The Bums in U.S. Education

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Solving our education problems, characterized by the seemingly never-ending escalation of costs and the simultaneous decline of SAT scores, is complex. One remedy will not fix the entire system. Government and education are joined and imposed upon a willing population—leaving parents little control in how their children are educated. As long as the public wants government and education joined in state and national departments we face a Gordian knot. But maybe it will be helpful to identify a troublesome strain of people within the complex interlocking system that we have.

It should be understood that these people use the complexity of the system to shift the blame for the failure of students to learn from where it rightly belongs: with them.

According to Andrew J. Coulson, who has written an excellent book on the history of education from Athens to the modern schools of the advanced nations (*Market Education*, Transaction Publishers), literacy was a "common feature of the cultural landscape" before the colonies declared independence of Britain. Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" sold 100,000 copies in the colonies. By the time the Constitution was written in 1787 the major cities had newspapers, and sixty-five percent of the population (eighty percent in New England) could read. What came to be known as the *Federalist Papers,* were a series of articles published one by one in New York City newspapers. In 1831 Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that it was rare to find a New Englander who was unfamiliar with the Constitution, didn't understand public issues, and hadn't become educated in some fashion—three not unrelated qualities. By 1850 only one in ten identified themselves as illiterate on a U.S. census. Of course some may not have wanted to admit failings, but Coulson estimates that between three-quarters to four-fifths of the population were already literate before public schooling began. It wasn't until 1918 that compulsory education legislation passed in all states.

Yet somehow in process of acquiring the apparatus of government education, including the careful training of those who would teach children, the nation exhibited a tendency toward disaster in the classroom. Despite our best intentions, too many students still weren't learning to read. Periodically a confused and angry public has demanded that something be done. Coulson relates that

> . . . tests of functional literacy taken during the forties and fifties showed that somewhere from a quarter to half of all Americans were unable to read and understand simple documents, and discontent began to build.

Things seemed to reach a boil with the publication of Rudolf Flesch's book *Why Johnny Can't Read*, in the mid-fifties, which pushed the reintroduction of phonics.

An insubstantial amount of phonics instruction was deployed, and the educational establishment seemed to have gotten through a rough patch. But by 1981 Flesh thought it necessary to write *Why Johnny Still Can't Read*, in which he estimated that only one in six schools was using intensive phonics. Also, in 1973, Morris Kline took the trouble to write *Why Johnny Can't Add*.

The problem is powerful individuals and groups within the education establishment had developed prized theories which they are unwilling to dispense with. Because they were then and are today in advantageous positions (in state departments of education for example) but are invisible to or untouchable by the public—bureaucracy or tenure provide excellent "cover"—they frustrate reform. By the middle of the twentieth century the U.S. had developed a multilayed system run by professionals who disparaged those who thought differently than they did. Outsiders face a governmentally protected behemoth.

Without vigorous and focused efforts the educational system will remain a tangled mess, and some future author will someday have to write *Why Johnny After All These Years Still Can't Read*.

The sad fact is, as Coulson points out in a book with a huge bibliography, that effective ways of teaching reading have been known for thousands of years. The Athenians showed the way by using games to help children learn letters and sounds. The method is called phonics. Young children are taught that words are made of letters. They are exposed to all the letters and the sounds made when they are combined in various ways. Children are presented with a small number of common words. After the words have been broken down into separate parts they are reassembled into syllables and then words. Thus skills are taught that enable students later on and by themselves to sound out unfamiliar words and to use a dictionary—children are led to the road on which they will be able expand their vocabulary on their own.

In the late 1960s and on into the 70s a federally funded, large-scale experiment was designed to identify the most effective instructional methods; it was called Follow Through. Advocates of twenty-two types of elementary-school teaching were allowed to use their methods in the public schools around the country. The effects of their methods were measured and analyzed by Abt Associates, an independent research firm. It was found that structured teaching methods worked best. The report said that the teaching models "that emphasize basic skills . . . succeeded better than other models in helping children gain these skills." According to Coulson, the most structured, most skill-oriented method of the group was Direct Instruction, sometimes called Distar, and Distar stood out as the best. Coulson says:

> Distar systematically broke new topics down into understandable parts, and then had students practice those component skills, eventually putting them back together to master the complete task. This Direct Instruction method emerged on top in virtually every category. It not only placed first in teaching basic skills as a whole, but came out first in all four subcategories (reading, arithmetic, spelling, and language) individually.

