

The modern American school system:
An institute designed to fail individuals.

Saffron Splain

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Advisors: Sarah Splain & Don Splain

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Abstract

All humans have been educated in one form or another to take up the mantle of being a contributing member of the culture in which they live. However, the forms and institutions in which education has occurred have varied widely. This thesis examines models of education throughout western culture, from ancient Hebrew, Classical, Renaissance, American colonial and into the Modern American model of schooling. By reviewing the history, models, and results of these models, it is evident that our current system of schooling in the United States was never designed for the complete education of the individual. It was designed in fearful reaction to mass immigration, for the processing of the individual by separating him or her from the institute of the family, and by molding him or her in an institutional environment. The goal was to socialize individuals into an infantilized class of Americans useful for factory labor. The institute was designed to fail the individual.

Three reasons in this thesis support the premise that the modern American industrialized school system was designed to formulate a working class rather than educate the individual. The first reason is the emergence of adolescence as a novel stage of human development which correlates with the emergence of the modern school system and the delay in achieving adulthood in contemporary youth. The second reason is that students who proceed through the modern school system are not equipped, practically or emotionally, to be contributing members of their families or society. The third reason is that the modern school system's focus on student skills over content-rich learning results in graduates who lack both skills of learning and knowledge.

Supporters of the modern American school system say that poor results are from a myriad of reasons other than the flawed model of schooling. They say that the model is necessary

because it is student-centric with a goal of all learning being meaningful to the individual. Yet, they fail to observe the disconnect between that ideal and the school system in practice. They say that poor and underprivileged children would have no way to advance socially or economically without it. They deny that the system was never designed to provide upward mobility. They say that skills-based education is necessary but fail to see that rich content is required to form skills.

The Modern school system fails the individual. Any discussion of real education must consider other options. The ideal of personal liberty and trust in the free marketplace of ideas and education models has been proven effective throughout history. Education that is effective for the individual is necessary not only for our children but also for our country's survival.

"What is the purpose of education? This question agitates scholars, teachers, statesmen, every group, in fact, of thoughtful men and women,"

— Eleanor Roosevelt

"The primary goal of real education is not to deliver facts but to guide students to the truths that will allow them to take responsibility for their lives."

— John Taylor Gatto

The need for the next generation to take up the mantle and carry on the work of their parents is inherent in human civilization. Throughout history, those skills and the understanding necessary were learned in a variety of ways. Whether around a campfire listening to stories from an elder, shoulder to shoulder with a parent or mentor learning a skill, in solitude pondering and experimenting with the natural world, or in a formal school setting, the goal is for young people to grow into adults who are contributing, valuable members of their families and society. Education and schooling have taken many forms throughout Western history to achieve the goals of equipping young people to become contributing, valuable members of society. The ancient Israelites were commanded to teach God's law to their children. In Deuteronomy 6:7, it is written: "You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." Scribes devoted themselves to preserving and copying the scriptures and served as teachers for this holy task. It was, and is, viewed as a commandment by God.

In ancient Greece, the boys of wealthy families often were provided schooling by their families in the form of private tutoring in the home or sent to be schooled with other boys by a hired teacher. This schooling included poetry, oratory, music, gymnastics, reading, writing, and philosophy. The great philosopher Plato opened an institute in 387 BC where scholars could come to continue their studies. Aristotle studied there for 20 years and became the private tutor to Alexander the Great when Alexander was 13-16 years old. While Alexander went on to conquer Asia, establishing schools everywhere he went, Aristotle opened his academy, the Lyceum, in 334 BC. This legacy of study continued to shape the culture for generations. The ancient Romans had a very similar system of education involving private tutoring or schooling for wealthy boys of prominent families. Schooling was generally finished by about the age of 12. However, boys might go on for further education in specialized topics. Literacy was valued for the upper class, and even some of the common people could read and write. By the early middle ages, after the fall of the Roman Empire, the classical education that had been available to the upper-class males in the late antiquities of Greece and Rome had all but died out.

