

IS PUBLIC EDUCATION NECESSARY?

by

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I am delighted to have this opportunity to present my views to this audience. I believe that we need more than merely constructive alternatives to forced busing. We need constructive alternatives to public education in general which is in such a state of disintegration that the sooner we address ourselves to that problem, the better. I consider forced busing as simply the straw that is breaking the camel's back. (It is the kind of issue that is finally forcing parents to seek alternatives outside of the public system. What amazes me is not how many private schools have been started by aroused parents, but how many parents are still willing to send their children to schools that can't teach them to read, that drug ~~the~~ children they can't control, that are destroying minds instead of developing them. Dr. Howard L. Hurwitz, principal of Long Island City High School in Queens, New York, recently summed up the situation with these words:

"The public schools in the United States are experiencing a decline unprecedented in the annals of education anywhere in the world. . . . You have throughout the country a level of classroom discipline that is so poor that most teachers spend a good part of their time trying to keep order. And if you're trying to keep order, you're not teaching anybody anything. Show me a school where the floors are dirty, kids are roaming around the halls at all hours of the day and the classrooms are dirty and I'll show you not a school, but a sewer."

Very strong words from a veteran educator who's seen the whole process of disintegration from the inside. Dr. Hurwitz, who is 61, is retiring in January because the Board of Education insisted that he readmit to school a 17-year-old girl he'd suspended. When the Hurwitzes of America are forced to retire by boards of education that will not back them, what chance is there that the situation is going to get any better? All of the indications are negative. The teacher unions are becoming politically more powerful, federal control of the schools is increasing through HEW, the educational lobby in Washington is better organized and more active than ever, the behavioral psychologists and social engineers are using the schools as one big laboratory for behavioral experimentation, and the professors of education are busy mapping out the new values-oriented curriculum. Yes, a few school districts have permitted a few back-to-basics units to operate in competition with the open classroom. But these units have been begrudgingly set up to appease and silence troublesome parents. In general, however, the open classroom movement is sweeping the nation and every remaining vestige of structure and tradition is going down the drain. Today the school administrator's biggest problem is not how to improve education, but how to beef up school security. Testifying before a Congressional committee in June 1975, Joseph I. Grealy, President of the National Association of School Security Directors, provided the following hair-raising information:

School assaults, rapes, and robberies are common everyday occurrences. In 1974, offense estimates included 12,000 armed robberies, 204,000 aggravated assaults and 9,000 forceable rapes. There were 273,000 school burglaries costing an estimated \$243 million and malicious destruction costing an estimated \$102 million. In one Philadelphia school, experimental pets in 25 classrooms were slaughtered by vandals. Damage caused by school arson is estimated at over \$100 million a year. In Miami a \$200,000 planetarium was burned to the ground. In Irving, Texas, a \$700,000 fire

guttled a junior high school. In Lafayette, Louisiana, a million-dollar fire destroyed a high school, and in Bellevue, Washington, the school library was burned down causing a million dollar loss. In 1974, more than twice as many actual and attempted bombings occurred in school facilities as took place in police and fire departments. Of the 23 targets listed, school facilities ranked fourth. The House committee study of drugs in our schools stated we are a Nation suffering from a deadly disease. They found that drug abuse had become so extensive and pervasive that among students it was only the uniquely gifted and self-possessed child who was capable of avoiding some form of drugs.

Would any responsible parent, knowing all of this, send his child to a public school? The public school has become the most dangerous place in America for children, and if the government were consistent in its concern for the health and welfare of its citizens, it would require the schools to put signs on their doors warning parents that "the Department of Health, Education and Welfare has determined that this school is dangerous to your child's health." But don't hold your breath, and don't look to the government for consistency.

What alternative do parents have? The only realistic alternative is the private school. It is the only alternative that gives parents the things they want: sound basic instruction, physical safety, and moral and social values in agreement with their own. These are no longer obtainable in the public schools, and more and more people are coming to realize that the problems of the public schools are really insoluble. The system by its very nature is incapable of correcting or healing itself. And the sooner more parents realize this, the less time and money will be wasted trying to improve the unimprovable.))

