Our Prussian School System

by John Taylor Gatto

The government began to compel us all to send our children to school in 1852 in Massachusetts, and from that state the compulsion spread south, west, and north. But in 1818, 34 years before the first compulsory school laws, Noah Webster estimated that over 5 million copies of his Spelling Book had been sold in a country with a population of less than 20 million. And every purchase decision was made freely, by an individual or a family; there were no federal, state, or city tabs on which to run bulk purchases. Each decision was made privately, and in each case somebody forked over some cash to buy a book. That would seem to suggest that most people don’t have to be compelled to learn; they do it on their own because they want to.

Between 1813 and 1823 Walter Scott sold 5 million copies of his novels in the United States. That would be about equal to 60 million books today. James Fenimore Cooper’s books, including The Last of the Mohicans, also sold in the millions. As many modern readers will attest, neither author’s books are easy reading.

In 1812 Pierre Du Pont de Nemours published Education in the United States, in which he expressed his amazement at the phenomenal literacy he saw. Forty years before passage of our first compulsory school laws, Du Pont said that fewer than four of every thousand people in the new nation could not read and do numbers well. He saw a world in which nearly every child was trained in argumentation (the old-fashioned term for “critical thinking”). Two decades later a French aristocrat named Alexis de Tocqueville wrote Democracy in America, in which he called us the best educated people in history.

It appears that, before 1852, the American people were educating themselves quite well. They made their own educational decisions, using, inventing, or substituting for schooling—as Ben Franklin did—as they best saw fit. Our early catch-as-catch-can, entrepreneurial form of instruction offered abundant choices of useful ways to grow up, useful ways to read, write, and think—historically, schooling was about literacy, and that is why it succeeded. Literacy isn’t very difficult for children to achieve when they perceive that the adults about them think that it’s important.

Kids Like to Learn

The secret to our amazing early accomplishment was that reading, writing, and numbers are very easy to learn—in spite of what we hear today from the reading, writing, and numbers establishments.

A few private businesses still know that secret and manage to instill literacy correctly—at a fraction of the cost of public schools. I want to caution you that the two places I’ll cite use radically different theories, but the outcome in both is very impressive. In Philadelphia the Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential has been teaching babies to read, and teaching mothers to teach their babies to read, since shortly after World War II. What is really diabolical is that the kids have a great deal of fun learning, study sessions only last a few minutes, and the babies learn foreign languages—and the violin, too. You might want to ask your local school superintendent why you haven’t heard of that business.

Place number two is the beautiful Sudbury Valley School, 20 miles east of Boston, in the old Nathaniel Bowditch cottage, which looks suspiciously like a mansion to 20th-century eyes, a place ringed by handsome outbuildings, a private lake, woods, and acres and acres of magnificent grounds. Sudbury is a private school, of course, with a tuition of $3,500 a year—about 63 percent cheaper than a seat in a New York City public school.

Sudbury teaches a lot of things, but two things it doesn’t teach anybody—and its students range in age from 4 to 18—are reading and numbers. Kids learn reading and calculation at Sudbury at many different ages (though never as babies); when they are ready to learn, they teach themselves. Every kid who has spent any time at the school has learned to read and compute; about two-thirds of them go on to college without ever taking a standardized test or getting a report card; and the school has never seen a case of dyslexia. The faculty doesn’t believe such a condition exists except in a few physically damaged kids and the fevered imaginations of compulsory-school reading specialists.

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They don't teach reading, yet all the kids eventually learn to read and even to like it. That poses a frustrating puzzle for many observers, but no more frustrating than trying to explain how Thomas Paine's Common Sense sold 150,000 copies in 1776 to a nation of 3 million people, about 25 percent of whom were slaves.

One final more or less modern example of how easy it is to learn to read well—myself. In 1941, when I went to first grade in Swissvale, Pennsylvania, a borough of Pittsburgh, at the age of five, I could read easily and well. For the first 200 years of our history, most schools wouldn't accept children who couldn't read and count, so they must have learned those skills where I did—at home.

The miracle woman who taught me to read was Frances "Bootie" Zimmer, who had graduated from Monongahela High School in 1929. There wasn't enough money to send Bootie to college, but nobody despaired about that in those days because the country seemed to run very well without college graduates.

Did Bootie know some secret method of teaching that could have made her a fortune if she had turned professional? I don't think so. What she knew was how to hold me in her lap and read to me while she ran her finger under the words. From the time I was two years old, she read me every day from increasingly difficult books, none of which seemed hard because I was having so much fun. She read real fairy tales, real history books and newspaper stories, and real grown-up works including some tales from The Decameron. What she didn't read were scientific readers of any sort, the books with 364-word sanitized vocabularies and a lot of pictures.

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We are confronted with a great mystery: We had a perfectly literate country before the advent of government schooling in 1832. What on earth has happened since? Why aren't we a literate society in the present well-schooled era?