That began to change with Charlemagne, king of the Franks, who was crowned Emperor of the Holy Roman Emperor by the pope in 800AD. Charlemagne could not read or write, but he valued knowledge and insisted that he and his children be well educated. For this purpose, he recruited Alcuin, who had been educated in the Cathedral School of York in England. He taught the seven liberal arts: grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music and was subsequently used by Charlemagne to reform monasteries into institutes of learning. (13) Having seen the illuminated Scriptures of Ireland, Charlemagne believed that every monastery should have a library including the scriptures, histories, stories, and philosophy. He recruited

Irish monks to help continue the educational reforms under Alcuin and is credited with the Carolingian Renaissance, a period of renewed emphasis on scholarship and culture.

The 1300s brought about a rediscovery of the ancient teachings of the Greeks and Romans, a movement towards humanism in philosophy, and an explosion in art, scientific discovery, and global exploration. This period, which ran from the 14th through the 17th century, is referred to as the Renaissance. The printing press was invented during this time, allowing for knowledge and information to be widely distributed for the first time in human history. The world of art, religion, politics, science, and philosophy was turned upside down. Instead of the long-believed notion that there were simply facts to be learned, there came to be an idea that all things could be understood and cataloged through rational thought. This idea was the central idea of the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries. There were many great thinkers and ideas during that time; however, in terms of education, one of the most influential was John Locke.

Locke argued that human nature was mutable and that individuals gained knowledge through accumulated experience rather than by accessing some outside truth. He viewed the human mind as a "tabula rasa" or clean slate, which was formed through the interaction of the senses with the outside world. He asserted that "the first capacity of human intellect is that the mind is fitted to receive the impressions made on it; either through the senses by outward objects; or by its own operations when it reflects on them. This is the first step a man makes towards the discovery of anything..." (14). The implication of this idea was that every person, whether peasant or nobility, was born in the same state. As such, all people were born with the same fundamental rights and opportunities, or as Thomas Jefferson stated in our Declaration of Independence, were "Endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

The American Dream embodied Locke's revolutionary idea. The American Dream is that all people deserve freedom and that children can grow and learn and attain their own version of success regardless of where or into which class they were born. It was an idea unprecedented in human history. The responsibility for growth and education lay with the individual and was limited only by the desire and work of the individual. While many of the Founding Fathers, including Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, believed that an ignorant populace could not long remain free, the method of becoming educated was left in the power of the individual and the family.

The Founding Fathers understood that limiting the power and control of the government was what made liberty and the American dream possible. This was the context in which the American concept of education was initially imagined. James Madison, the primary author of the constitution, warned: "If Congress can employ money indefinitely to the general welfare, and are the sole and supreme judges of the general welfare, they may take the care of religion into their own hands; they may appoint teachers in every state, county, and parish and pay them out of their public treasury; they may take into their own hands the education of children, establishing in like manner schools throughout the Union; they may assume the provision of the poor; they may undertake the regulation of all roads other than post-roads; in short, everything, from the highest object of state legislation down to the most minute object of police, would be thrown under the power of Congress.... Where the power of Congress to be established in the latitude contended for, it would subvert the very foundations and transmute the very nature of the limited government established by the people of America." Because of the foundational American fear of too much power centralized within the federal government, the authority over education was given to the States in the 10th amendment of the U.S. Constitution. At that time, education

options were varied and included public and private schooling, charity schools for the poor, apprenticeships, and homeschooling, among others. This medley of options was highly effective, and historians Boles and Gintis report that approximately three-quarters of the total U.S. population, including enslaved people, were literate in 1800. (16).