It's been seven years since I made my first tour of the South to inspect the private schools that Southern parents had created as an alternative to the newly

integrated public schools. That trip had been made as part of my research for the book I was then writing, HOW TO START YOUR OWN PRIVATE SCHOOL. I was pleasantly surprised by what I found on that tour: clean, safe, orderly schools run by responsible parents and citizens, providing, in general, a no-nonsense education at no expense to the taxpayer and only moderate expense to the parents. These private schools, organized and financed in so many ingenious ways by local citizens, and staffed by so many dedicated teachers and administrators, reflected the values of their communities rather than those of the professional elite subsidized by HEW. This was a remarkable success story, an extraordinary example of parent power in action, but if I hadn't gone down there to see for myself, I would have never known about it. It was certainly, from a media point of view, the best kept secret in America.

Back in 1970, of course, it was unthinkable that any northern city would be faced with the very same problem of forced integration and busing that the Southerners had had to face. After all, the schools of the north were already racially integrated. Or so we thought. But now we all know better.

We know, for example, that racial integration alone is no longer the goal. The goal is racial balance. You can no longer have a public school in which more than 50 percent of the students are black. It's the percentages that count, and that means busing children all over the map to create the right racial percentages in each school. What the balance itself is supposed to produce in terms of improved education or social adjustment no one really knows. In any case, it was on the basis of this sort of thinking that the Massachusetts State Board of Education, in June 1973, adopted a plan to eliminate racial imbalance in the Boston schools. The Boston School Committee rejected the plan, but in March 1974 the State supreme court ordered the school committee to comply with the board's timetable for

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implementing its plan. In April of 1974 parental resistance to the plan began to form. But I knew from what I had learned in the South that no amount of parental resistance would be able to stop the implementation of the busing plan. So when anti-busing parents picketed the State House, I went down there with a copy of my book, HOW TO START YOUR OWN PRIVATE SCHOOL AND WHY YOU NEED ONE, introduced myself to Fran Johnenne, leader of the protest, and told her that no amount of demonstrations, motorcades, or mothers marches would stop the buses from rolling come September. Their only recourse was to do what those in the South had done, start private schools. Fran bought my book on the spot, and I left feeling that I had done my small bit. Two months later, despite all of the parental opposition, Judge Garrity handed down his famous order of June 21, 1974. The parents of Boston could yell and scream until they were blue in the face. The buses would roll.

Incidentally, you might be interested to know that the final busing plan approved by Judge Garrity had been authored by Dr. Michael J. Stolee, Dean of the University of Miami and author of more than forty desegregation plans. Dr. Stolee, who knew as much about Boston as I know about Tokyo, had been hired by the NAACP to come up with a plan that would satisfy their demands. To Dr. Stolee, the people and schools of Boston were just a lot of numbers and percentages and two colors. For example, anyone who knew this city was bound to know that pairing Roxbury with South Boston would lead to the worst sort of racial confrontation. Yet this is exactly what Dr. Stolee did betraying an ignorance and ~~conscious~~ insensitivity that seems to be characteristic of these social engineers. I mention this because it is important for Americans to realize to what extent they no longer control their own local schools, if, indeed, they ever controlled them in the first place.

In August 1974, a month before school opening, I received a call from Hal Lodge, an electrical engineer from Hyde Park. He had read my book and wanted me to talk to

a group of parents interested in starting their own school. The seed had taken. Also, at about that time, I had been invited to speak at the annual conference of the South Carolina Independent School Association which was to take place in October 1974. My host had told me that if I wanted to bring anyone with me from Boston to see how they in South Carolina had solved their busing problem by building their own schools, he would be more than delighted to give us the grand tour. So after I spoke to the group in Hyde Park, I extended my host's invitation. Hal Lodge and his wife Karen and two of their friends decided to come with me. In South Carolina we were given the warmest and friendliest of welcomes. We toured schools, we asked many questions, we got many sensible answers. Above all, we saw what parents can do when they put their minds to it.

