A TEACHER’S PERSPECTIVE ON WHAT’S WRONG WITH OUR SCHOOLS

Peter McAllister

The American public has been aware of the poor performance of our schools since the Reagan Administration published A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform in 1983. Since then, educational reformers have engaged in several major programs, such as the No Child Left Behind Act and the Common Core State Standards Initiative. Despite these efforts, the performance of our schools is still unsatisfactory. We have one of the highest levels of educational spending per student in the world, yet American students' performance in international comparisons of educational quality is consistently mediocre. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2017), only 25 percent of American 12th grade students are proficient in math, 22 percent are proficient in science, and 12 percent are proficient in U. S. history.

Members of several professional groups, including economists, psychologists, teacher union representatives, public policy analysts, and politicians, have opined upon our educational policies for decades. Teachers, on the other hand, have been virtually silent. Yet teachers have direct experience of the practical consequences of our educational policies, and are in a position to identify problems in our
Based upon my own teaching experience, I believe that the discouraging test performance of American students is a symptom of fundamental problems in our schools. When I taught mathematics and social studies in a public high school, I observed the following characteristics in many of my students:

- **A nonconceptual mentality.** Students could not integrate the information that they learned into a comprehensive understanding of a subject. Because they could not comprehend their subject matter, they simply memorized it.
- **A lack of independent thought.** When drawing conclusions, students rarely relied on their own informed judgment. Instead, they either relied on their emotional reactions or uncritically adopted the opinion of the group.
- **Ethical expediency.** Students frequently cut corners for the sake of some short-term gain. If they thought that the rewards were high enough, students violated rules that they would not have violated otherwise.

In this article, I argue that the policies and practices that engendered these characteristics in my students are based upon the pedagogical principles of “progressive education”—that is, the educational philosophy that has dominated mainstream American education for the past century. Although progressive education ended as a formal movement in the 1950s (Cremin 1961: 347–53), state departments of education have ensured that progressive educational principles have remained firmly entrenched within our schools. These principles, applied faithfully by American educators for generations, have produced students who do not think, who do not question, and who do not care about what is right or wrong.

**Nonconceptual Mentality**

Students have difficulty learning to think conceptually because many of our curricula violate a fundamental principle of epistemology: the hierarchical structure of knowledge.

In her *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, Ayn Rand (1966) identified a crucial aspect of conceptual knowledge: concepts have a hierarchical structure. Higher-level concepts are derived from
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simpler, more basic concepts. For example, it is impossible for a child to grasp the concept of “furniture” without first grasping more basic concepts from which the concept furniture is derived such as “bed,” “table,” “chair,” and so on. There is a necessary order in the sequence of abstractions that a child must follow to form this concept. This necessity of order applies to every concept. A higher-level concept, such as “electron,” requires a lengthy, complex sequence of abstractions. Each step in this sequence must be performed in a hierarchical order. If any step is omitted or not performed properly, the resulting idea cannot be considered valid conceptual knowledge.

This aspect of Ayn Rand’s theory of concepts has a clear pedagogical implication: because there is a necessary order in which concepts are formed, there is a necessary order in which concepts must be taught. As Lisa VanDamme (2006: 59), the headmistress of the VanDamme Academy, has pointed out, “An abstract idea—whether a concept, generalization, principle or theory—should never be taught to a child unless he has already grasped those ideas that necessarily precede it in the hierarchy, all the way down to the perceptual level.” Because the order of presentation of conceptual knowledge must follow the principle of hierarchy, a proper education requires a structured curriculum that also follows this principle. If the proper order of presentation of a subject is violated, it is often impossible for a child to integrate new information into his knowledge base.

Progressive educators, however, have rejected structured, hierarchical curricula. William Heard Kilpatrick, who was reputed to have trained 35,000 teachers during his tenure at Teachers College, Columbia University (Ravitch 1983: 50), was outspoken in his antipathy toward any structured curricula. Kilpatrick (1925: 266) advocated an education that “would stress thinking and methods of attack and principles of action” rather than curricula that he derisively referred to as “subject matter fixed-in-advance.” This rejection of fixed curricula led to the separation of thinking methods from content, with content relegated to a secondary status. Under the influence of Kilpatrick and other progressive educators, teachers gradually abandoned courses with content presented in a logical hierarchy.

