

# Building a New Vision of “Public Education”

Daniel Grego

**When we really appreciate the fact that every child is unique, we realize that schools are only *one* of the many diverse tools available to educate our children.**

*I have never let my schooling interfere with my education. (Mark Twain)*

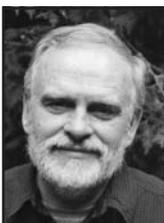
The schooling establishment has become a major threat to education. This is especially true when it comes to secondary education. Some critics argue all we have created is the world’s most expensive baby-sitting service.<sup>1</sup> Others, who view schooling as less innocuous, describe it as a gigantic machine that sorts the strong from the weak, the more intelligent from the less gifted (Spring 1976). This machine allows us to separate those who will end up running the banks and insurance companies from the those who will mop the floors after all the important people have gone home.

In many large, urban school districts, for every ten bright, curious, enthusiastic children who enter the System, only five emerge with high school credentials. Many of those who do graduate leave with their heads asleep. Before and just after World War II, the labor market was able to absorb most of the dropouts, but the economy has changed and schools have not. Adolescents still leave in droves. Why is that?

Schooling fundamentalists and their apologists blame the students. While it is considered offensive and racist to suggest students fail in school because they are on the wrong end of “the Bell Curve,” it is perfectly acceptable among the schooling establishment to attribute school failure to the economic circumstances of the students and their families. There is a correlation between economic status and school success, but no one has demonstrated a *causal* relationship. If poverty *caused* school failure, no poor person would ever graduate.

A story from Greek mythology suggests another explanation for the dropout problem. There was a gi-

Note: Two additional background papers by the author are also available to subscribers online at [www.great-ideas.org/Encounter/GregoCall.pdf](http://www.great-ideas.org/Encounter/GregoCall.pdf) and [www.great-ideas.org/Encounter/GregoChanging.pdf](http://www.great-ideas.org/Encounter/GregoChanging.pdf)



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ant named Procrustes who made a habit of robbing travelers near Eleusis. He also insisted his victims sleep in an iron bed, which they had to fit exactly. Anyone too tall had his or her legs sawed off. Anyone too short was stretched on a contraption like a rack. Most high schools are Procrustean beds. Some students fit in and succeed. Many more, however, apparently do not appreciate having their legs sawed off.

Several years ago, a prominent politician, concerned about the large numbers failing in Milwaukee's high schools, asked a group of "at-risk" students, those most likely to quit school, why so many of their peers dropped out. There was a brief silence. Finally, one young man responded: "I think you're asking the wrong question. Given what high school is, the question you should ask is: Why anyone bothers to stay?" After further reflection, he added: "I guess some people just tolerate high school better than others."

Was this young man exaggerating? Are the students who survive high school just tolerating it? Consider the comments of social psychologist, Elliot Aronson (2000, 15), who studied American high school environments after the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado.

From my classroom research, I have found that the social atmosphere in most schools is competitive, cliquish, and exclusionary. The majority of teenagers I have interviewed agonize over the fact that there is a general atmosphere of taunting and rejection among their peers that makes the high school experience an unpleasant one. For many, it is worse than unpleasant — they describe it as a living hell....

Young people are forced to endure this unpleasantness because schools are temples of learning, right? Roger Schank (2000, xiii-xiv), the director of the Institute for the Learning Sciences at Northwestern University, does not think so.

From elementary school to college, educational systems drive the love of learning out of kids and replace it with the "skills" of following rules, working hard, and doing what is expected.... We all learn in a very specific way, and the method schools use is antithetical to this learning model.

Schank (2000, 21) goes on to say "Everyone knows that our schools don't work, though not everyone is willing to admit it."

Leon Botstein, the president of Bard College, is willing to admit it. In fact, he is rather blunt about it. "The American high school is obsolete," Botstein (1997, 79) writes,

It can no longer fulfill the expectations we legitimately place on it. It offers an inadequate solution to the problem of how best to motivate and educate American adolescents.

