

## The Problem of Schooling

Experts have consistently misdiagnosed and misdefined the problem of schooling to serve their own pocketbooks. The difficulty is not that children don't learn to read, write and do arithmetic very well - it is that kids don't learn at all the way schools insist on teaching.

When we strip children of a primary experience base - as confinement schooling must do to justify its very existence -we destroy the natural sequences of learning which always put experience first. Only much later, after a bath of experience, can the thin gruel of abstraction mean anything. We haven't forgotten this, but there is just not much profit in it for the people and the businesses who make their bread and butter from monopoly schooling. Indeed, you can't hire people who can handle primary data well as teachers because there are so many other things they can do - that's why science teachers are seldom scientists and other teaching "specialists" are seldom very good practitioners of what they presumably "teach".

The call you hear all around for a longer school year is only a mask over the endless longing of the school institution for a guaranteed clientele; in times like these, when money isn't forthcoming, then perhaps people can be frightened into handing it over. I've just given you a better way to understand why you hear so often about the wonders of Japanese schooling, twelve weeks longer than our own. You are being asked to believe that more is better at the very instant that Hong Kong, with a school year ten weeks shorter than Japan's, whips that nation in ev-ery single academic category measured. In New York City we hear with reasonable frequency that Israel's long school term confirms the lesson of Japan since both nations trounce U.S. student competition handily. But during this whole gruesome exercise in manipulating our national mind to prepare it for more schoolteaching (in spite of its hideous track record) I have yet to hear once how handily Flemish Belgium trounces Israel in every academic category - even though it has a school year eleven weeks shorter than Israel's and nineteen weeks shorter than Hong Kong's.

Have you heard these things before? Is it possible someone would rather you didn't? Perhaps you can think of some convincing explanation why we fail to hear of the victories of nations with short school years in the current stampede toward a longer one here.

If you would think clearly, first guard the integrity of your mind against the myths of schoolmen. The most important thing you need to know about the school hierarchy in New York City - and "official" reform initiatives endorsed by New York teacher-colleges like Columbia's, Bank Street's and Fordham's, and those of invisible 501c3 entities like "The Center for Educational Innovation" - is that they maintain a school empire of over 30,000 administrative jobs, visible ones and covert ones. Seventy-five cents of every school dollar goes for

administrative costs. The Catholic Church oversees a million kids in parochial school with about 1/60th the number of administrative jobs New York schools have - indeed they have more administrators than every nation in western Europe combined.

Why don't you know that? Is it possible some-one would rather you didn't? Look at the disgrace these 30,000 experts have brought down on this city. Their existence bankrupts the middle class. Look at the nightmare world they have inflicted on our children. My own school district, a wealthy place located mainly between Columbia University and Lincoln Center, was declared in 1989 the worst single school district in New York State - out of more than 700 "competitors." Worst in reading, worst in math, worst in many other things. Community School District 3, which no more serves the "community" than its version of "public" education serves the public, has, on its northern boundary, Columbia University, just south of that sits the world famous Bank Street College of Education, and on its southern boundary rests Fordham University.

In my 26 years of teaching, none of these fine and arrogant institutions, none of the king's ransom in tax dollars spent by the school district, and none of the feverish rhetoric of the West Side's loud and arrogant political establishment, none of this massed wealth and wisdom has done one tiny bit to alter the nightmare destiny of the children whose minds are put to death in District 3 schools.

Come to a school board meeting in District 3 and you will find the school board and superintendent congratulating each other about the good job they have done. A spectacle I believe is repeated ev-erywhere that monopoly schooling flourishes.

Enough. Enough. Enough. There will be no reform in these schools without competition. Any promise of change from within is an illusion. Government schools are a jobs project, one that hires two people for every one and a quarter needed. Government schools are the single largest form of political patronage everywhere, their sweetheart contracts with bus companies, builders, booksellers and other profiteers are legendary - in school pur-chasing there are no economies of scale. With their no-show, low-show jobs, their favors for insiders, and all the rest they are corrupt places, and they are corrupting of the precious time of children. Time to declare the monopoly irrelevant.

