



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Changing the Education Paradigm

by Scott McPherson

America doesn't have a Department of Sustenance. Why not? Eating is one of the most important things we do. Without food, human beings die. Still, we're content to allow individual citizens and families to choose for themselves how best to fill their tummies.

Yet, when it comes to the less — though nonetheless very — important job of education, we've opted for a government bureaucracy to satisfy our needs.

And there's not just a federal agency for this purpose. Every state has an extensive and highly expensive public-school system with the stated purpose of providing a "quality" education to all. We have teachers' unions, school boards, parent-teacher associations, bussing, progressive property taxation, regularly updated textbooks — all to ensure a good education for your child.

How's it going? Well, by the looks of things, "quality" education isn't all it's cracked up to be. With colleges and universities routinely complaining that students need remedial courses in the most basic subject matter, we clearly see that the quality of a government education leaves quite a bit to be desired.

The government gets our children for 12 years (longer, if some had their way), eight hours a day, at an average cost of at least \$7,000 per pupil per year — and yet this "quality" education is failing. Miserably. A series of IQ tests administered to children 2 to 4 years old showed that 95 percent had curious, questioning minds, and a healthy understanding of abstract thinking. Tested again at age 7, only 5 percent retained their love of learning. Is it a coincidence that this radical change came after 2 years in the stale confines of a government classroom? And what can we logically expect after a decade in this environment?

Even the public schools' biggest proponents recognize that the system is broken. At a recent Education Summit, Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates, a Democrat and strong supporter of government education, actually accused the public schools of "ruining" the lives of millions of children each year. That's a pretty powerful indictment, especially considering the source.

But to hear mainstream discourse on the subject, you could be forgiven for believing that all we need is a little cosmetic therapy and the system would work just fine. For Democrats, that

means more money. How much money, exactly, is never defined. It's just enough that you know that we need "more." Republicans want a voucher program, which would only render our private schools indistinguishable from government schools.

Freedom and education

What no one is willing to question, however, is the need for a government school system at all. The fact that public-school officials routinely profess their undying love for children and devotion to them appears sufficient to convince the average voter that public schools are indeed doing right by our kids — all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. To suggest otherwise is practically heretical, proving that a tax-supported myth will in time be elevated to ecclesiastical proportions.

Public schools are often described as some kind of noble American tradition, but the system that we have today is actually relatively new. It wasn't until around 1890, nearly 400 years after colonists first landed at Jamestown and more than 100 years after the ratification of the Constitution, that a full-fledged compulsory school system was under way in this country; in England, it happened around 1870.

Before that, churches, villages, charities, and individual families were responsible for providing education. How did they? According to the exhaustive research of the late E.G. West, in his excellent book *Education and the State*, before the advent of compulsory schooling most people were educating themselves and their children quite well without the aid of the state. Literacy rates were actually higher in the 19th century than they are in the 21st, after a century of public "education."

An interesting complaint in early 19th-century England was that common people were reading *too much* — in fact, a free market in printed material produced too much for the masses to read. Among the most popular books was Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*. Coincidentally, Parliament quickly passed a tax on printed products that stayed in place until the 1830s.

In the new United States, early discussions about the "need" for education spending centered not on the notion of educating everyone, but instead acknowledged that it was merely a handful of the poorest members of society who might need assistance.

Surveys of church, parental, and village schools throughout the century indicated that a basic education was available to almost everyone. One example West gave was of a family living on nothing but potatoes so that they could spend every spare cent on their child's schooling. As general wealth increased throughout the 19th century, so did private education expenditures, creating a huge market in private schools. Such was the character of parents before government interference became commonplace.

Public-school proponents would have us believe that the average person was delighted by the appearance of compulsory schooling, but the historical record tells a different story (it was

actually teachers and bureaucrats who lobbied hardest). Most people, particularly average, working-class people, were highly suspicious of a government-school regime. They feared that elitist principles would be forced on their children and squelch their values. They also feared that a rising industrialist class would seek to use the schools to mold their children into docile workers destined for the factory. Early advocates for universal compulsory schooling, such as Horace Mann and John Dewey, praised the authoritarian and militarist nature of Prussian society — from which our public-school model comes — and spoke openly of using schools to mold children for this end. Massachusetts actually had to use the state militia to force parents to send their kids to government schools.

America is among the freest and most prosperous nations on the face of this planet. Surely we can do better than this.

The idea of replacing bread lines and empty store shelves with a free market in food production and distribution appeared ridiculous to the Soviets. They simply couldn't imagine what such a system would look like, and we laughed at their feeble attempts to reform their flawed policies.

So too do most Americans shut their eyes to the possibilities accessible to everyone if government were to get out of the education business.

Just as the Russians couldn't feed their citizens using a system of collective agriculture, Americans are failing to give every child a chance to live up to his fullest potential by locking children in a system of collective education. Government's "one size fits all" approach to learning is failing 40 million school kids. The stultifying effects of our public schools can be seen everywhere.

At a home-schooling conference in Maryland last April, author John Taylor Gatto — an award-winning teacher with almost three decades of classroom experience — told his audience that debates over high-stakes testing, sex education, "new math," and phonics are merely red herrings that deflect us from identifying the real problem: government schools are unfixable.

We don't have a Department of Sustenance because food is far too important to be controlled by a government bureaucracy. Likewise, we don't need education central planners of any kind, from the federal Department of Education to state boards of education to local school boards. It's time we stopped arguing about petty details about how best to run state schools and instead started talking about true educational freedom in America.

Scott McPherson is a policy advisor at The Future of Freedom Foundation.

This article was originally published in the September 2005 edition of *Freedom Daily*.