When we consider the course 20th-century government schooling has deliberately taken, it is clear that we are in the presence of no simple mistake in engineering but in that of a powerful ideological agenda, one so passionately and grimly supported by its proponents that we might almost view it as a religion. A brief tour through history is essential to understanding the present situation. Otherwise you might continue to think that some tinkering—or God forbid, some more money—will cure the disease of bad schooling.

How We Got into the Present Mess

The structure of 20th-century American schooling is modeled on a system that was introduced in Prussia after Napoleon's amateur soldiers beat the professional soldiers of Prussia in the battle of Jena in 1806. (When your business is selling soldiers, losing a battle like that is serious.) Almost immediately afterwards the philosopher Johann Fichte delivered his famous Address to the German Nation, in which he told the Prussian people that the nation would have to be shaped up through a new utopian institution of forced schooling in which everyone would learn to take orders.

Modern forced schooling started in Prussia in 1819 with a clear vision of what centralized schools could deliver:

1. Obedient soldiers for the army,
2. Obedient workers for the mines,
3. Subservient civil servants for government,
4. Subservient clerks for industry, and
5. Citizens who thought alike about major issues.

The Prussian system was intended to create an artificial national consensus on matters that had been worked out in advance by leading German families and the heads of institutions.

A small number of very passionate American ideological leaders visited Prussia in the first half of the 19th century; fell in love with the order, obedience, and efficiency of its educational system; and campaigned relentlessly thereafter to bring the Prussian vision to these shores. Prussia's ultimate goal was to unify Germany; the Americans' was to mold hordes of immigrant Catholics to a national consensus based on a northern European cultural model. To do that, children would have to be removed from their parents and from inappropriate cultural influences.

So, at the behest of Horace Mann and other leading citizens, we adopted the Prussian schooling system. During the first 50 years of our new school system, the Prussian purpose—to create a form of state socialism—gradually forced out the traditional American purpose—to prepare the individual to be self-reliant.

The Prussian purpose was collective: the American purpose, as it had come down through history, was singular. In Prussia the purpose of the Volksschulen, which educated 92 percent of the chil
The Prussian Educational Method

Prussia concocted an educational method based on complex fragmentation to ensure that the products of its schools would fit the grand social design. That method divided whole ideas into school subjects and shortened class periods so that self-motivation to learn would be muted by ceaseless interruptions. The whole system was built on the premise that isolation from first-hand information and fragmentation of the abstract information presented by teachers would result in obedient and subordinate graduates, properly respectful of arbitrary orders. Those thus schooled would be unable to interfere with policymakers because, while they could still complain, they could not manage sustained or comprehensive thought. Well-schooled children cannot think critically, cannot argue effectively.

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vehicle of schooling during the first 40 years or so of the new government monopoly. The one-room school vested too much responsibility in the children themselves and thereby preserved too much of the old self-reliant, neighborly way of doing things.

The second important idea of the Prussian method was that extreme fragmentation of thinking into subjects, fixed time periods, sequences, externally imposed questioning, units, and the like would simplify the problems of leadership. Thoughts broken into fragments could be managed by a poorly trained, poorly paid teaching force; could be memorized even by a moron who made the effort; lent themselves to the appearance of precision in testing; and delivered beautiful distribution curves of "achievement."

The third idea adopted from the Prussians was that the government is the true parent of children, the state is sovereign over the family. You can see that philosophy at work in court decisions that rule that parents need not be told when schools dispense condoms to their children, or consulted when their daughters seek abortions.

By 1889, a little over 100 years ago, the crop was ready for harvest; in that year U.S. Commissioner of Education William Torrey Harris assured railroad magnate Collins Huntington that American schools were scientifically designed to prevent "overeducation." The average American would be content with his humble role in life, said the commissioner, because he would not be tempted to think about any other role. My guess is that Harris meant he would not be able to think about any other role.

In 1896 John Dewey said that independent, self-reliant people would be a counterproductive anachronism in the collective society of the future. In modern society, said Dewey, people would be defined by their associations—the groups to which they belonged—not by their own individual accomplishments. In such a world people who read too well or too early are dangerous because they become privately empowered; they know too much and know how to find out what they don't know by themselves, without consulting experts.

Dewey said that the great mistake of traditional pedagogy had been to make reading and writing constitute the bulk of early schoolwork. He advocated that the phonics method of teaching reading be abandoned and replaced by the whole-word method, not because the latter was more efficient (he admitted it was less efficient), but because reading hard books produces independent thinkers, thinkers who cannot be socialized very easily. By socialized Dewey meant conditioned to a program of social objectives administered by the best social thinkers in government. That was a giant step on the road to state socialism, and it was a vision radically disconnected from America's past, its historic hopes and dreams.