Government schools must be made to compete for tax dollars with every other form of schooling, old and new. Let parents and communities choose what kind of education they will buy. Trust the customers, they will correct our school problem with the power of the purse string. Time to end the Soviet system of government compulsion schools that disgraces our nation and ruins our children. We need tax credits, vouchers, and some more sophisticated ways to develop thousands of entrepreneurial schools. Down in Knoxville, Tennessee, a young man named Chris Wittle is gambling 60 million dollars of his own money to come up with a new design for schooling.

I've met him; I think he's going to succeed. We'll all be better for his success because it will stimulate others to try their own designs.

There is no one right way to grow up. Locked up in the minds and hearts of people everywhere are hundreds of good designs - just waiting for the incentive of free market competition, and perhaps a little underwriting at the beginning, to burst forth.

But so far the State Departments of Education, and the materials suppliers who love their sweetheart deals, and the institutes and foundations and other special interests who make a living out of school business as usual, have stopped this natural return to the successful free market in schooling that the U.S. once enjoyed.

My instincts tell me the school establishment thinks they are going to get away with it again. That's why I rented Carnegie Hall - to ask people to help me force the politicians to put school choice legislation on the ballot. Once we succeed in forcing that, the handwriting will be on the wall. And like insects exposed when a rock is lifted the 30,000 administrators will scurry to and from vainly trying to protect their privileges. Perhaps I won't live to see that end, but I want my granddaughter Mossie to see it.

I asked you earlier not to be fooled any longer by calls for a longer school year, now let me warn you against being fooled that your kids will miss anything important by scrapping this monopoly for free market choice schools. Schoolmen will tell you we need these places to take care of the poor, but the Gallup Poll will tell you it is the poorest among us who scream most loudly for choice.

Schoolmen will have you believe that no one can learn without these places even though literacy was higher in the United States before we built the factory school system. Schoolmen will tell you that we can't enter the technological future without mass compulsion schooling but the tremendous computer revolution which made 45 million of us computer literate over the past 20 years owes nothing whatever to formal schooling!

People taught themselves by reading instructions, watching others, begging for advice, by experimentation, by trial and error, by tuning into networks, by buying lessons from thousands of little entrepreneurs. That's how we learned to be computer literate - schools had nothing to do with it at all' I have a personal story to tell here - for the past 15 years I've watched a New Jersey hairdresser, a mother with young children to raise, turn herself into a high-powered executive of a freight consolidation company doing business from coast to coast. Judy Kovach, the lady this evening is dedicated to, didn't have an MBA and spent her evenings dancing instead of reading The Wall Street Journal. But by force of will and hard work, and by dint of a good attitude that made her a lifelong learner, she became superb at a tough, demanding job -

and rose to the #2 spot in a national company, by merit. School had nothing to do with Judy's success, although self-education had everything to do with it.

The owner of McGraw-Hill/Macmillan, a leading textbook publisher, and the owner of Berlitz, the world's premier language schools, was, himself, a grade school dropout. Is there, perhaps, a lesson in these stories? Would his products and services have been less appealing if his private history had been known?

What we have most to fear is this: that school in the year 2090 will be exactly like school in the year 1990. As school in 1990 was exactly like school in 1890 except for cosmetic differences. But a century earlier, in 1790, it was still possible to get an education in the U.S. One dramatic evidence of that was that Tom Paine's *Common Sense* sold 600,000 copies in that year to a population of two and a quarter million, three-quarters of it slaves and indentured servants. Almost nobody has the skill to read *Common Sense* today, even though its language is simple and powerful.

In 1790 school didn't preempt all the time of the young in endless abstractions, nor did it act as the major destabilizer of family life then, nor did it disseminate a river of halftruths and state-approved myths so that its clientele were turned servile and mindless.

School in 1790 didn't drive children insane as it does today. Alexis deTocqueville said in 1831 that the common people of America were the best educated in the history of the world. That was before we had a government monopoly in schooling - does anyone think he'd say that again?