In the early 1800s, a period of massive immigration into the United States began. In Massachusetts, those immigrants were primarily Irish Catholics fleeing the potato famine in Ireland. The population of Boston doubled between 1820 and 1840. There was general concern that the new immigrants, who were proactively creating Catholic parochial schools for their children, were disrupting the Protestant, Anglo-Saxon culture. In 1837 Massachusetts became the first state to create a state board of education to assert state authority over education, and Horace Mann became its first secretary. In 1642 Massachusetts had been the first colony to require that towns of a certain size must provide basic grammar schooling to ensure that all people would be able to read the Bible and become good Puritans; however, the educational reforms that Mann proposed were much different. He proposed a system of free "Common Schools" with professionally trained teachers to provide education to all children and be paid for by the public's taxes. The modern concept of compulsory, state-financed schooling arose in 18th-century Prussia with the primary goal not to educate but to turn children into pliant citizens who would revere the state. This is the model Mann used as the template for his Common Schools. (15) In addition to teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic, the new schools proposed by Mann would "instill a common political and social philosophy of sound republican principals." (1) Moreover, Horace Mann believed that public schools must be entirely secular stating: "What the church has been for medieval man, the public school must become for democratic and rational man. God will be replaced by the concept of the public good." (3)

There was a general fear and distrust of the immigrants. In 1851, the editor of *The Massachusetts Teacher*, William Swan, [wrote](#): "In too many instances, the parents are unfit guardians of their own children. If left to their direction, the young will be brought up in idle, dissolute, vagrant habits, which will make them worse members of society than their parents are; instead of filling our public schools, they will find their way into our prisons, houses of correction and almshouses. Nothing can operate effectually here but stringent legislation, thoroughly carried out by an efficient police; the children must be gathered up and forced into school, and those who resist or impede this plan, whether parents or priests, must be held accountable and punished." (18) It was in this social climate that, in 1852, Massachusetts became the first state to require mandatory schooling for all children, effectively removing the authority of the parents from the responsibility to educate their children. It was the beginning of a trend in the United States. Eventually, education was made mandatory for children in every state in the Union, with Mississippi being the last in 1917.

The irony is that Horace Mann grew up in an environment ruled by poverty, hardship, and self-denial. Without the benefit of public schooling or wealth, he was taught briefly and erratically by various untrained teachers but still managed to educate himself in the Franklin town library. With tutoring in Latin and Greek, he gained admission, at the age of 20, to the sophomore class at Brown University, where he went on to be the valedictorian of his class. (4) His own achievements demonstrated that access to money and public schooling was not what was necessary for education to occur. (17) Additionally, it was not what he chose for the education of his own three children, whom he homeschooled even while mandating common school attendance for others. Compulsory public schooling, from the outset, was not about

education but about removing children from the family unit to be indoctrinated into cultural norms established by the state.

As compulsory public schooling gained traction, the industrial revolution was booming. A workforce for factories was needed who would be complacent, easily directed, and accept that the fruits of their own personal industry and hard work would be for the benefit of the corporation, or society at large, rather than themselves. Industrialists such as Rockefeller and Carnegie recognized the utility of the public school system to create such a workforce. In the philosophy of John Dewey, they found what would progress their needs. Dewey wrote, "Any education is, in its forms and methods, an outgrowth of the needs of the society in which it exists." At the end of the 19th century, industrialists believed that society needed an infantilized population to fill the mind-numbing role of a factory worker. From this, the modern progressive model of schooling was born, and its form mirrored that of the factories for whom its graduates were intended.

Adolescence emerged as a distinct developmental period early in the 20th century (8). Before then, throughout history and cultures, childhood was the time before ethical and sexual maturity. By around the age of 10-12, it was expected that children would have the skills and moral compass necessary to learn whatever they needed and that they would be contributing members of their families and society, taking responsibility for their own continued learning. Learning was a process that took place throughout life to equip the individual for whatever they faced. In-depth study, either as an apprentice or in an institute of higher learning, were some of the options available to achieve specialized knowledge and skills for those who needed them. However, the responsibility to learn necessary skills was on the individual, not the state. It is not coincidental or accidental that the emergence of adolescence as a stage of development correlates

precisely with the emergence of the modern progressive United States school system. The fundamental model of the institute of the modern progressive American school system was never intended to provide an education that would equip young people to grow into contributing, valuable adult members of their families and society. In fact, the modern school system was designed to perpetuate childhood, creating easily controlled, "socialized" workers and consumers who serve not their families, themselves, and society but industry.