Coulson goes on to write that the poor/disadvantaged students (they usually score lower than eighty percent of their peers) who had gone through several years of the Distar method "performed at the national average of all students." Distar benefits were as evident among non-native English speakers as native English speakers. Non-disadvantaged students performed better than the national average. And, Coulson continues:

> Two, three, and even six years after they had left the Distar Follow Through program, disadvantaged former participants still performed at a level above the control group of disadvantaged students who had not participated in Follow Through.

Like phonics, the Distar method emphasized breaking topics down into parts so that essential skills could be most easily taught. The teacher led students using repetition and drill so that children could most easily learn. Moreover it was found that as they had gone a good way toward mastering skills, students had higher self-esteem, because of course they had become familiar with success—this is an important point to note because wrong-headed educators put "self-esteem" at the top of their priorities.

So after the Follow Through experiment, which was a federally funded, national project, the facts as to which method worked best were on the table and seemingly should have been seen by all. Sadly, twenty years later

> Follow Through has been almost totally forgotten, and future teachers are taught in schools of education that instructional method really doesn't have much of an impact on student performance.

Coulson quotes a professor John Stone who has spent many years watching the relationship between educational research findings and the everyday practices in public schools and teachers' colleges. Professor Stone says the vast majority of textbooks on teaching methods "present an eclectic assortment of approaches colored by a distinct distaste for methods that are structured, teacher-directed, and results oriented."

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So who are these bums mucking up the education of our children, and what are their theories?

More than 150 years ago Horace Mann dominated education issues, advocating government-funded education throughout the nation. If public schooling were "expanded to its capabilities" he said, and "worked with the efficiency of which it is susceptible," the results would be amazing. In hindsight the notion that public education is "susceptible" of "efficiency" can be doubted. Mann also introduced a flawed approach to reading with awful, lasting consequences. In his 1843 Report to the Massachusetts Board of Education, he wrote,

> I am satisfied that our greatest error in teaching children to read lies in the beginning with the alphabet—in giving them what are called the "Names of the Letters."

Mann disregarded the distinctions teachers who taught phonics made between the names of letters and the multiple sounds each letter could carry. To Mann the letters were "skeleton-shaped, bloodless, ghostly apparitions," and syllables were "cadaverous particles." If children were provided with text, they would recognize whole words without having to be taught to recognize the letters of the alphabet, without needing to learn how spelling related to pronunciation. Mann believed children would read the same way they learned to speak, automatically, naturally, with no laborious, special practice required. Children should be introduced to more and more words gradually, and after months or years of guessing then they could learn phonics and spelling. This approach was called the "look-say" or "word" method, but it met with few supporters after it was tried by the local teachers in Boston schools and judged to be inferior to phonics. Thereafter "look-say" was forgotten for fifty years until a new group of education crusaders appeared.

According to Andrew Coulson, author of *Market Education*, a group of eighty-five prominent educators formed the Progressive Education Association (PEA) in 1919. Coulson writes that among their "key principles" were:

> . . . the freedom of children to learn what they wanted, when they wanted; the redefinition of teachers as guides rather than instructors.

There was also a current of thought circulating even before the founding of the PEA that families were "obstacles" standing in the way of better schools and society. Edward A. Ross was a sociologist and a popular figure with educators. He wanted to use public schools to control and shape the minds of children. Parents were too unreliable to be left with their children's education. In his book *Social Control* (1901), he wrote

> Another gain lies in the partial substitution of the teacher for the parent as the model upon which the child forms itself. . . . the advantage of giving him his teacher instead of his father to imitate, is that the former is a picked person, while the latter is not.

Parents were not subject to government selection or certification, but teachers could be.

