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# America's Educational Crisis -How Did it Happen?

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Until late in the last century, most Americans shared a clear understanding of the educational task. Students were expected to learn and to master basic skills including reading, composition, speech, mathematics, civics, history, and related disciplines. Accordingly, educational expectations focused on student performance as measured by tests, essays, term papers, and similar instruments. Teaching focused on the subject matter and its content. Students were expected to memorize when necessary, acquire a defined body of knowledge, and demonstrate the skills based in that knowledge.

Of course, the teacher was the authority in the classroom. Possessing the credibility of age, experience, knowledge, and expertise, the teacher's authority was unrivaled, and students were required to bring their expectations in line with the teacher's, not vice versa. The expectations of parents and the larger community reinforced the authority of the teacher, and the entire educational structure was designed in order to produce students who had acquired basic skills, basic knowledge, and were now prepared for greater challenges ahead.

All that has changed. Now, students often set the expectations in the classroom, and the teacher has been deposed as authority. Parents now treat teachers as hirelings who are expected to "facilitate" the "educational process." Education has been largely redefined in terms of an experience rather than student performance. This process-focused concept of education has largely eliminated attention to the classical disciplines of learning. In some school systems, this philosophy has now produced teachers who are instructed not to correct grammatical or spelling mistakes, because such correction would reinforce a "majoritarian" intolerance and might hurt the fragile self-esteem of their young charges.

Accordingly, the educational culture has been largely bureaucratized, with an army of assorted administrators focusing on minutiae and handing down dictates, far removed from classroom experience.

The erosion of authority in the classroom, the demotion of the teacher to a functionary, the replacement of process for performance, and the emergence of a vast educational bureaucracy are all matters of urgent concern. Nevertheless, all of these pale in consideration of a far more dangerous trend-the politicization of education itself.

During the last half of the twentieth century, the public schools were transformed from agents of education to agents of social change. The roots of this development go back into the early decades of the century, when the philosophy of John Dewey began to shape the education schools and teacher colleges. Dewey, a militant atheist and humanist philosopher, was one of the most influential proponents of pragmatism as the American philosophy. In Dewey's view, the schools

should become the great engines for producing American citizens.

But Dewey's conception of citizenship was directly at odds with the values held by the vast majority of Americans, and certainly those held by America's parents. Dewey believed that the American experience in democracy—as understood through his radical vision—required that children be stripped of particularity and melded into the great monoculture he and his elitist colleagues would create. At least part of their concern was directed at ethnicity, with successive waves of immigration bringing children into the public school classrooms. Dewey wanted to make these students into his conception of Americans, leaving behind their identity as Irish, Italian, German, or Polish. But Dewey's vision did not end with the issue of ethnicity, for he also understood that students must be liberated from parental worldviews, prejudices, and expectations if the new democratic culture he envisioned was to emerge.

Thus, the public schools would become great engines for secularization and the reduction of parental authority. Aided and abetted by strategic court decisions, the schools became transformative instruments for the secularization of the American worldview. Dewey's atheism was not a minor factor in this development, as he and like-minded theorists saw the public schools as a means of liberating children from the religious convictions of their parents. Parental authority was undermined by the fact that the schools took on functions that had previously been left to parents alone. Gradually, school officials began to speak of parents as "partners" in the educational process. Many schools now treat parents as extensions of the school's own mission and purpose—a great reversal from the time when schools saw themselves as extensions of the parents' authority.

Once these developments are understood, the modern school situation makes more sense. A breakdown of cultural consensus has led to a fracturing of vision and the emergence of competing interest groups, all concerned to bring their agenda into the classrooms and into the minds of our children. Johnny may not be able to read, but he is no doubt well versed in "safe sex." He may not know how to use a calculator—much less perform even simple mathematic computations without one—but he has been taught how to use a condom. The secularized environment of the public schools now serves as host for radical ideologies soothingly packaged by the educational establishment. The atrocities evident in so many sex education scandals are only the tip of the iceberg. The real assault upon parental authority and Christian conviction should be traced to the foundations of the current educational establishment.

John Dewey's dominant moral concern was the formation of citizens who would resist religious conviction, minimize the impact of family and parents, and transform issues of objective truth into matters of taste and tolerance. Now, after decades of experimentation in social revolution, the public schools resist almost all efforts at reform.

The greatest hostility to reform comes from teachers' unions, with the National Education Association [NEA] leading the resistance. The NEA is oddly consistent at at least one point—it resists testing for both students and teachers. The testing of students is resisted because such instruments would indicate whether students are actually learning anything and can show evidence of basic skills. The testing of teachers is opposed because the NEA and its allies see the public schools as engines for employment—regardless of performance—rather than as institutions for education.

We now reap what has been sown in a heritage of educational failure and confusion. Many of those emerging from America's schools know little and care even less. The sustained attack upon moral structures and parental authority has produced an overarching worldview of moral relativism. Dewey's "progressivist" educational philosophy has given birth to a host of competing ideologies, and genuine reform seems all but impossible.

For all these reasons—and more—many Christian parents have decided to remove their children from the public school environment, educating them at home or placing them in schools committed to the Christian worldview. Thousands of Christian churches now sponsor schools, and the growth in both Christian schools and the number of parents who homeschool now represents one of the nation's most significant demographic developments.

Nevertheless, all Christians must be concerned about the millions of children who remain in the public schools. As citizens, we must continue to contend for the reform that is so badly needed in the educational establishment and the classroom. We must also recognize that there are many dedicated Christians working as teachers and administrators in our public school systems—even as many students from Christian families remain in those schools. Thus, the "back to school" season is a reminder that we must pray diligently for all the children in this nation's public schools, for their families, and for the future of our nation. We must keep one great fact ever before us: This struggle is not directed only at the minds of America's children, but at their hearts as well.

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