There is a general consensus that our compulsory modern school system is not optimal and fails many students. There is a sense that students are graduating without complete education. However, most are hesitant to criticize the existing system of public schooling as the problem. Instead, there is a culture of blame to try to get to the bottom of the problem. Blame for teachers who are inadequately trained: maybe if all teachers were required to have Master's degrees, like in Norway, the problem would be solved. Blame for parents: maybe parents would not be disengaged and uninvolved in their children's education if required to serve in the PTA and attend school board meetings. Blame for political fighting over the why's, how's and how much for funding: maybe if the government had more (or less) control over how funding was spent, the system would work better. Blame for the legislature for not holding schools accountable for results: maybe more incentives of funds based on test results could help. Blame for standardized testing: maybe if teachers did not have to "teach to the test," they would be able to educate their students effectively. Blame for technology (or lack of technology) in the classroom: maybe if every child had access to an iPad, or if addictive screens were eliminated in the classroom, the system would work better.

All of these issues have merit. However, they all miss the mark by attempting to tweak elements within the system when the problem is with the system itself. It is like trying to fix a

car's flat tire because it is failing to drive across a lake. While the tire may, in fact, be flat, it is not what is preventing the car from crossing the lake. It is the model of the vehicle which is the problem. Likewise, it is the fundamental model of compulsory modern progressive schooling which is causing our students to sink. The evidence that the compulsory modern school system is failing our students is ubiquitous. First and foremost, the fact that students are not achieving adulthood demonstrates that the system was designed to infantilize our population. Secondly, neither practically nor emotionally are students emerging from the system ready to lead independent, productive lives. Finally, students are not being equipped with a sufficient level of knowledge to perpetuate a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

The emergence of adolescence as a discrete stage of development correlating with the compulsory modern American school system is a compelling indicator that a delay in the individual's ability to achieve adulthood is inherent to the system. Besides the emergence of adolescence, there are other indicators that adulthood has been systematically delayed in our culture. According to the U. S. Census Bureau, young adults, defined as those between 18 and 34 years of age, "take longer to achieve the traditional milestones of adulthood of previous generations." (19). While traditions and milestones change, it is true that in 2017 one in three young adults still lived with their parents. Of those who didn't, the vast majority were receiving financial support from their parents, regardless of the economic demographic from which they came. Even more disturbing, of those young adults still living at home, one in four were classified as idle, meaning they were neither in school nor employed. They were literally just stuck in childhood. The majority of young adults are delaying marriage, and most do not believe that marriage and parenthood are important indicators of being an adult. One evidence of this is the fact that between 1975 and 2016, the share of young women who were homemakers fell from

43 percent to 14 percent of all women aged 25 to 34. This is a profound shift from anything in human history and further evidence of the effect of the modern educational school system on the social institute of the family.

The American public school system does not provide practical equipping for leading independent and productive lives. Creating mandatory public schooling for the grammar years was intended to sufficiently socialize and equip students to join the American workforce in an age when factory workers were necessary. Soon, however, primary education was deemed insufficient, so secondary education, or high school, became mandated as well. In 1940, more than half of the U.S. population had completed no more than an eighth-grade education but were generally able to participate in society and provide for their families. Now graduation from high school is insufficient to provide a living for most young adults. In 1975, only 25 percent of men aged 25 to 34 had incomes of less than \$30,000 per year, adjusted to 2015 dollars. By 2016, the share earning less than \$30,000 a year rose to 41 percent of young men. (20) This is in spite of the fact that in 1975 only 62% of young men achieved a high school diploma, while now 88% of young men achieve a high school diploma. In addition, the public school system does not emotionally equip students for success. The rates of suicide for males aged 15–19 years increased from 12.0 to 18.1 per 100,000 population from 1975 to 1990. (20).

The modern American school system fails to equip students with the basic knowledge necessary to have or attain the literacy, numeracy, and cultural awareness necessary for our country to thrive. Modern school teachers are evaluated by tests of their students, which measure skills rather than knowledge. Because of this, classrooms have had less and less rich content for students to explore and discover, which inadvertently exacerbates the problem. Suppose students lack the knowledge and vocabulary to understand the passages on reading tests. In that case, they

will not have an opportunity to demonstrate their skills in making inferences or finding the main idea. Familiarity with content and vocabulary allows students to understand and think critically about that to which they are exposed and that which they read.

