

We Won't Reform Schools by Turning Back

Inequity and boredom, violence
and despair characterized
education in "the good old days."

Photograph of U.S. boys school circa 1905 courtesy of Library of Congress



At the turn of the century, according to Jacob Riis, thousands of children left school to idle and commit crimes. Those who stayed toed the mark or, failing to do so, wore the dunce's cap or the marks of the whipping cane.

Many middle-aged Americans remember their childhood education as a paradise. Secretary of Education William Bennett has helped transform the native penchant for nostalgia into a fine art, encouraging us to look backward to a time when education worked.¹ The historical record, however, documents a far bleaker story: academic tracking was more the rule than the exception, scholastic opportunity was blatantly unequal even where the schools weren't racially segregated, and corporal punishment was often threatened if not actually practiced.

Undisciplined Students

In the 1950s disruption and violence rocked schools throughout the country. One observer noted that in some classes teachers spent up to 80 percent of their time disciplining students.² In 1955 students at Lafayette High School, New York, exploded a bomb; at Evander Childs High School in the Bronx a gang attacked a child in class; and the *New York Times* reported incidents of theft, assault, extortion, vandalism, and fires in several schools.³ In 1953 ten million adult Americans had less than a 5th grade education.⁴

A high school teacher in 1948 echoed a common complaint of the time: "I don't know how we're supposed to teach them anything anymore. They come to us knowing less and less each year. How can we teach them when they can't read?"⁵ College students in 1942 were criticized for being "deficient in even the most rudimentary academic skills."⁶

Declining Standards

As for youngsters who joined the work force, an English teacher in Dayton, Ohio, wrote in 1937: "Ask any group of businessmen in any city, and they will tell you that they are driven to distraction by stenographers who cannot spell and clerks who cannot add, much less compute fractions."⁷ That year, a Northwestern University reading expert estimated that the number of poor readers entering junior and senior high school amounted to "a horde."⁸ In 1933 a professor lamented that "standards of college work have been and are being lowered. Freshman courses are increasingly becoming courses for the correction of defects in high school preparation."⁹



Angelo Patri, a principal and teacher in New York City at the turn of the century, observed that orthodox pedagogy—narrowly prescribed and strictly enforced—was "nothing but a deadly mechanical grind."

In 1930 a high school principal in White Plains, New York, was convicted of third-degree assault for slapping a student: "He had struck the girl across the face after reprimanding her for walking on the grass."¹⁰

A Generation of Nonreaders

In 1928 only 19 percent of American high school students took geometry.¹¹ A 1929 test of Oklahoma college freshmen found more than half reading at or below the 9th grade level.¹² In a 1923 article titled, "Are Our Universities Overpopulated?" the president of the Carnegie Foundation complained, "In a large number of institutions the teaching has become enormously diluted."¹³

A math teacher in Kansas City described a freshman high school algebra class in 1917 composed entirely of upperclassmen who had failed it once, twice, or three times. "Such classes," she noted, "are not exceptional."¹⁴ Test results of Army inductees for World War I showed that 25 percent were unable to read a newspaper or write a letter.¹⁵

50 Percent Dropout Rate

Before 1914 children in many cities were held back on a mass scale, many of them repeatedly.¹⁶ Only a small proportion graduated. The likelihood that recent immigrants would graduate was even more dismal. Of children who had started high school, the percentage of Italian-Americans in New York who received a diploma in 1911 was zero; the percentage of Irish-

Americans, 0.1.¹⁷ In 1908 New York Superintendent of Schools William Maxwell called attention to a dropout rate of more than 50 percent with many dropping out even before reaching high school.¹⁸ In 1910 only 16 percent of American children between the ages of 14 and 17 were enrolled in school.¹⁹

Booker T. Washington reported in 1904 that 45 percent of black Americans were illiterate, and "a very large proportion of those classed as educated have the merest smattering of knowledge, which means practically no education."²⁰ At the turn of the century, Jacob Riis revealed that thousands of children quit school before the legal school-leaving age to work, to idle, and to commit crimes.²¹

Boredom and Violence

The memoirs of Angelo Patri, a teacher and principal in New York, give a vivid picture of the schools in the 1890s and early 1900s. The age range of children in his first class was 8 to 15: "They had been sitting there daily annoying the substitutes who were sent to the room and driving them out of school." One of the biggest boys whom I had detained for disorder stopped long enough on his way out to ask, "Coming back tomorrow?"²² Patri's next class was "composed of all the children that the other teachers in approximate grades did not want. There were 50 misfits."²³

At another school, the principal warned Patri that the students had broken a teacher's glasses and thrown

inkwells and books out the windows. Observing the morning assembly, Patri noted, "There was scarcely a child in the room who was not either talking or chewing gum, or slouching in his seat."²⁴

Throughout his career, Patri dealt with truants, with students who marked up walls and fought with empty bottles in vacant lots, with gangs of dropouts who harassed his students out of school, and with young people in school who made learning impossible. One teacher complained bitterly of a child, "He won't work and he won't let anybody else work. I've kept him in every day until five o'clock but it does no good. He swears in the classroom and yesterday he threatened to hit me."²⁵

Classroom disruptions failed to threaten prevailing teaching methods, however. Orthodox pedagogy was narrowly prescribed and strictly enforced, consisting of repetition and memorization, "nothing but deadly mechanical grind. Every teacher and every class had to do these things in just this way."²⁶

The young Patri had no trouble accepting an obsessive approach to discipline, since the same philosophy had reigned when he was a schoolboy: "Had I not been kept after hours to study my lessons, slapped for asking my neighbor for a pencil, made to kneel for hours for absenting myself from school, for defending my rights to the teacher?"²⁷

Changing Myths

Such, then, was the glorious past that Secretary Bennett and other reformers invoke in support of more basics, rigid curriculums, dress codes, and tight requirements for promotion and graduation. Angelo Patri gradually broke with tradition and established himself as a spokesman for humane, child-centered schools. He would have laughed to hear the schools of a hundred years ago held up as models for reform.

Real change, on the other hand, compels us to rethink compulsory education laws, to admit that homogeneous classes are a fiction, to abandon the whole-class methods that still pre-

vail, to discard such concepts as promotion and retention, and to find an antidote to standardized testing. We must also seek alternatives to a diploma system that has been debated since its inception and that is, by almost unanimous consent, virtually meaningless. □

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23. *Ibid.*, 8.
24. *Ibid.*, 21.
25. *Ibid.*, 33.
26. *Ibid.*, 7.
27. *Ibid.*, 11.

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