Andrew Coulson identifies George S. Counts as one of the most influential members of the PEA. He, along with John Dewey, directed the *Social Frontier*, which was the journal of choice for progressive educators in the early twentieth century. Counts gained the support of many professors in the Teachers College of Columbia University. He took the PEA further from traditional methods, believing children needed to be emancipated from "the coercive influence of the small family or community group." Instead of providing basic knowledge and skills teachers

should "Focus more on society, less on the child." In his book *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* (1932) he wrote:

> To the extent that they [teachers] are permitted to fashion the curriculum and procedures of the school, they will definitely and positively influence the social attitudes, ideals and behavior of the coming generation . . . . It is my observation that the men and women who have affected the course of human events are those who have not hesitated to use the power that has come to them.

The above quotes characterizes the thinking of the progressives early in the century. A small core of intellectuals dedicated themselves to the ideal of the "professional educator" using government power to build a better society. Education was too important to be left to parents or the local school boards. Their goal was the consolidation of power, and their efforts were not without effect. Andrew Coulson relates that between 1929-30 and 1993-94, the number of one-room schoolhouses fell from 150,000 to 442; in 1932 there were 127,531 school districts nationwide, but by 1962 there were 35,676, and by the 1993-94 school year only 14,881 remained.

The progressives adopted Horace Mann's "look-say" method. They abhored teaching strategies involving drills, worksheets, teacher-directed lessons. Like Mann they believed it unnecessary that complex skills should be broken down to clearly defined units, taught one by one and recombined to achieve mastery. Children had only to be exposed to rich works of literature in a supportive environment to become literate. Coulson writes that prominent progressives, such as Stanley Hall and John Dewey, created the "whole language" approach to reading. In practice, according to Coulson whole-language teachers often:

- Read predictable, illustrated stories to students over and over until the students have essentially memorized them.

- Encourage children to guess words they do not recognize by looking at the pictures which accompany the text or by inferring their meaning from the context of the story.

- Periodically introduce a letter sound and suggest that children guess unknown words by looking at first and sometimes last letters. (sounding out entire words is not encouraged.)

- Do not correct children when they guess the wrong word, particularly if the meaning of the children's guess is similar to the meaning of the correct word.

- Encourage students to invent their own spellings when they write, rather than teaching them the accepted spellings, and do not correct spelling errors once they have been made.

Progressives want children to enjoy their time in the classroom and be pleasantly exposed to a wide range of ideas.

While modern politicians nowadays often talk about the importance of reading, and that "not one child should be left behind," Coulson provides quotes from progressives who thought much differently:

> Very many men have lived and died and been great, even the leaders of their age, without any acquaintance with letters. The knowledge which illiterates acquire is probably on the whole more personal, direct, environmental and probably a much larger proportion of it practical. Moreover, they escape much eyestrain and mental excitement. —Stanley Hall, quoted in Mathews' *Teaching to Read.*

> We shall some day accept the thought that it is just as illogical to assume that every boy must be able to read as it is that each one must be able to perform on a violin, that it is no more reasonable to require that each girl shall spell well than it is that each one shall bake a good cherry pie. —A.H. Lauchner, a school principal, quoted in 1951 by Arthur E. Bestor in *Educational Wastelands.*

The latter quote is fifty years old. Would the "professionals" today be rash enough to be so explicit? Do educators still believe that every child need not be able to read?

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Progressives are no longer a small number of "frontier thinkers." Progressivism is the dominant philosophy, and it is passed along to successive generations of public school teachers through the nation's teachers colleges. Andrew Coulson writes of the teachers colleges:

> The public school teaching profession is very much like a medieval walled city, heavily fortified, and with only one main entrance. Guarding that entrance are the schools of education, which provide the only legal entry into the profession for the vast majority of candidates.

Coulson cites a study of freshmen at teachers colleges. The study, conducted in the late 1980s, found that freshmen had begun college with traditional views: i.e., that the teacher's role is to provide a body of knowledge and skills to students. By the time the education majors had completed their degrees most of them had the progressive stamp: "the teacher's role is to facilitate the child's self-directed educational experiences." Coulson also refers to a survey done by Public Agenda (1997) titled "Different Drummers: How Teachers of Teachers View Public Education." Education professors were asked which of two statements was closest to their view: 1) "Teachers should see themselves as facilitators of learning who enable their students to learn on their own"; or 2) "Teachers should see themselves as conveyors of knowledge who enlighten their students with what they know."