Bill Gates echoed this sentiment during his keynote address at the National Education Summit on High Schools held in Washington, D.C. on February 26, 2005. "America's high schools are obsolete," Gates declared. "By obsolete I mean that our high schools — even when they're working exactly as designed — cannot teach our kids what they need to know today."

It is time to admit that the System is obsolete. Many of the current proposals for "education reform" are merely calls for more of the same: more standardized testing, longer school days, longer school years. The American Federation of Teachers has even proposed extending high school an additional year. Some people apparently think the way to solve the dropout problem is to sharpen the saws and grease the gears of the rack. It is time to stop the insanity. If public education is going to improve, it must change.

### A New Vision Needed

We need a new vision of public education. For the new vision to emerge, we must understand, as the epigraph from Mark Twain makes clear, that "education" and "schooling" are not synonymous. So we need to define some terms.

*Education* is the process by which people become responsible mature members of their communities. Or put another way, *education* is the process by which a community points the learning of its members toward its conception of "the good." *Community* is a word that is often used without a precise definition. A *community* is a group of people who practice together the arts of living, suffering, and dying in a particular place. However, for communities to function well and remain healthy, they must be limited in

size. The concept is like a balloon: pump too much into it and it will burst.

The frequently invoked African proverb "It takes a village to raise a healthy child" speaks to the importance of communities as the proper context for the educational process. You will notice, however, the proverb does *not* say, "It takes a village to create a System to raise a healthy child."

Milan Kundera (1988, 162-1630) claims that one of the greatest ills facing the contemporary world is what he calls "the modernization of stupidity." In premodern times, stupidity implied ignorance, "a simple absence of knowledge, a defect correctable by education." In its modern form, stupidity is something else. It is "not ignorance but *the nonthought of received ideas*." Ironically, the field of education is as rife with this "nonthought" as any other. One example of modern stupidity is the proposition that systems can replace communities.

This is where we took a wrong turn. Somehow, we convinced ourselves that the division of labor used to manufacture pins or widgets most efficiently could be applied to education. So, in our approach to schooling, we tried to create what historian, David Tyack (1974), called *The One Best System* and inserted it between our communities (the villages) and education (the raising of our children). But children are not pins or widgets. Systems cannot substitute for communities. When learning is separated from the life of a community, education becomes impossible. If communities are falling apart or nonexistent, then education becomes impossible.

The myth that must be debunked, therefore, is that schools educate children. They do not. Communities do. Schools are only tools that communities can use as part of the educational process. The responsibility for education belongs to the entire "village."

This is not a new idea. It used to be plain common sense. In 1839, Orestes Brownson wrote in the *Boston Quarterly Review* that

Our children are educated in the streets, by the influence of their associates, in the fields and on the hillsides, by the influences of surrounding scenery and overshadowing skies ... by the love and gentleness, or wrath and fretfulness of parents, by the passions or affections they see manifested, the conversations to which they lis-

ten, and above all by the general pursuits, habits, and moral tone of the community.

When we clearly distinguish *education* from *schooling*, when we understand that schools are only *one* of the tools communities use in the educational process, we can begin to ask ourselves new questions: What are we trying to do? Are we using the right tools for the task? Do we have enough different kinds of tools to get the job done well? Does everyone have equal access to all the tools? Have we kept our tools within appropriate limits? Has any tool become counterproductive? Are different tools needed for different students?

Wendell Berry (2003, 184) recounts a conversation between a well-known, highly respected horse trainer and someone curious about his methods. "How do you train horses?" the latter asks. The former replies, "Which one do you have in mind?" If such a response makes sense for horses, then surely, given the complexity of human development, the answer to the question "How do you educate children?" must be "Which one do you have in mind?"

Instead of beginning with the pernicious abstraction of the average child and sorting students into the "gifted and talented" at one end of the Bell Curve and those in need of "special education" at the other, we need a vision of education predicated on the belief that every person is special and has unique gifts and talents. Since no two children are identical, there cannot be *one best way* to educate all of them. Our new vision must include enough diverse learning environments so all students can choose the ones in which they will flourish.