Somewhere around the turn of the 20th century, making people dumb for their own good became the point of our national exercise in forced schooling. If you find that hard to believe,
use the evidence of your own eyes and ears to confirm it. Do you think you can find a better way to teach? Of course you can, but you can't find a better way to teach obedience. Throughout the 19th century a small band of very influential people, substantially financed by money and ideas from the Rockefeller foundations and the Carnegie foundations, introduced socialism into American education. They had determined privately that that was the best course for American democracy, and with little wasted motion—and no public discussion—they pointed our nation down the statist road.

Bertrand Russell once observed that American schooling was among the most radical experiments in human history that America was deliberately denying its children the tools of critical thinking. When you want to teach children to think you begin by treating them seriously when they are little, giving them responsibilities, talking to them candidly, providing privacy and solitude for them, making them readers and thinkers of significant thoughts from the beginning. You keep the games and songs and pretty colors in balance with the soberer purpose—teaching them to think. There is no evidence that teaching children to think has been a state purpose since the advent of compulsory schooling.

Choice and Competition in Education

The movement toward socialism is not a historical curiosity but a powerful dynamic force in the world around us. It is fighting for its life against forces that would, through vouchers or tax credits, deprive it of its financial lifeblood, and it has countered that threat with a demand for even more control over our children's lives, and even more money to pay for the extended school day and year such control would require. I move with interest the growth of day care in the United States and the repeated calls to extend school downward to include four-year-olds. When Frederick Froebel, the inventor of kindergarten in 19th-century Germany, fashioned his idea, he did not have a garden for children in mind but a metaphor of teachers as gardeners and children as vegetables. Kindergarten was created to be, and was quietly celebrated as, a way to break the influence of mothers on their children once and for all.

A movement as visibly destructive to individuality, family, and community as government-system schooling has been might be expected to collapse under its dismal record and increasingly aggressive shake downs of the taxpayer, but that has not happened. The explanation is largely found in the transformation of schooling from a simple service to families and towns to an enormous, centralized bureaucratic enterprise.

Although our public school system has had a markedly adverse effect on people, and on our democratic traditions, it has made schools the single largest employer in the United States, and the largest grantee of contracts after the Defense Department. Both of those low-visibility phenomena provide monopoly schooling with powerful political friends, publicists, advocates, and other useful allies who are apparently outside the loop until an analysis map of special interests is drawn. That explains in large part why no amount of failure ever changes things in schools, or changes them for very long. School people are in a position to outlast any storm and to keep short-attention public scrutiny thoroughly confused. A glance at the short history of American public schools reveals a pattern marked by intervals of public outrage followed by enlargement of the monopoly in every case. The net result of public alarm has been to diminish worthwhile alternatives—surely the richest of all the ironies and a cosmic reversal testifying to the secret systems of nourishment available to schooling exactly as it is.

After nearly 30 years spent inside a number of public schools, some considered good and some bad, I feel certain that management cannot clean its own house. The structure is too brilliantly designed to allow that; it relentlessly marginalizes all significant change or degrades it, and no watchdog mechanism exists, nor can exist, to effectively combat that marginalization. Teaching that is attuned to the way children learn involves a dynamic too complicated to bureaucratize. The inability to see that simple truth, or to act upon it in a monopoly situation, dooms all in-system reform to trivialization.

There are no incentives for the "owners" of the structure to reform it, nor can there be without outside competition. Indeed, I'm afraid that competition too tightly monitored from a central point—as it would be in a national test situation, which would of necessity involve wildly incorrect assumptions about learning—will not touch the existing monolith. What is needed for several decades is the kind of wildly swinging free market we had at the beginning of our national history. It cannot be overemphasized that no body of theory exists to accurately define the way children learn, or what learning is of most worth. By pretend ing the existence of such theory we have cut ourselves off from the information and innovation that only a real market can provide. Fortunately, our national situation has been so favorable, the United States has been so dominant through most of its history, that the material margin of error has been vast.

But the future is not so clear. Perhaps materially a case can be made that our position of advantage is too great at this point to squander, but in the arena of emotional capital, of simple satisfaction with life and joy in living, our relative position has been slipping for many years. That holds true whether we compare ourselves with certain other nations or with standards we set for our own lives based on our values and traditions. Violence, narcotic addiction, divorce, alcoholism, and loneliness are all tangible measures of poverty in education. Surely schools, as the institutions monopolizing the daytime of childhood, can be called to account. In a democracy the final judges are not the experts but the people.

And the courtroom of the people is the free market. Over 50 years ago my mother, Bootie Zimmer, chose to teach me to read; she had no degrees, no government salary, no encouragement, yet her nonexpert choice has given me a wonderful and interesting life. I have never been a public charge. Trust the people, give them choices, and the school nightmare will vanish in a generation.