The U.S. experience with mathematics education is an obvious example of this development. State departments of education began to mandate instruction in “New Math” in the late 1950s and, by the late 1960s, the New Math curriculum had become prevalent in our
schools. As Morris Klein (1973) has pointed out, this curriculum repeatedly violated the principle of hierarchy. Elementary school students struggling to grasp the rudiments of arithmetic have had to learn aspects of number theory that are meaningless to children of their age. For example, in many schools, instead of teaching subtraction by simply counting and removing quantities of real objects, such as tiles or beads, elementary school teachers taught their students that the operation of subtraction entails the addition of a negative quantity. It took the world’s leading mathematical thinkers a millennium to develop the concept of a negative quantity, and another millennium to accept it (Klein 1973: 40); yet mathematics teachers have expected children somehow to master this counterintuitive concept in a matter of weeks. Similarly, even though it took 22 centuries for mathematicians to notice that Euclid’s Elements rested on more fundamental axioms than Euclid stated, geometry teachers have expected teenagers not only to grasp this shortcoming, but also to understand why they must use abstruse axioms to prove the simplest of theorems. New Math curricula have flitted across exotic, unrelated topics such as set theory, locus, symbolic logic, and linear algebra without providing students with any indication of the practical application of these topics or a logical context within which to integrate them.

To get an idea of how esoteric New Math curricula have been, consider the topic of material implication. This topic deals with conditional sentences, which are statements in the form of “if . . . , then.” Material implication obviates any causal relationship in these statements. Material implication holds that the only time a conditional sentence is false is when the antecedent (the “if” part of the sentence) is true and the consequent (the “then” part) is false. All other conditional sentences are true. Thus, a sentence such as “If Paris is the capital of France, then the sun rises in the West” is false, not because it makes no sense, but because the antecedent is true (Paris is the capital of France) and the consequent is false (the sun does not rise in the West). On the other hand, the sentence “If the sun rises in the West, then Paris is the capital of France” is a true statement. Try explaining that to a class of ninth graders! Material implication first gained notoriety when Bertrand Russell included it in Principia Mathematica (Whitehead and Russell 1910: 98). Since then, philosophers have challenged the utility of this logical formalism (Blanshard 1939: 374–81). As you may imagine, most well-educated adults
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would have a great deal of difficulty understanding this topic. You also may be wondering what any of this has to do with mathematics. Yet material implication was part of New York State’s Integrated Mathematics curriculum for decades and appeared in widely used mathematics textbooks (Dressler and Keenan 1989: 147–51). The New York State Regents examinations regularly included questions involving material implication, or topics derived from it, until January 2009. It has also been part of the curricula of school districts in California and several other states. Material implication is not part of the Common Core standards, however, and it is no longer included in the mathematics curricula of either New York or California.

By discarding the hierarchical, logical chain that connects mathematical abstractions to physical reality, American educators have severed mathematics from the real world in the minds of many of their students. I encountered the consequences of this separation shortly after I began teaching high school mathematics. When I tried to show my students how the topics we were covering have real world, perceptual foundations, students typically demanded that I stop and just give them a formula that they could memorize. They had no interest in grasping the hierarchical chain that connects mathematical principles to observable facts. Based upon their prior mathematics courses, my students had come to expect instruction in mathematics to consist of manipulating a series of strange little symbols whose meaning defy comprehension. I also discovered that, because mathematics teachers have learned this subject the same way they teach it, many mathematics teachers do not understand the real world foundation of mathematics either.