Ninety-two percent answered number one.

So, who are some of these bums infecting the Universities? In the *Weekly Standard* (Aug., 1999), Lynne Cheney, who is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, writes about Regie Routman, an elementary school teacher in Ohio and author of *Invitations: Changing as Teachers and Learners K-12,* Heinemann, 1994. Cheney writes that *Invitations* is one of the most widely used textbooks in ed. schools—used at Vanderbilt, Michigan State, and the U. of Arizona for example. Future teachers learn from Routman that much too much attention has been paid to phonics and therefore, "some children have difficulty learning to read." (She has it completely backwards.) Routman uses anecdotes instead of quantitative research to make her case. She writes of Maria, who had struggled teaching grammar and punctuation: "But . . . no matter how hard she tried, things didn't seem to come together for her." But then Maria attended a summer workshop and learned about whole language. Maria learned to get out the way and let children naturally evolve into readers and spellers. Now she "can offer children choices in decision making about their own learning." Because children are free of capitalization, and other dull concerns, Maria's classroom is a "joyful, collaborative community."

Routman also lets us know about Loretta, a second-grade teacher who attended a week-long conference called "Creating the Whole Language Classroom," at which Loretta was enlightened. She was once a struggling and frustrated teacher, now she is relaxed and happy, and the classroom is "a child-centered room where children are productively in charge of their own learning."

Routman writes of a kindergarten teacher who decided to let her students discover phonics for themselves. But, "I felt real guilty for a long time," she says. Also a first-grade teacher reports feeling pressured by second-grade teachers who expect children to arrive at second-grade already knowing phonics. "Also, I feel guilty for not giving spelling tests," says the first grade teacher. Routman recommends "support groups" to reduce the guilt. Groups of teachers can encourage each other and discuss how to handle parental discontent. Routman herself is an elementary school teacher and has had trouble abandoning explicitly taught phonics: "It has taken me well over ten years to feel completely comfortable with this approach." At her support group teachers are advised to lobby against standardized tests in early grades, so that "if successful [we] will allow teachers to decide for themselves whether their methods are working." Routman repeatedly refers to Kenneth Goodman and Frank Smith, whom Lynne Cheney calls "whole language gurus." Goodman says the phonics-based reading instruction reflects a "flat-earth view of the world." Smith believes that reading and writing are overvalued: "Literacy doesn't make anyone a better person."

Another progressive book worth noting is *Creating Classrooms, for Authors and Inquirers*, by Kathy G. Short and Jerome C. Harste, because it dominates elementary education at Indiana University's School of Education, which is the third largest education school in the nation. Harste teaches at the university, and she is president of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCT). The NCT has

90,000 members and promotes using publications, conferences, and conventions. In *Creating Classrooms* Harste writes that it is a mistake for the curriculum to be "mandated by 'experts' outside the classroom,"—and that standards set by outsiders should be ignored. Part of Harste's repertoire is J. Richard Gentry's *Spel . . . Is a Four-Letter Word*, Heinemann, 1987.

There is even a weird political attitude taken by progressives and the NCT. Constance Weaver directed the Commission on Reading for the NCT in the late 1980s. She Wrote *Reading Process and Practice*, Heinemann, 1994. Weaver believes that "right-wing" extremists want children to learn phonics:

> Teaching intensive phonics . . . is also a way of keeping children's attention on doing what they're told and keeping them from reading or thinking for themselves.

She goes on,

> The political Far Right's agenda is well-served. . . by promoting docility and obedience—on the part of the lower classes.

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These wrong-headed educators believe they are leading us to a happier tomorrow. They are not, and they are dangerous. They should be identified and held up to public view over and over again. Their rotten methods should be discredited and gotten rid of.

As Andrew Coulson points out, changing the education behemoth seems a daunting task. But he has worked out some answers in *Market Education.* Ω