I need not remind you of the tumultuous events that took place after school opened in September 1974. It didn't take very long before a half dozen groups, interested in starting private schools in different parts of the city, formed in Boston. From these, three schools finally materialized: South Boston Heights Academy, Parkway Academy in West Roxbury, and Hyde Park Academy founded by the two couples who had accompanied me to South Carolina. All of these schools were built from absolute zero by parents with no previous experience in such a complex and awesome undertaking. Today these schools are viable, growing institutions, sinking deep roots into the communities they serve, exercising a freedom that American parents have not exercised in over a hundred years, proving that parents can indeed overcome the tyranny of judges, state bureaucrats, and the educational elite. And all of this has been done without the help of the professional educators or that element in the establishment that prides itself with its contributions to culture and learning. Considering the obstacles and opposition these parents faced, their achievement is quite remarkable from every standpoint.

As I said at the opening of my presentation, ¹²we need constructive alternatives to public education which is no longer able to educate our people, and the more I learn about public education, past and present, the more convinced I become of this. For the past two years I have been working on a revisionist history of public education, and my research has uncovered interesting and important facts about the intellectual development of this country that help explain why we are now where we are. First, I must explain what I mean by revisionist. I am not revising history. The facts of history are facts. They cannot be revised out of existence. What you can revise is how someone brings those facts to you, if he bothers to bring them to you at all. The prejudices of a historian will often determine how he writes history. In the past, virtually all of our educational historians have been deeply prejudiced men, men prejudiced in favor of public education. Now you may think that there is nothing wrong in favoring anything as noble as public education. Except for one thing: if you favor public education, with its centralized state control, uniform curriculum, compulsory attendance laws, truant officers, and educational bureaucrats, all supported by enforced taxation, then you must be against the more noble concept of educational freedom. And it is this profound prejudice against educational freedom that mars the work of most educational historians.

In fact, the reason why I started writing my book is because I wanted to find out why the American people, with their great devotion to liberty, were willing to give up educational freedom so early in their history. I found the answers, but they are not simple answers. They are the same answers to the larger question of why people all over the world are giving up their freedom for despotism. In the United States, educational freedom was the first major freedom we surrendered. By putting education in the hands of the government, we gave government a power over our minds which it has used to gradually rob us of the rest of our freedoms. The process is

now in high gear and only the strongest opposition of an alert and concerned citizenry will be able to reverse it.

Contrary to popular belief, compulsory public education did not come with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Our Constitution, in fact, makes no mention of education at all. Except for the tax-supported common schools which originated in Puritan New England, American education for the first fifty years of our nation's history was a wholly private affair. There were private schools, church schools, charity schools, dames' schools, academies, seminaries, home tutoring, etc. We had an unregulated diversity of educational institutions that served the needs of a free people. In Massachusetts alone in 1835 there were about three hundred independent academies, with the number growing as more and more towns gave up the dilapidated common schools in favor of the new well-run private ones.

Yet, what has come down to us is a lot of myth and legend about so-called crusaders like Horace Mann and Henry Barnard supposedly creating public education so that the masses might be saved from ignorance and illiteracy and the Republic saved from an uninformed electorate. But the fact is that despite the lack of compulsory attendance laws, literacy was just about universal in the United States and qualitatively higher than it is today. Education was thriving in its free state.

What Horace Mann did from 1837 to 1849, with the help of a somewhat hysterical messianic network of social reformers, was destroy American educational freedom and diversity and create the legal and bureaucratic framework for centralized, regulated, conformist, state-controlled, tax-financed education for everybody.

To understand why the reformers wanted public education, you must first understand that the central intellectual conflict between liberals and conservatives in this country has its origins in the religious conflict between Unitarians and Calvinists, that is, between the religious liberals and the religious orthodox. The conflict is

crucial, because it centers on two fundamental issues: the nature of God and the nature of man. However, the two issues are so interrelated as to be merely two sides of the same coin.

The Calvinists were more anxious to understand the nature of God than the nature of man. To them man's nature was an open and shut case: man was a fallen creature, innately depraved, the source of evil, and therefore he could not be trusted with power. Thus, the American system of government was based on the Calvinist view of man, and power was dispersed as widely as possible to minimize the danger of giving some men power over others. The creation of the American form of government would have been impossible without the then prevalent Calvinist view of man. The Founding Fathers, along with the rest of the colonists, were, for the most part, orthodox Calvinists, not Deists. But prejudiced historians have given far more credit to the Deists than is rightfully their due. If you want to know what the American mind was like just prior to the American Revolution, it's better to read Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion than Montesquieu or Rousseau.