Consequently, mathematics education in our schools has often devolved into a process of cramming formulas into students’ minds, with mnemonic devices substituting for instruction. For example, instead of teaching the derivation of the quadratic formula—a formula indispensable in the design of objects ranging from flashlights to the Golden Gate Bridge—teachers often “teach” this formula by singing it with their students to the tune of Pop Goes the Weasel. Mathematics teachers have relied on similar approaches to teach topics in number theory, algebra, geometry, and trigonometry.

Before I became a teacher, I spent more than two decades setting up and managing departments that specialized in using applied mathematics to solve business problems for a multinational bank. During that period, I often had difficulty finding Americans who
possessed the mathematical skills that I required. Shortly after becoming a teacher, I learned why: instruction in our state-mandated mathematics curricula has caused this subject to become unfathomable to many young minds.

The opposition to hierarchical curricula on the part of progressive educators has permeated instruction in other subjects as well. A proper history curriculum should begin with objective facts and proceed in a chronological sequence, so that students can see how choices made by people in one period cause outcomes in the next. When education historian Diane Ravitch (1985) visited a local New York City high school in the mid-1980s, she was surprised by the complete absence of traditional, chronological instruction in history. The department chairman informed her that, since the late 1960s, the school had followed the guidelines of the New York State Education Department, which was to deemphasize chronological history and to focus instead on topical issues and social science concepts.

A teacher in the same school pointed out that he did not teach history because it did not help his students pass the New York State Regents examination in social studies. Under the influence of progressive educators, such as John Dewey and Harold Rugg, school districts have eliminated history departments and replaced them with social studies departments. In addition to teaching courses in history, many social studies departments now offer courses in economics, sociology, anthropology, and psychology. Ravitch noted that the introduction of these other disciplines caused considerable confusion among teachers and administrators as to what constitutes a proper curriculum; it also left little time for hierarchical, chronological instruction in history.

Like mathematics courses, science courses should begin with perceptually verifiable information before proceeding to higher levels of abstraction. Instead, for decades, science teachers have plunged students into worlds of subatomic particles, obscure biological processes, and ineffable forces with little attempt to show how such worlds were discovered from more basic knowledge or how the information that students are expected to learn has practical, observable consequences. VanDamme (2006) has pointed out that this type of instruction in science paradoxically requires a nonscientific act of faith on the part of the student. For example, when a child is presented with a schematic representation of an atom, with hardly any
hierarchical explanation of the process by which atomic theory was
developed, the child has no more compelling reason for believing in
atomic theory than he has for believing in Santa Claus.

State departments of education also have virtually eliminated instruc-
tion in grammar from the public school curriculum (Mulroy 2003), and
have introduced the nonphonetic—that is, nonconceptual—whole
word approach to reading instruction as either an alternative or a sup-
plement to phonics-based instruction in reading.

Ironically, by denigrating hierarchical course content, American
educators have made students far less able to master the thinking
methods prized by progressives. The curriculum, the very content
upon which students might learn to apply essential methods of think-
ing, militates against the development of these methods. With
method divorced from content, students have come to view thinking
methods as arbitrary rules of an unreal game. Instead of trying to
understand these rules, students simply memorize them—exactly the
opposite of the result sought by Kilpatrick and his progressive
colleagues.

This substitution of memorization for understanding has incul-
cated the nonconceptual mentality in many students. These students
can often retain large amounts of information and perform calcula-
tions and other routine mental operations rapidly, but they can do
very little conceptualizing. They memorize, manipulate, and recall
information well; they just cannot think. Because they do not grasp
the difference between understanding and memorization, they are
often incapable of identifying when they do not know something.

Although educators have been aware of the need of a hierarchical
approach to curriculum development, based upon my experience as
a teacher and my review of the relevant literature, I believe that they
have not fully realized its critical importance. In 1956, psychologist
Benjamin Bloom (1956) chaired a committee of educators who
developed a set of hierarchical models that classify learning objec-
tives into levels of complexity and specificity. Robert M. Gagne
(1965) developed a similar system of analyzing learning from simple
to complex levels. These taxonomies present general guidelines
regarding the order of presentation of knowledge, and they have
been used extensively in the design of curricula. There is also a sub-
tantial amount of material that discusses, in general, the relationship
of curricula to students’ acquisition of conceptual knowledge.
However, few researchers have sought to bridge the gap between
the hierarchical structure of concepts within epistemology and the development of a hierarchical curriculum within pedagogy. The only curricula that I am aware of that present content in a comprehensive, hierarchical manner are the Core Knowledge Sequence developed by E.D. Hirsch and the Core Knowledge Foundation, and the curricula in place at the VanDamme Academy.

