

Straight Talk on Public Education – Summary, Part 2*

Byron Schlomach

“The very fact that the education system succeeds to the degree that it does is a testament to the good will and work ethic, mostly, of teachers.”

- *Straight Talk on Public Education*

A Brief History of America’s Education System

The current government-monopolized public education system is *not* “as American as apple pie.” At its root, it is a German invention.

The Puritans and Jefferson (The First 200 Years)

- In 1647, Massachusetts law created an expectation that children would be taught to read, but that instruction did not have to occur in schools.
- The education model Jefferson proposed is most akin to a fully “charterized” school system with parent-governed schools, but with parents substantially funding them.
- By 1795, the literacy rate among white New England men was 90 percent, and nearly 100 percent in New England cities.
- The degree to which Americans are literate today cannot be attributed to the existence of a centralized public education system.

Horace Mann (The Next 80 Years)

- The roots of the current U.S. education system can be traced to Prussia, the leading state of Germany.
- One of its primary creators, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, said “If you want to influence a person, you must do more

than merely talk to him; you must fashion him, and fashion him in such a way that he simply cannot will otherwise than what you wish him to will.”

- The Prussian education system’s primary exponent in the U.S. was Horace Mann of Massachusetts, considered the father of American public schooling.
- Mann’s interest in the Prussian system was for its organizational advantages.
- Mann’s message played well at a time of widespread Protestant angst regarding Catholic immigration.
- The system Mann promoted is basically what we have today, a top-down system of school districts and state-level authorities exercising central control.

John Dewey’s Influence (The 20th Century and On)

- John Dewey turned the education system toward its Prussian roots of molding society.
- Dewey’s views continue to impact public education today, with his experiential learning philosophy.
- As Thomas Sowell has put it, “Whatever the intentions of John Dewey or other pioneers of Progressive education philosophy, its practical consequences have been a steady retreat from the daunting task of making mass education a serious attempt to raise American school children to a standard, rather than bringing the standard down to them.”

Byron Schlomach is Director of the 1889 Institute.

- The strangest aspect of Dewey's influence on American public education is his advocacy for the whole-word reading instruction method.
- Dewey's philosophy of education openly de-emphasized early literacy.
- Dewey would have known of concerns regarding his preferred reading instruction method's lack of efficacy.

Modern Public Education in the U.S. – The Last 60 Years

- The story of public education has been one of constant cycling through re-packaged pedagogical fads, mission creep, and frustrated efforts at reform, all accompanied by spending increases.
- While public education, given the price tag, does not do its one core function well, its concentrated numbers of employees, with their family members and supporters, wield political power very well.
- The supposed greater efficiencies from consolidating school districts have never materialized.
- Because of federal money, the federal government has been able to impose its will on states.
- Fads include: Marzano's taxonomy, self-esteem, bilingual/bicultural education, early childhood education, technological gadgetry for its own sake, shifts in mathematical pedagogy, and diversity.
- Schools have become centers of social experimentation, social work, community health, entertainment, child care, transportation, and nutrition.
- The focus of schools is too often on something other than the one very complicated thing schools are supposed to achieve.
- Early accountability reformers merely wanted what might be called "performance transparency."
- The education establishment fought accountability every step of the way.
- The use of criterion-referenced accountability exams has encouraged "teaching to the test" rather than teaching curricula in full.
- The education establishment responded to the accountability movement by gaming the system from top to bottom, and they irked parents.
- The fundamental problem with the accountability movement, not foreseen by reformers but foreseeable nonetheless, was that reformers would never control the system.
- In Oklahoma, funding equity became an issue in the 1970s.
- Though their assumptions fail, "adequacy" advocates persist.

Our Current Education System

- John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, in their Brookings study from 1990, *Politics, Markets and America's Schools*, demonstrated that the public education system cannot improve itself due to the incentives inherent within it.
- The U.S. public education system is top-down wherein authorities in school district central offices, state capitals, and Washington D.C. stick their noses into individual classrooms about whose students and teachers they know little or nothing.
- The system has been shamed, prodded, threatened, begged, encouraged, asked, sued, pandered to, and bribed.
- Teachers blame their woes on state legislatures, a group of people responsible for little more than very general directives and providing money.
- The fact that the education system succeeds to the degree that it does is a testament to the good will and work ethic of teachers.

The Only Solution: Education Choice

- Educational choice reduces segregation, does not harm existing public schools, and has positive impacts on student civic engagement.
- Good schools are populated by teachers who are intellectually curious, passionate about their subjects, and who love kids.
- School Choice gives parents the ability to choose good schools with good teachers.
- Poor parents get a bad rap. While it's true that some parents will never be good, caring parents, many would step up were they to have options.
- Whether through charter schools, education savings accounts, tax credit scholarships, or voucher scholarships, the key to improving the educations of Oklahoma's children is school choice.