The Unitarians, who rose to dominance in Boston and Harvard around 1809, rejected the Calvinist view of both man and God. By denying Christ's divinity, they rejected the New Testament as a prophetic fulfillment of the Old. This set them on the road to pantheism, atheism, spiritualism, and socialism. As for man, he was not only fundamentally rational, benevolent and good, but quite perfectible. Evil, they believed, was not caused by anything innate in man but by conditions outside of man: ignorance, social inequality, poverty, etc. The Unitarians said, in essence, that power corrupts man. The Calvinists said that man corrupts power. The Unitarians believed that money was the root of all evil. The Calvinists believed that man's pride was the root of all evil and that money was merely an inert commodity, an instrument of exchange.

After the Unitarians gained control of Harvard in 1809, they shifted intellectual interest from God to man. The Calvinists had lived in a God-centered world, in which theology--the study of God--was central to their concerns. The Unitarians, because of their faith in man, were forced to develop psychology--the study of man's nature--to prove not only their contention that man was perfectible, but to discover the means to bring that perfectibility about. "Education" was to be that means, and that is why the public education movement was largely created, directed, and propelled forward by the Unitarian elite centered in Boston and Harvard.

But the man who was undoubtedly the most responsible for developing the idea of centralized, regulated, national, secular, anti-religious education was the Welsh industrialist Robert Owen, the father of Socialism and founder in 1825 of the New Harmony communist experiment in Indiana. The central idea in Owen's philosophy concerned the nature of man. Owen contended that man's character was formed for him by his environment and education and that, therefore, by reforming education and environment, man was capable of giving the future generation any character it wished. Owen then argued that the only way that nations could change the character of their people from evil to good was to educate them from infancy in an atmosphere of benevolence, cooperation, science, reason, and rationality in a system of national schools. To Owen, competing religions were the root of all evil. It was necessary to get religion out of education before man's character could be reformed and a new cooperative, socialist society created. Only a national system of education based on scientific, secular principles could do this.

Basically, the Unitarians and the Owenites shared the same views about the plasticity of the human character, and the two groups joined forces to become the backbone of the public school movement. Their desire was to use the instrument of public education to change the character of man in conformity with their notions

about man's innate goodness and perfectibility. That was the messianic vision behind this extraordinary movement. But both Unitarians and the Owenites realized that they would need conservative cooperation if the movement were to succeed, and that is why other arguments, appealing to conservatives, were used to persuade legislators and taxpayers to approve of the legislation needed to bring about centralized, state-controlled, secular education.

The opposition, in many instances, saw through the Unitarian-Socialist machinations, but they failed to prevent the loss of educational freedom because of their lack of unity and their inability to deal with the underhanded methods of both Unitarians and Socialists. The Socialists, indeed, were by 1829 already operating in secret cells because Owen's views on religion had turned public opinion against him. I found complete documentation for this in the writings of Orestes Brownson who, for a time, was a member of the Owenite movement.

In short, what my research proves is that the public school movement was motivated primarily by a zeal to reform human character, not improve or extend literacy. The failure of public education is the result of the basically erroneous premise that society can permanently alter human nature by means of education and environment. After more than one hundred years of centralized, state-controlled public education, we have more criminality, not less, more depravity, not less, more illiteracy, not less. Every day, new studies tend to confirm the accuracy of the Calvinist view of human nature. So, we are coming full circle after having given the Unitarian-Socialist concept the fullest possible test. There is more popular cynicism about the nature of man than ever before, and rightly so. The atrocities of the twentieth-century make any notion about the perfectibility of man seem like a cruel joke.

The road back to educational freedom is a long one, but it is the road we must

take if we are to restore sanity and value to American education. In fact, if we truly value intellectual freedom then the last place we should permit the government to enter is the classroom. Alternatives to forced busing are not enough. We must get the government out of education altogether. The lessons of history make no other course possible.