There is another aspect of our public education system that militates against the establishment of a hierarchical approach to education: most public school teachers are not experts in subject matter. Beginning in the early 20th century, Ravitch (2003) notes, educators sought to establish teaching as a distinct profession, similar to law or medicine. Teacher certification became dependent upon taking courses in pedagogy and passing exams in pedagogic theory, and less dependent upon mastery of the subject taught. A report produced by the National Center for Educational Statistics (Lewis et al. 1999: 12–13) found that, by the end of the 20th century, only 38 percent of teachers held a bachelor's or graduate degree in an academic field other than education. The report noted that this statistic was unchanged from a similar survey conducted five years earlier. A more recent report by the U. S. Department of Education (Staklis and Henke 2013: 9) showed that one half of the 2007–08 bachelor's degree recipients who taught the following year had majored in education. To inculcate a hierarchical understanding of the subjects they teach, teachers themselves need a comprehensive, hierarchical understanding of these subjects. To acquire this understanding, teachers need, at least, to have attained a bachelor's degree in these subjects.

On a topic related to hierarchy, E.D. Hirsch (2016: 13) notes that current research disputes progressive educators' justification for what he refers to as “skills-centrism”: the belief that teachers can impart general thinking skills, such as critical thinking and problem solving, without regard to specific subject content. He cites the comprehensive Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance (Feltovich, Prietula, and Ericsson 2006: 11), which states, “Research clearly rejects the classical views on human cognition in which general abilities such as learning, reasoning, problem solving, and concept formation correspond to capacities and abilities that can be studied independently of the content domain.” The decoupling of thinking skills and subject matter that led to the proliferation of the nonhierarchical curricula discussed above rests upon this discredited assumption of skills-centrism.
Hirsch (2016) also presents a cogent argument for the failure of progressive educational ideas in his discussions of the decline in American schooling in the 1960s and 1970s, and the decline in French and Swedish schooling underway currently. Hirsch maintains that even though progressive ideas had begun to take over American public schools in the 1920s, it took decades for these ideas to achieve dominance. Although the progressive education movement ended in the 1950s, Hirsch notes, by the 1960s progressive ideas regarding teaching methods and curricula had become conventional educational practice in most American schools. Between 1960 and 1980, American academic scores fell rapidly. Academic scores across all grade levels fell more than a quarter of a standard deviation, a big decline for large populations. SAT scores fell by half a standard deviation. Student performance on other national tests such as the ACT (a test similar to the SAT), the Iowa Test of Educational Development, the Minnesota College Aptitude Test, the California Achievement Test, and the Stanford Achievement Test all showed large declines (Hirsch 2016: 133).

Hirsch describes the same pattern emerging in France and Sweden. In 1989, after decades of growing interest in progressive educational ideas in France’s schools of education, France adopted the loi Jospin (“the Jospin Law”); this law effectively required that France’s elementary schools institute a child-focused, skills-centric approach to education similar to the approach in American schools. A sample of the performance of 300,000 French fifth grade students in 2007 showed more than a third of a standard deviation decline in reading skills and more than four-fifths of a standard deviation decline in mathematics skills relative to the performance of students in 1987—two very large, very significant declines. When stratified by demographic characteristics, the results showed declines for all groups, with the largest declines in those groups within the lowest socioeconomic statuses (Hirsch 2016: 211). In 1994, Sweden made changes to its educational system similar to those made in France. From 2000 to 2012, Sweden’s scores on the PISA test, a frequently cited assessment of national educational quality, dropped from 516 to 483 in reading, from 510 to 478 in mathematics, and from 512 to 485 in science. These declines were monotonic: the result of each test in each category was lower than the previous result (Hirsch 2016: 154). Apparently, France and Sweden are determined to duplicate America’s educational mistakes.
It is our children who suffer because of these ideas. In a recent multiyear college and career readiness survey of 165,000 high school students, 87 percent of the respondents stated that they hope to earn a college degree and embark upon a career, but only 45 percent feel positively about their college and career readiness (YouthTruth 2015). A separate survey, consisting of interviews with college instructors and employers (Achieve 2015), indicates that these students have reason to be concerned. The survey found that 78 percent of college faculty and 62 percent of employers believe that public high schools are not preparing students for the demands that these students will face when they graduate.

