion, and whose cult influences the entire educational system. This is language-study -- the study not of foreign language, but of English; not in higher, but in primary education. It is almost an unquestioned assumption of educational theory and practice both, that the first three years of a child's school-life shall be mainly taken up with learning to read and write his own language. . . .

My proposition is, that conditions -- social, industrial, and intellectual -- have undergone such a radical change, that the time has come for a thoroughgoing examination of the emphasis put upon linguistic work in elementary instruction. . . .

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. . . .

And writing about the school reforms to come, he said:

Change must come gradually. To force it unduly would compromise its final success by favoring a violent reaction.

Why did Dewey and his colleagues consider high literacy to be an obstacle to socialism? Because, as he so eloquently stated:

The last stand of oligarchical and anti-social seclusion is perpetuation of this purely individualistic notion of intelligence.

In the November 10, 1928 issue of School and Society, the weekly publication edited by J. McKeen Cattell and named after Dewey's famous book, Dr. Edward L. Thorndike, professor of educational psychology at Teachers College, Columbia, reviewed what was being done in the laboratory to change the curriculum in American schools. He wrote:

I am commissioned to describe and discuss researches concerning the curriculum. . . . Many improvements have had such an origin, for example, the change in certain schools for Negroes from a predominantly literary to a predominantly realistic and industrial curriculum. . . .

We are in a position to prevent in the future such educational absurdities as having a total vocabulary of 9,500 words in the ten most widely used text-books in reading for grade three, with less than 700 words occurring in all the ten.

Researches concerning the psychology of reading, arithmetic, algebra, spelling, handwriting and drawing are modifying the teaching of these subjects, often in fundamental ways.

When, for example, the psychologist makes arithmetic largely experimental and inductive and verifying instead of dogmatic, deductive and ritualistic, the curriculum is changed fundamentally.

. . . 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.

More money has been allotted specifically for scientific studies of education in the past ten years than in the previous ten thousand. Their results are made use of widely in the training of teachers and the construction of text-books and other instruments

of instruction. . . .

Less and less every year the curriculum will be based on the traditions of the multitude or the personal prestige of some reformer. More and more it will be the product of our laboratories and experimental schools, certified by experts.

In 1925, William F. Russell, director of the International Institute at Teachers College, and later dean of Teachers College, told the World Federation of Education Associations in an address entitled "Who Shall Mould the Mind of America?":

In the last analysis the problem is one of the proper relation of the governing officer, the politician and the educator. We cannot trust the parent alone. We cannot put full power in the hands of the locality. The state fails to provide legislators with sufficient insight. The nation's governors are too dangerous. Teachers and school administrators may not see all round. In some combination of these many elements will the true solution lie. May our science of education develop. May the associations hold to their noble task. And then the time may come when the minds of our children whose development is in our care may receive training free from the prejudices of the narrow teacher, protected from the ignorant parent, and safe from the wiles of the unscrupulous political agitator or warlike nationalist.

It wasn't until 1930 that the progressives achieved sufficient control over the education system so that they could introduce look-say into the schools without any resistance whatever. Plans were also well underway to reform the rest of the curriculum. Charles H. Judd, dean of the school of education at the University of Chicago, a Leipzig alumnus, told a meeting of the American Political Science Association in 1931:

It was decided that a joint effort would be made by all the organizations at that meeting to promote a movement to bring to full realization the project of socializing the whole body of instructional material in schools and colleges.

And at the 1932 meeting of the school superintendents department of the National Education Association, held in Washington, D.C. and attended by John Dewey, Charles Judd and other progressives, it was reported:

Here, in the very citadel of capitalism . . . this group of outstanding spokesmen of American education talked a remarkably strong brand of socialism.

And in 1934 the Commission on the Social Studies, sponsored by the American Historical Association, issued its report, stating:

The report makes it clear that two social philosophies are now struggling for supremacy: individualism, with its attending

capitalism and classism, and collectivism, with planned economy and mass rights. Believing that present trends indicate the victory of the latter the Commission on the Social Studies offers a comprehensive blue-print by which education may prepare to meet the demands of a collectivist social order without submerging the individual as a helpless victim of bureaucratic control.

To the progressive educators, the American people were the masses who were to be ruled by an educational elite. A decline in literacy was essential if the masses were to become intellectually dependent on the elite. And indeed literacy in America has declined significantly since 1930. In that year the percentage of illiteracy among white persons of native birth was 1.5. Among foreign-born whites it was 9.9 percent, and among Negroes it was 16.3 percent. Among urban blacks the illiteracy rate was 9.2 percent.

