

The Cause of Our Bad Schools

Terrence O. Moore

The leading cause of the failure of our public schools to teach children virtually *anything* in thirteen years—or over fifteen thousand hours spent in school—is not what most people think. It has nothing to do with funding. It is not the lack of “support” given to the schools. School failure would not be remedied by extending the school day or the school year. Making schools smaller would not make them better, nor would having the students wear uniforms, or even introducing school prayer or reviving the Pledge. Worse still, the near universal opinion that students in the suburbs go to “good schools” is pure illusion. Those students do moderately better on standardized tests (that are deliberately dumbed down by the school bureaucracy) because suburban parents either send their children to school already being able to read or “help” (i.e. teach) them to read while the children are in school. And though the curriculum in public schools is notoriously weak in many respects, that is still not the reason that thousands—no, millions—of graduates of so-called “good public schools” show up at college every year wholly ignorant of the basic outline of American history, having memorized no poem, being unable to recall the details of even one major work of literature, unable to do simple algebra problems or to balance chemical equations, devoid of an understanding of English grammar, and as often as not alien to the fundamentals of spelling. The reason is much more obvious, although no politician is willing to say it and few school reformers say it very loudly. The leading cause of school failure is the very people who are running the schools: the teachers.

The teachers are the cause of school decline for a very simple reason. They do not know anything. Before a person can *teach*, that person must first *know*. Teaching is by definition the imparting of knowledge on the part of those who have knowledge to those who do not have that knowledge. Otherwise, there would be no need for a teacher. But public school teachers today do not have knowledge. What is worse, they do not even think they have to know anything to become “good teachers.” If you confront them with the fact that they, just as their students, can tell you nothing about the first ten presidents of the United States, the use of the gerund, or the reasons the Puritans might want to slap a red A on Hester Prynne, they will blithely respond that it is not so important for them to know things (especially in the Information Age) as to know “how to know things.” This nonsensical remark was actually made to me by an education professor when I called her department to task for not teaching ed students anything. When it comes to knowledge, what should be the core of a teacher’s mission, today’s so-called teachers are agnostics—literally know-nothings. That is because they put no emphasis on the thing they dismiss cavalierly as “content.”

Such an upside-down world makes no sense to outsiders who assume that teachers must really want to teach children *something* but are confronted by too many social ills and a lack of funding and lack of “support” in the classroom. In reality, the whole system is designed so that teachers do not know anything, and the smarter and more knowing the teacher, the less he or she is welcomed into the ranks of the public schools. Knowledge is in fact kept from the public schools through the corrupt system known as credentialing or certification. The basic equation is this: No one gets to be a public-school teacher

without being certified. No one gets certified without going through one of the nation's education schools. Yet these education schools not only do *not* impart real knowledge of academic subjects; they are actively hostile to it.

It is too long a story to tell in such a short space. Anyone wishing to pursue the topic should consult Rita Kramer's *Ed School Follies* or read the first few chapters of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (especially 2 and 4). Suffice it to say that the Progressive ideas that school should be more about "socialization," and even social *engineering* than the old-fashioned practices of attaining mastery of academic subjects, are alive and well. "Content" is looked upon as a chore. Mickey Mouse projects and group work and extra credit for doing nothing in particular and bull sessions to no end, or just allowing students to "talk quietly" are the norm. These bad practices are acquired in ed school. Since the aim of education in the formula of John Dewey is the engineering of "society" rather than the imparting of knowledge, the ed schools are designed to show teachers in training how to dance around content and find "creative" ways to "cover" content rather than making plain the time-tested ways of teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic, to say nothing of Latin grammar or Constitutional history. Yet it is not simply that traditional methods of teaching are ignored. The ed schools are hostile to traditional teaching and learning, one might even say hostile to the human mind.

Consider history and geography. The old way of learning these subjects was first to learn the presidents and all the states and capitals *by heart*, and to do so at a fairly early age. The reason is simple: History occurs in a particular time and a particular place in the world. Before you can orient yourself in the past, you have to know *where* and *when* you are. In the U. S., presidential terms are our natural chronology, just as kings and queens are in the British past. The student who does not know who the presidents were and in what order they served cannot really make sense of the American past. The ed schools in America, though, malign memorizing the presidents or the states and capitals or any other piece of concrete knowledge as "mere rote learning." Mere rote learning is somehow inferior to the progressives' promise of really "getting in touch with" history (or getting away from history altogether by replacing it with "social studies"). But just think about what these so-called educators are doing. In maligning *memorizing*, they malign *memory* itself. The most powerful capacity the young mind has is in fact memory. If children did not use their memories, they could not acquire language as fast as they do or learn to find their way in a world that must appear at birth as utterly mysterious. Plainly, the hostility to memory on the part of the ed schools is either a fear or a loathing of knowledge itself. What progressive educators would rather do is have students develop "feelings" about "real-world" scenarios. Knowing the actual principles and personages that brought our world into being is of no interest to them. Quite the contrary, they regard concrete facts as obstacles to their training students in the proper feelings progressive teachers wish our children to have, feelings that just happen to correspond to the agenda of the progressive (liberal) state: feelings about the environment; about America's supposed racism, sexism, and unfeeling capitalism; and about the alleged failures and hypocrisy of the Founding Fathers. To put it bluntly, the nation's education schools regard knowledge of legitimate academic disciplines as at best an inconvenience and more often a hindrance to achieving their own highly questionable "social" goals.