Lack of Independent Thought

One of the salient characteristics of progressive education is a shift away from lecture-based, teacher-centered instruction to group-based, student-centered instruction. Based on my experience, this change in focus, when combined with the effects of nonhierarchical curricula, has made students reluctant to question the content that is presented to them or to investigate issues thoroughly when such an investigation may cause them to challenge opinions that they consider part of the status quo.

John Dewey, “the father of progressive education,” believed that guiding a child’s adjustment to the demands of the group is one of the most important responsibilities of an educational system. According to Dewey (1897: 77), “The only true education comes through the stimulation of the child’s powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself. Through these demands he is stimulated to act as a member of a unity . . . to conceive of himself from the standpoint of the welfare of the group to which he belongs.”

Under the influence of Dewey and other progressive educators, educational administrators began requiring teachers to focus on conforming their students’ behavior to group norms during the early 20th century. This development was most pronounced within the elementary grades, where students’ social interactions are most pliant. Dewey replaced permanently anchored classroom desks in his Laboratory School in Chicago with movable units that could be rearranged at will to suit the needs of the group (Rugg and Shumaker 1928: 1). School districts across the country followed suit.
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In leading progressive schools, the focus of instruction shifted from that of students acquiring individual intellectual skills to students completing group projects. In the Lincoln School in New York City, elementary school students decided what projects the group would work on and who would perform what tasks. The teacher was only “a wise but inconspicuous member of the group” (Rugg and Shumaker 1928: 57). By the end of the 20th century, group work had become common within all grades in our schools. A report on teacher development by the National Center for Educational Statistics (Choi and Chen 1998: 45) found that, during the 1993–94 school year, 49 percent of teachers reported that they had received training in methods of cooperative learning wherein students work together in groups to solve a problem or produce a product.

As a high school teacher, I was frequently directed to avoid content-based lecturing in favor of group activities. In my education courses, particularly those courses concerned with classroom management skills, my professors stressed the advantages of allowing groups of students to work independently on projects (Cooper 1999: 267–307). As part of my state certification requirements, I had to submit videotaped lessons to the New York State Department of Education. The teacher who supervised the production of these videotapes informed me that, unless at least one-third of each lesson contained group activities, my application would likely be rejected.

In my performance reviews, school administrators told me to minimize time spent lecturing in favor of allowing students to work independently in groups. Administrators urged me to be “the guide on the side, not the sage on the stage.” In department meetings, my colleagues frequently praised a variation of the Socratic method they used known as Socratic Circles, which effectively allow students to control the direction and the flow of knowledge in the classroom.

Despite rosy descriptions of shifting the focus of instruction from the teacher to the student, I found that this group approach to instruction yielded discouraging results. Many students became free riders in these groups and contributed nothing, causing those students who worked on the group assignment to become resentful. I had to spend a great deal of time keeping students on task and preventing these group activities from becoming social get-togethers. In general, the quality of student work was poor. When students work together in groups, they often get bogged down with superficial issues and rarely think in fundamental terms. Used judiciously,
carefully guided group work can be effective; but, overall, students cannot direct the course of their own instruction.