Today the illiteracy rate among urban blacks is probably about 40 percent, while the illiteracy rate among whites has been estimated at from 7 to 30 percent. No one really knows the exact figure. The Department of Education says there are about 23 million functional illiterates in America. But what is a distinctly new phenomenon today is the educated illiterate. Karl Shapiro, the eminent poet-professor who taught creative writing for over twenty years at the University of California, described the phenomenon to the California Library Association in 1970. He said:

What is really distressing is that this generation cannot and does not read. I am speaking of university students in what

are supposed to be our best universities. Their illiteracy is staggering. . . . We are experiencing a literacy breakdown which is unlike anything I know of in the history of letters.

I've described to you what I believe are the causes of this literacy breakdown. It is not accidental. ~~It is not accidental.~~ It is the ^{deliberate} result of a very careful and thorough analysis by the progressives of the heart of the educational process. You have to read the works of Dewey, Judd, Thorndike and the others to appreciate the amount of work, planning and effort that went into their radical and thorough reform of American education. And you have to realize that virtually all of our doctors of education and psychology today were either trained by these men and their disciples or nourished on their writings. The progressive-humanist-behaviorist mindset of the education establishment is the reason why I don't think the tide of mediocrity in the public schools can be reversed.

The individualistic values that would produce high literacy are not the values that motivate the progressive-humanist-behaviorist mindset. The men that have this mindset cannot be expected to implement traditionalist reforms based on ideas they reject. In fact, they are very busy pushing through reforms of their own to make American education even more humanistic than it already is. If you want to know how busy they really are, pick up a copy of the Humanistic Education Sourcebook edited by Donald Read and Sidney Simon, published in 1975 by Prentice-Hall. In an essay entitled "Humanistic Goals of Education," Arthur W. Combs writes:

Modern education must produce far more than persons with cognitive skills. It must produce humane individuals The humane qualities are absolutely essential to our way of life -- far more important, even, than the learning of reading, for example. We can live with a bad reader; a bigot is a danger to everyone.

The inference, of course, is that you can't have both good readers and humane persons, that one must be sacrificed for the other. Note also the very subtle suggestion that high literacy and bigotry go together. If this is what the humanists believe, then how can we expect them to promote high literacy?

The progressive-humanist-behaviorist mindset also has profound political implications that contradict our basic beliefs. ~~Our~~ Our Declaration of Independence states "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Well, if there is no Creator, as our humanist educators believe, then there are no unalienable rights, only rights granted by the state. The Declaration further states, "That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." But if there are no unalienable rights, then the purpose of government can't possibly be to secure them.

And apparently the educators firmly believe this, for they have closed church schools that refused to be regulated by government, jailed ministers and parents, and taken away children from parents who refuse to comply with the compulsory school attendance laws.

Needless to say, all of these manifestations of state tyranny exercised in the name of an education system that cannot properly teach children to read, have created great anxiety, fear, and frustration among religious parents all across America. We are reaching the point where Americans are going to have to make some very tough decisions about the basic nature of our society. Is there a Creator or isn't there? Do we have unalienable rights, or don't we? Do parents have the unalienable right to educate their children without interference from the state or don't they?

We must realize that a free society is based on the concept of unalienable rights, and that once we discard that concept we cannot expect our freedoms to last very long. If we want to preserve our free society we are going to have to reject the progressive-humanist-behaviorist philosophy and mindset.

But how are we going to do this if 85 to 90 percent of our children go to public schools totally controlled by this mindset, influenced by it, manipulated and molded by it, and miseducated by it? Under these circumstances we must ask the question: do our public schools, as presently constituted, any longer represent the ideals of our founding fathers or serve the true interests of a free people?

I believe that our great national experiment with public schooling must be judged on the basis of its results. Never have we spent more money on education, and never have we had poorer results. Perhaps the reason for its failure is the fact that it is a government enterprise, and there are not too many things that the government does well. Is the government an effective educator? Only if the government has an effective philosophy, and governments do not have philosophies.

They are the product of philosophies held by their citizens. And the philosophy of our government schools is the philosophy of those educators who control the system -- and that philosophy was created and imposed by the progressive-humanist-behaviorists. The question is, can their philosophy provide the kind of education the American people want, the kind of education that will make the necessary reforms work? If not, then who is to formulate an alternative philosophy for our public schools?

The simple truth is that Americans are not agreed on a philosophy of education, and because we live in a pluralist society in which there are competing philosophies of education, we must provide the kind of climate that will permit educational diversity to flourish. And that means encouraging educational freedom, educational entrepreneurship, private schools, proprietary schools, home-schools. Schools that are in charge of their own affairs can flourish where the government schools with no one in charge can only flounder. John Naisbitt's book, Megatrends, tells us that the trend in our society is toward decentralization, and the computer is making this more possible than ever.

Maybe the government ought to get out of the education business. Maybe that's the only way to get the quality education we want. I appeal to you to open your minds and think of the unthinkable. We are at that point in our history where government education is on trial. If, after all these reforms, we find that public education is still not providing the quality we need to produce a literate, skilled population, then we ought to be courageous enough to turn education over to the private sector.