"Learning environments" is the right phrase. Children learn all the time and, as Brownson noted, in many different places. People do not need schools in order to learn as hundreds of thousands of homeschooled children demonstrate every year. Among the many tools that contribute to education are libraries, museums, science and nature centers, zoos, parks, fairs, carnivals, the media, the internet, travel, summer camps, and swimming, dance, and music lessons. Apprenticeships and internships are at least as effective learning tools as classrooms.

Just to be clear, schools are not buildings. *Schools* are intentional gatherings of people to promote certain types of learning. A building could house more

than one school and a particular school could meet in more than one building, or on a beach, or on a bus.

### **Principles of a New Vision of Public Education**

#### **All Children (and their Families) Are Part of "The Public"**

Adolescents who find large, comprehensive high schools intolerable and who drop out are still part of "the public." Children who attend private schools are still part of "the public." Families who decide not to subject their children to the System and whose children learn at home are still part of "the public." Keeping communities healthy and guiding young people on their way to responsible maturity are tasks for all of a community's members. We should dismantle the walls that are keeping us from working together.

#### **"Public Education" is Any Learning Opportunity Funded by Tax Revenues**

A young person who attends a seminary with support from a Pell grant is participating in "public education." A marine recruit learning to operate radar equipment is participating in "public education." Inner city adolescents engaging in "youth development" activities at a community-based organization are participating in "public education." A poor family using a voucher to send their children to a private school is participating in "public education."

The interests managing the System equate "public education" with an obsolete monoculture that, for too long, in most places has held a monopoly on public funds. These folks have spun any attempt to diversify educational opportunity as an attack on public education. This charge is nonsense. It would be like saying anyone advocating for anything other than a two-hand set shot was attacking basketball. Breaking up the monopoly will be absolutely necessary for a new vision of "public education" to emerge.

#### **The Entire Community Must Acknowledge Responsibility for the Educational Process**

For the entire community to contribute to the educational process, we need a diverse ecosystem, or what Paul Goodman called a "mixed economy," of learning environments. We should be educating all of our children using all of the tools at our disposal.

In Milwaukee, there are now various ways schools can be supported inside the traditional Milwaukee Public Schools district, in partnership with the district, and outside the district. Most of these new options must be considered "public schools" since they are either operated or authorized by public bodies: the school board, the city government, the state university system, and potentially the vocational/technical college. Even some private schools become part of "public education" when parents are able to access them with vouchers through the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (Grego 2011a).

Every step in the process of building this new vision of public education has been viciously opposed by teachers unions and their supporters. They tried to block the new vision in the state legislature, stall the new vision in the courts, and continually attempt to confuse people with misinformation. They have made one false or misleading claim after another. They have used their political clout to impose caps and other impediments to the open, dynamic, flexible new vision we need.

There is an irony in this opposition because there is nothing inherently "anti-union" about the new vision and it may even provide opportunities for unions to increase their influence (Grego 2011b).

An enormous amount of time, energy, and money has been consumed defending the new vision from these attacks. The resources employed, both to attack and to defend the new vision, could have been devoted to improving it, to helping it grow, and to ensuring that every family could take full advantage of the new options.

#### **Adequate Resources Should be Equitably Distributed to All Children**

Public education should not be structured to increase private privilege. This principle has had no greater champion than Jonathan Kozol, most notably in *Savage Inequalities* (1991). However, Kozol relegated to his endnotes the serious discrepancy that exists in how resources are distributed to schools depending on the size of the district in which they are located. Some schools, in suburban and rural areas, are systems unto themselves. Nearly all of their resources directly support students and teachers. In large urban districts, half, and in some cases more than half, of all

resources are siphoned off to maintain mammoth bureaucracies that add little benefit to the educational process. Given the potential of modern information technologies, we have to consider the possibility that school districts are now obsolete.