This type of instruction when combined with the effects of non-hierarchical curricula instilled conformity in many of my students. Students frequently saw no need to justify their opinions on any basis other than their emotions, or they uncritically accepted the group consensus. This behavior is understandable. Many students, for example, do not have a chronological, hierarchical grasp of historical facts and yet are asked to develop recommendations regarding issues such as income inequality, nuclear nonproliferation, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. How can we expect these students, who have hardly any knowledge of what men and women have actually done, to make well-reasoned recommendations regarding what men and women should do?

Students who do not think independently are defenseless against a subtle, but growing, form of propaganda within our schools. In many introductory economics courses, teachers coach students with no previous knowledge of financial markets or economic principles to replicate complex explanations of how the Federal Reserve’s purchase and sale of securities affect interest rates, foreign exchange rates, the levels of consumption and investment, and ultimately nominal and real GDP. These financially nascent students must also provide critiques of rarefied and controversial topics such as the central positions advanced by the Keynesians and Monetarists. Widely used texts for these courses focus on the mechanical aspects of these topics, with only a cursory examination of fundamental economic principles (Clayton 1995, Baumol and Blinder 2005, Carbaugh 2008). By compressing so much sophisticated information into a high school course, these courses frequently violate the principle of hierarchy. Consequently, many students simply memorize this material, and they do not question it. The often unstated premise in these courses and their supporting textbooks is that, without the intervention of the Federal Reserve and the fiscal policies of the federal government, our economy would lurch from crisis to crisis. Because many students equate memorization with comprehension, they accept this premise as true. Similarly, students learn about problems caused by monopolies, oligopolies, and monopsonies, with the unstated premise that these market structures are the unavoidable consequences of an unregulated economy. Students accept this premise as well. Social studies departments portray these courses as unbiased, on the
grounds that the textbooks and syllabi of these courses merely reflect the economic reality of our mixed economy. Having taught these courses for several years, I can testify that the consistent message students receive is that, without the extensive and often drastic intervention of government policymakers and regulators, our economy would collapse.

Students receive similar messages in their other social studies courses. The authors of American history textbooks, from texts used in the 1960s (Planer and Neff 1962) to texts used currently (Brinkley 2007), have portrayed the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a period of escalating class conflict during which politicians had to protect the working classes from the predatory behavior of industrialists. Historian Larry Schweikart (2008) examined several of the most widely used American history textbooks in upper-level high school and introductory college courses and found evidence of an increasing bias in favor of a progressive, left-liberal interpretation of our past. He found that these texts maintain that the Great Depression was caused by the tax cuts and unfettered flow of capital of the late 1920s, that FDR’s New Deal and LBJ’s Great Society were major advances in American society, and that Northern capitalist greed—not slavery—drove the civil war. These textbooks also claim that our transcontinental railroads would never have been built without the intervention of the government, and that it was the lack of government intervention that caused the declines in the U.S. automobile and steel industries.

In literature courses, teachers often blame the avarice of Britain’s industrialists for the miserable social conditions described by Charles Dickens and other writers, and claim that these conditions ended only when legislators enacted child labor laws and other social legislation. In science courses, teachers claim that federal agencies must work constantly to prevent industrialists from destroying our environment. Since 2007, every student I taught had seen An Inconvenient Truth in at least one of his science courses, but few students were aware that there are scientists who dispute the claims made in this documentary. I do not know how many other school districts have shown their students An Inconvenient Truth, but Schweikart points out that students are exposed to other sources, including American history textbooks, that imply that man-made global warming is real and caused primarily by insufficiently regulated American industries. Even some mathematics textbooks now exhibit an ideological
point of view. In his textbook *Precalculus*, for example, Robert Blitzer (2001: 362–63) illustrates how exponential functions can be used to calculate how rapidly the world’s population would grow without some type of presumed intervention to prevent the exhaustion of our global resources.

