

# Public Schools Smother Parents

Barry MacDonald

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If Governor Bush becomes president in November he plans to use the U.S. Department of Education to hold individual schools accountable. Each school receiving federal money must prove itself, or face losing funds and students.

When compared to President Reagan's desire to abolish the Department of Education (he couldn't) Bush's position represents quite a retreat—from a purely conservative point of view. But he is sensible and he's aiming to win.

If we parents are contentious and unreasonable when dealing with teachers and administrators, our behavior is understandable. If our children are right, and the teachers most often wrong, we should not be overly surprised with ourselves. We are rebelling against something far more powerful than ourselves—and so we behave like frustrated children.

Perhaps it's unfair to say that we have only ourselves to blame, because the government has controlled schools for a long time. But the source of the problem lies where we have bought the idea that public education should be free, because it really isn't.

The idea that parents should pay out of their own pockets for their children's schooling seems radical, cruel even. We the public can not bear the thought. So George Bush must be willing to use the national government to fix the local school. He may even believe he can.

But even with the threat of vouchers the entrenched bureaucrats can fight back. Using an arsenal of regulations and a corps of lawyers they could force schools run by outsiders to conform to government rules. And as often as not judges seem to side with the bureaucrats.

The combination of a multitude of administrators enforcing volumes of regulations is imposing—each supports the other.

Long ago the American public decided on a system of schools paid for through shared taxation—though not without an initial fight. From the moment city boards took over education in the nineteenth century, parents lost control over what and how their children were taught, and control went to those skilled in the use of political power.

Now we have a system where dissenters are firmly suppressed and political correctness rules. It has been this way for a long time in the United States, and some

of the bold opinions of the powerful in the past are surprising when recalled.

James G. Carter was a Massachusetts congressman in the 1830s. He wrote:

The ignorant must be allured to learn, by every motive which can be offered to them. And if they will not thus be allured, they must be taken by the strong arm of government and brought out, willing or unwilling, and made to learn, at least enough to make them peaceable and good citizens.

From the same period Samuel Smith, a soldier and politician, wrote:

. . . it is the duty of a nation to superintend and even to coerce the education of children. . . . [H]igh considerations of expediency not only justify but dictate the establishment of a system which shall place under a control, *independent of and superior to parental authority*, the education of children.

Horace Mann of Massachusetts was appointed secretary of the first state-level board of education in 1837. In 1841 he wrote:

Let the Common School be expanded to its capabilities, let it be worked with the efficiency of which it is susceptible, and nine tenths of the crimes in the penal code would become obsolete. . .

Seven years later he wrote:

. . . [w]hen [public schooling] shall be fully developed, when it shall be trained to wield its mighty energies for the protection of society against the giant vices which now invade and torment it;—against intemperance, avarice, war, slavery, bigotry, the woes of want and the wickedness of waste,—then, there will not be a height to which the enemies of the [human] race can escape, which it will not scale, nor a Titan among them all, whom it will not slay.

In the 1864 biennial report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (California) showed his approval of east-coast legal precedents by writing:

The child should be taught to consider his instructor, in many respects, superior to the parent in point of authority. . . . [T]he vulgar impression that parents have a legal right to dictate to teachers is entirely erroneous.

Fred L. Gifford was Exalted Cyclops of the Oregon Ku Klux Klan in 1922, a period when the Klan was very powerful. The Klan and the Oregon Scottish Rite Masons were lobbying for the Oregon Compulsory Education Bill which achieved majority support and passed into law. Gifford's remarks to a reporter for the *Oregon Voter* reflect his beliefs before they gained the force of law:

We are opposed to control of American public affairs by aliens or by

so-called Americans whose primary allegiance is to some foreign power. . . . The allegiance of Catholics is to a foreign power, the pope, [and] their clannish attempts to extend the temporal power of the pope over the offices of this country is opposed to the best interests of America. . . . No child should be permitted to be educated in the primary grades in any private school. . . . We are just as much opposed to private schools of the so-called “select” kind as we are to denominational private schools.

The above quotations can be found in the excellent book *Market Education, the Unknown History*, by Andrew J. Coulson. Transaction, ISBN 1-56000-408-8 (hardcover), 0-7658-0496-4 (softcover).     Ω

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