Whether it's going to be possible to get an education in the schools of the year 2000 will depend on political decisions made by those who hold power in trust for all of us. Or it will depend on the defiant personal decisions of simple people like you and me. Like the quiet revolution that caused 600,000 American families to school their children at home, up from 10,000 families a decade ago.

Our system of government schooling destroys both mind and character. It prevents the formation of the most precious resource of all - a self. To have a self you can trust it must be singular, it must be bold, it must be brave, resourceful, strong, self-reliant, unfettered. Does anyone in this audience think government schools teach these things? If you do you must be crazy. Perhaps you should teach in these places as I did for 26 years so you could know them inside out.

A school which educates cannot be a wall compound. It cannot employ a permanent priesthood certified as politically correct by the State and its economic partners like the teacher colleges.

Why is Community School District 3 so very bad if it contains both a wealthy population - and Columbia Teachers College, the world famous Bank Street College, and Fordham University School of Education inside its boundaries? The utter bankruptcy of teacher college education is found in the record of Community School District 3 over the past 23 years under Decentralization. Ask the colleges why this collection of schools is so bad. Listen carefully as they answer. Watch their eyes.

With the end of mass-compulsion schooling, corrupt relationships with universities peddling teacher credits, with publishers peddling useless texts, with building contractors (who are among the major supports of government schooling), and with other profiteers who thrive on a mass captive audience will cease.

The new school, if it happens, will eliminate testing as we know it because it does massive and permanent damage to children without producing any information of value - or even reliability. Testing as we have it is another profitable racket - ranking children through abstract measures with no verifiable connection to character traits we hope to cultivate in children - or any connection with developing mental powers. It is a rigged game and the testing industry is a gangster industry, which, through number magic, justified managing our citizenry as ancient Egypt managed its own - as if they distribute along a pyramidal hierarchy. They don't, that is what I've learned in 26 years of teaching rich and poor. And paper and pencil testing has no other use, it is a poor predictor of anything real.

The most disturbing instance of the testing racket is the multi-billion dollar reading remediation program. To learn to read fluently takes about 30 contact hours. It is a fairly easy skill for anyone to pick up, and millions know how to read before they go to school, having picked it up on their own.

Indeed, the only way to stop a child from reading and liking it in a literate environment is to teach it the way we teach it. But the industry of reading and its pseudo-scientific scare tactics is the most effective way to intimidate parents and taxpayers to stay in line, so you are discouraged from finding out just how easy it is.

So far, our new school has dropped walled compounds - its exercises occur everywhere: in offices, museums, companies, on farms, ships, in private homes, in churches, and in other rooms of a thousand types.

Our new school has decertified schoolteaching also, so that anyone with a skill to transmit can easily be put in touch with those who want the service. We have the technology to do this right now, all we lack is the will to deconstruct the empire of bad government schools we have erected over our children.

And most important of all, our new school has to put the money to purchase educational services back into the hands of taxpayers. It trusts itself to be able to win favor - and if it guesses wrong, it will have the decency to close up shop and go away. Government schools will compete with the others, but to win they will have to earn it. That would be a revolutionary change, wouldn't it?

The new school has flex-time, flex-space, flex curriculum, and flex-sequencing, because the range of human variety demands that; it has eliminated standardized testing - not because we don't need standards, we do - because standardization is the best way to assure the lowest possible quality of performance.

Time to stop the dishonesty. All of us are sickened by it, even those who think they profit by this system. We are dying as a nation and becoming a State. A nation is run by neighbors, but a state is run by experts. Monopoly schooling is a poison killing our nation. Don't look to schools for your salvation, they have no idea what to do. Look to your own courage, look to your own wits, look to your strong right arms. Demand free-market choice schools, help us get a school choice bill before the State legislatures.

Trust yourselves, trust the people, trust the kids. God bless you all in the struggle ahead.

[Back](#) to John's Carnegie Hall program