The theme that runs through these lessons, and a myriad of other lessons, is the standard progressive conceit: we cannot trust private individuals to act on their own. Instead, we need government experts to guide our choices, and politicians to protect us from the baleful consequences of capitalism. Isabel Paterson (1943: 258) warned that “every politically controlled educational system will inculcate the doctrine of state supremacy sooner or later . . . Once that doctrine has been accepted, it becomes an almost superhuman task to break the stranglehold of the political power over the life of the citizen.” Over the 75 years since Paterson issued her warning, the movement of our public schools in this direction has been unmistakable.

Ethical Expedience

John Dewey rejected the idea of moral absolutes. According to Dewey (1929: 222), “A moral law, like a law in physics, is not something to swear by and stick to at all hazard.” Instead, to Dewey and his progressive followers, efficacy is the primary criterion of ethical validity. Moral rules should be treated “as intellectual instruments to be tested and confirmed—and altered—through consequences effected by acting upon them” (Dewey 1929: 221). This progressive emphasis on efficacy, as opposed to strict adherence to rules, has been captured in a four word slogan that has echoed throughout our schools for more than half a century: “There are no absolutes.”

It is impossible to make a blanket statement regarding how much the environment of our schools has changed because of Dewey’s emphasis on efficacy. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Dewey (1915: 19) himself estimated that only 1 percent of the American population attended college and only 5 percent entered high school. The dramatic increase in school attendance during the 20th century, along with waves of immigration, exerted profound effects upon the conditions in our schools. Regardless of the sources of these changes, however, our schools have experienced a definite movement away from rigorously enforced codes of conduct and academic standards.
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Because rules are absolute—either you make it to class by the bell or you do not—formerly strict, traditional codes of conduct in many schools have become guidelines, open to continuous modification and interpretation. I am personally aware of administrators who, because it would be inefficacious to “rock the boat,” have chosen not to deal with violations of conduct codes properly in situations ranging from insubordination, inappropriate dress, and cell phone usage, to systematic cheating and assault. Additionally, students know that they can reduce or overturn almost any punishment for any infraction of school policy if they can persuade their parents or guardians to lodge a formal protest against it. A 2004 survey (Public Agenda 2004: 4) found that 55 percent of teachers believe that school districts’ backing down when confronted by assertive parents causes discipline problems in their classrooms.

Absolute academic standards, likewise, have often disappeared. Grade inflation has been chronic, and school systems have adopted policies such as social promotion, whereby grade advancement is determined by a student’s age rather than his intellectual development. Because it takes a lot more time to fail a student than to give him a marginally passing grade, and because high failure rates spell trouble for school districts, teachers and administrators sometimes find it expedient to avoid adhering strictly to grading criteria. In states where students are required to pass standardized examinations to advance academically, teachers routinely have been able to find extra points for failing students. This practice became so widespread that the New York State Department of Education had to introduce elaborate grading procedures for its state Regents Examinations so that teachers could no longer change any student’s examination grade once it was computed. School district administrators frequently fail to enforce attendance policies, and teachers have even been ordered by their school board to overlook plagiarism policies (Wilgoren 2002).

Many teachers who embrace multicultural education have communicated moral relativism explicitly in the classroom. Psychologists Blaine Fowers and Frank Richardson (1996: 609) define multiculturalism as “a social-intellectual movement that promotes the value of diversity as a core principle and insists that all cultural groups be treated with respect and as equals.” Teachers who engage in multicultural education often do so because they sincerely believe either that cultures cannot be evaluated according to any absolute, objective
criteria, or that it is wrong to do so. Others, however, may simply find it expedient to retreat to multiculturalism to avoid thorny issues related to criticizing other cultures. Either way, if all cultural groups are to be treated as equals, then the only moral conclusion students are likely to reach in these classes is “you must not judge.”