**All Families Must Have Equal Access to All of the Tools a Community Uses to Educate its Children and They Must be Able to Choose Among Them**

School choice has been demonized by some people who think of themselves as “progressives.” However, Herbert Gintis, who with Sam Bowles (1976) wrote *Schooling in Capitalist America*, is one leftist with impeccable credentials who has reconsidered his position on school choice. In his foreword to *The Emancipatory Promise of Charter Schools: Toward a Progressive Politics of School Choice*, Gintis (Rofes & Stulberg 2004, vii-viii) writes:

Everyone knew that school choice was a conservative plot to finance the private education of the well-to-do, to bleed the public schools of needed revenue, and to add one more roadblock against the struggle for social equality. Indeed, when I started writing about education in the 1970s, I shared this view. Not that I had ever really thought about the matter. I just knew that if Milton Friedman (the conservative University of Chicago economist) was for it, and if the teachers unions were against it, I must be against it, too.

Well, we were all very wrong.

Gintis is acknowledging he had succumbed to “modern stupidity” and also to what Wendell Berry (2003, 155) calls “the rules of political correctness”:

We must decide whether to deal with [an] issue according to the rules of political correctness or according to the rules of critical discourse. The enterprise of political correctness deals in the political merchandise of general categories, invoking judgment without trial, whereas critical discourse must try to deal intelligently with the fact that people who are wrong about one thing may be right about another.

Just because Milton Friedman is wrong about a number of issues does not mean he cannot be right about vouchers. In the end, Alan Wolfe’s (Viteritti 1999) comments about school choice seem irrefutable:

If middle class parents were unable to choose schools for their children, there would be no need for vouchers. But because they can, America, if it is to be a just society, has two alternatives: it can forbid the middle class to move to the suburbs or use private schools on the one hand, or it can allow poor and working-class parents school choice on the other. Since the former is impossible, the latter is inevitable.

It is time for people on the left to overcome “the nonthought of received ideas” and admit that giving poor families resources is a progressive public policy.

**Schools Must be Small Enough so that Every Student’s Gifts and Talents can be Recognized, Utilized, and Appreciated**

As E. F. Schumacher (1973) observed, there are inherent thresholds in the scale of any human activity that, when surpassed, produce effects that undermine, if not destroy, the ends the activity was designed to achieve. Limiting the size of schools is critical, especially for adolescents. Ted Sizer (2004), the founder of the Coalition of Essential Schools, has repeatedly asserted that to teach adolescents well, adults must know them well. Past a certain threshold, it is impossible for schools to foster the close, personal relationships that help adolescents make the transition to adulthood.

Schools must be small enough so that everybody can be a somebody and nobody is a nobody (cf. Fuller 2003). We have to stop telling our teenagers that our children are our future. They are here, right now. If adults do not ask adolescents to use their energy to better their communities, they will often use it in other, less desirable ways. When young people are *treated* as if they matter, they will begin to *act* as if they matter: a crucial step in the process of reaching responsible maturity.

**Schools Should be Held Accountable for the Outcomes They Achieve**

The folly of judging schools by their adherence to prescriptions should be apparent to everyone by

now. Traditional inner city public schools are staffed by teachers with the required licenses and credentials, are accredited by the recognized authorities, comply with all local, state, and federal regulations, and yet still fail more than half their students. Relying on prescriptions is a bureaucratic strategy to promote standardization, which ironically undermines attempts to reach high standards. Standardization is antithetical to the new vision of diverse options we need.

If schools meet in buildings, the buildings should be safe. All public funds should be appropriately spent and accounted for properly. Beyond that, we have to keep coming back to the question: What are we trying to do?

We need learning environments that help young people reach responsible maturity, that offer real opportunities for adolescents to apply their knowledge and employ their energies and talents in the service of their communities, and that open the doors to real choices so young adults can continue to study at the post-secondary level, or, having discovered their vocations, can make a good living. Measuring these outcomes will require a new set of standards, which will grow out of each community's struggle to realize "the good." Our goal should be (to paraphrase a line from John Holt) to ensure that all young people find their way to lives worth living and work worth doing.

When an entire community accepts responsibility for education and no child is left unknown, it may be possible to ensure no child will be left behind.

### Note

1. For example, James Howard Kunstler in *The Long Emergency* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005, 271) claims, "High school in our time amounts to little more than day care for virtual adults in which some learning might incidentally take place, much of it of dubious value."

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