While this may sound like a conspiracy theory to the uninitiated, once the observer of the public schools opens himself to this view everything seems to fall into place. Indeed, one's own "education" in public schools may begin to make sense. Why are elementary schools essentially captive markets for the crayon and glue factories? What important facts can you remember from elementary school? Why are teenagers unable to tell their parents what they learned in school that day but quite able to go into great detail about who is dating whom or what so-and-so wore? Is that just the way with teenagers? Why are students of all grades so fervently convinced that we are "killing the planet" while they cannot actually name in order all the planets of our solar system or explain the basic facts of meteorology (something every farmer used to know from reading almanacs)? Why can they tell you that Jefferson was a hypocrite because he wrote about equality and yet had slaves when they cannot quote a line from the Declaration or explain ideas such as liberty or happiness or self-evident truths? Are students (i.e. young human beings who possess memory and reason) really so uneducable? And why do public school teachers complain incessantly about measures taken to make them accountable for teaching actual knowledge and dismiss all such efforts as "teaching to the test"? What did they imagine they were teaching to beforehand if not to "the test"—or some test? Has not the entire history of education before the mid-twentieth century been one long effort at teaching to the test? Do not law schools teach to the test? Would you want to be operated on by a surgeon who had gone to a medical school in the progressive mode, that is, one that did not teach anatomy per se but rather how doctors should *feel* about the human body? The only conclusion that we can come to is that those who claim to be our children's *certified teachers* are the least qualified people in the country to be in charge of the classrooms.

That the education schools are at best Mickey Mouse and at worst actually hostile to human learning is no secret. Any sensible person who has genuinely wanted to become a teacher of young people has done one of two things: put up with four years of this awful nonsense in order to get the required certification (usually to find that the whole school system is plagued by this silly and harmful ideology) or decided to do the easier and more sensible thing: teach in a private school. When have we ever heard private schools in the nation complaining about the great dearth of teachers (the basis for every attempt to raise teacher salaries)? Private schools can do something the public schools cannot do: hire the best liberal arts and sciences majors (i.e. those who truly love learning) straight out of the best colleges in the nation. In fact, private schools are hardly restricted to inexperienced, recent graduates. The best private schools regularly hire teachers with master's degrees and Ph.D.'s. An enterprising headmaster can acquire a faculty that rivals many colleges. I know. I did just that while principal of a classical charter school in Colorado, one of the few states in which certification is not required in charter schools. That school has, not surprisingly, been ranked among the top in the state and the nation by every measurement that has been used. Furthermore, this is a school that receives around only two-thirds of the funding of the regular public schools.

So what is the remedy? The most important step state legislatures can take toward reforming the public schools is breaking up the education school monopoly. Stated positively, schools should be allowed to hire the best graduates of the liberal arts and

sciences programs in the country. Doing so would send an important signal both to the schools and the public at large: that teacher *certification* is not synonymous with teacher *qualification*. So much hold does the word “certified” have over the public mind that often even private schools are reluctant to hire graduates of the arts and sciences for fear that the public school establishment will alarm prospective parents with the specious cry of “uncertified teachers.” It should be a bragging right for a school to make a practice of hiring teachers who have never spent one moment in an education school, but the public has been duped into thinking “uncertified” attached to “teacher” is the equivalent of an uncertified medical doctor. In fact, the reverse is true. A medical doctor could not teach a basic anatomy class in a public school. No state governor or U. S. Senator could teach an introductory government class. Or, as I once pointed out, Alan Greenspan, who was the central figure in the U. S. economy for twenty years, would not be allowed to teach a class in economics at a public high school.

It is doubtful that many principals in regular public schools would begin to hire the best liberal arts graduates in the country in place of the know-nothings who are too often in charge of our classrooms. Principals and superintendents are the chief beneficiaries of the education school racket. Yet the opportunity of hiring smart and well-read teachers would send to the states and to the nation an invaluable message. Furthermore, if charter schools in the states would be allowed to hire teachers based on merit rather than bogus credentialing, those schools would gain a real chance at showing the way toward true public school reform. The unfortunate fact is that in all but a few states charter schools must hire from the stagnant pool of certified teachers. The public school establishment wants it this way. The result is that most of the charter schools in the nation—our best hope for real public school choice—must choose their teachers from the best of the worst. Meanwhile, the better teachers go to private schools or to the few states in which charter schools can hire anyone they want to. The charter schools are not allowed to be a real alternative and then are criticized by the public school establishment for providing only moderately better results than the regular public schools.

Common sense tells us that the smarter and more knowledgeable the teacher, the more the students will learn. The public school establishment wants us to believe that every smart and knowledgeable person in the country is an absent-minded egghead who cannot “relate to children.” Do not believe that stereotype. Students learn a lot from the teacher who knows a lot. They learn nothing from the teacher who knows nothing. Let’s put the teachers who know a lot back into the public school classrooms. If we fail to do so, we fail our children.

Terrence O. Moore teaches history at Hillsdale College and is an advisor to the Barney Charter School Initiative. A graduate of the universities of Chicago and Edinburgh and a former Marine officer, he was the principal of Ridgeview Classical Schools in Fort Collins, Colorado for seven years. Ridgeview was twice ranked the number one high school in the state during his tenure and has ranked in the top three every year since its opening.