It is difficult to assess the moral caliber of youth, and even more difficult to ascribe specific moral characteristics to the influence of schooling. Individuals are free to choose their own actions; and other factors, such as family life and religious affiliation, exert powerful influences upon the development of an individual’s character. Despite these disclaimers, it is hard to imagine that students have not been affected by the progressive influence on the moral environment of our schools. Before progressive ideas became influential, many traditional schools emphasized to their students that it is right for students to base their actions on moral principles; the schools backed up this emphasis with strictly enforced codes of conduct. This situation, however, was not what I encountered when I taught. Because teachers and administrators, both explicitly and by their actions, had assured students that “there are no absolutes,” many students regarded issues of right and wrong as mostly irrelevant. If the likelihood of getting caught for a tempting infraction of school policy was high and the penalty was great enough, students did not break the rules. Otherwise, they did. If I left a classroom where I was proctoring an examination, students immediately began to cheat. If calculators, cell phones or other valuable items were left unattended, students were likely to steal them. This unprincipled behavior is consistent with progressive educators’ ethical pragmatism. If there are no moral absolutes, then ethics is a matter of expediency.

Conclusion

In Educational Wastelands, published in 1953, Arthur E. Bestor (1953) accused progressive educators of abdicating the responsibility to teach the “power to think.” That same year, Robert M. Hutchins (1953), in The Conflict in Education in a Democratic Society, criticized what he referred to as progressive educators’ “doctrine of adjustment,” which prized conformity and devalued independent thought. Albert Lynd (1953: 36), in Quackery in the Public Schools, also published in 1953, characterized the methods of teacher training and certification, wherein teachers are taught and certified only by
teachers who are themselves steeped in progressive educational theory, as “one of the neatest bureaucratic machines created by any professional group in any country anywhere.” The specific conditions that these authors criticized have changed but, 65 years later, the underlying problems that they identified continue to plague our educational system.

The foregoing leads to the following question: Is the central problem in our schools the influence of progressive educational ideas, or is it the patchwork of state education monopolies that has rendered our schools impervious to fundamental reform? These well-coordinated monopolies have suppressed the marketplace for new ideas in education, and they have pitted the rent-seeking behavior of teacher unions against the well-being of our children.

I believe that our current system of state education monopolies is the biggest obstacle we face to achieving genuine educational reform. In the Winter 2016 edition of the Cato Journal, Benjamin Scafidi (2016: 134–38) discussed a proposal offered by economist Richard Vedder that may overcome some of the resistance to dismantling these monopolies. Vedder (2000) proposed using “Employee Stock Ownership Plans” to convert individual public schools into autonomous, employee-owned enterprises. These schools would have control over the curricula, teaching methods, and conduct codes that they adopt. The tuition charged by these schools would be covered by voucher payments, but Vedder’s proposal does allow for parents to bid up the price of tuition by adding their own funds to the amount of tuition they offer to pay. Although students from low-income families and special needs students may have to receive additional resources, a trial program could be structured to identify and address problems that these groups of students encounter. Because teachers and other stakeholders would become owners of these schools, their resistance to ending state control of education may be reduced.

Vedder’s approach provides the means to address all the issues I have identified above. Most critically, it would end the states’ monopolies of educational policies. If parents still want their children to receive an education based upon progressive principles, they would be free to send their children to a progressive school. In fact, Vedder speculated that most schools would not initially offer programs of instruction that were radically different from the those in place currently. Over time, I believe this would change. Private schools need
the approval of state departments of education to confer diplomas recognized by the state. If the need for this approval was eliminated, I believe that many schools would be willing to explore innovative educational approaches. This could lead to a dramatic improvement in the quality of American schools.

The alternative to trying Vedder’s approach, or a similar approach, is to continue the pitched battles that proponents of school choice are engaged in currently with teacher unions and the politicians that these unions support. Unfortunately, these battles will leave our counterproductive educational policies mostly untouched.

When I was a teacher in a government-run school, I witnessed firsthand the consequences of the educational policies discussed in this article. If we wish to realize the schools that our children deserve, we need to jettison these educational policies along with the state monopolies that have preserved them.

Our children deserve schools that train them in the proper development and use of concepts; that facts and principles cannot be evaded with impunity; and that their own unaided reason, rather than any majority’s opinion or anyone’s emotional reaction, is the only means whereby they can discover the truth. And our children deserve schools that demonstrate that there are objective moral values whose realization can lead to a successful, productive, and happy life.

References


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