The proof that content-rich education results in students who are more proficient at the skills of learning was demonstrated in France. Until 1989, all schools in France were required to adhere to a "detailed, content-focused national curriculum ." This national curriculum demonstrated proficiency in narrowing the achievement gap between poor and rich students. A new law was enacted that encouraged elementary schools to adopt the American approach, foregrounding skills such as "critical thinking" and "learning to learn." The results were dramatic. Over the next 20 years, achievement levels decreased sharply for all students—and the drop was greatest among the neediest." (7). The modern American school system neither provides students with sufficient content to be educated citizens nor adequate skills to continue learning what they need to on their own.

Proponents who believe that the modern Progressive American school system is the best model for educating the youth of America agree that it is not a perfect system. However, they feel that the problems have more to do with social ills than the school system itself. The predominant view is that academic success is tied to "a student's family income and wealth, social class, ability to go to schools with good teachers and abundant resources, and "white privilege." (19) They feel that because the modern American school system has the goal of making learning meaningful to individual students at the heart of its progressive educational theory forwarded by John Dewey, it is the best option. They note that there are established consensus that true learning is only ever of that which is meaningful to the individual.

Unfortunately, the disconnect between that ideal of child-centered learning and the modern school system's ability to achieve it is profound. The innate skills of learning must be cultivated in a content deep learning environment that allows students to progress at their own pace. This is not what the modern public school system provides. The institutionalized school system creates an environment that destroys rather than cultivates those skills. Wasting the precious early years of childhood socializing children to endure artificial structure and control over their attention, their bodies, their play, their exploration of the world, and their sense of home and security, cripples the necessary skills of attention, focus, persistence, passion, and boldness. It kills curiosity, intrinsic motivation for learning, and an innate desire for excellence. Instead, it makes children passive recipients of information and directions rather than active creators of their own knowledge and being. The modern American institute of schooling hinders the thing it purports to seek most dearly to achieve.

Proponents of the public school system also say that without a socialized education system, the poorest and least advantaged would have no hope or options for education and, therefore, no hope of advancement. For this very reason, innovators such as Maria Montessori took up the mantle of pedagogy. While nobody could argue that the status of poor children of factory workers during the industrial revolution was atrocious, the education system which was created was not one designed to provide them with social mobility or the opportunity to better themselves. In fact, it sought to and achieved the opposite. It was designed to pacify the masses into a non-threatening, docile workforce who took directions readily and did not think for themselves. At the same time, the American model of progressive public education came into being, the American dream, the belief that anyone, regardless of where they were born or what class they were born into, could attain their own version of success, began to die. Rather than the

work of the individual allowing upward mobility, the "working class" was born. The U.S. became a class system, just like the monarchies of Europe.

There is a correlation between poor educational outcomes and poverty as measured by the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunches. This leads many progressive politicians to blame poverty for poor educational outcomes. Interestingly, an examination of immigrant families provides a control group with which to evaluate that hypothesis. The educational attainment of the parents of immigrant students is lower, on average, than those of native-born parents, and most are not caucasian, so they are not receiving any white privilege. Additionally, many immigrants come from homes where a language other than English is spoken, and they are more likely to live in neighborhoods that have relatively high concentrations of childhood poverty. Despite these many supposed handicaps, they consistently achieve higher academic standards than their native-born peers in the same environment. (19)

The one variable consistently associated with higher academic achievement and social mobility is an intact family at home. A traditional single breadwinner structure is most beneficial, even when it results in lower income. It is theorized that this family structure is most conducive to equipping children with the character trait of grit. *Grit* is defined as "passion and perseverance for long-term goals of personal significance, the tendencies not to abandon tasks in the face of either changeability or obstacles," It is more predictive than even cognitive ability, for achievement, particularly of goals of personal significance. (11) Interestingly, the traditional family structure is the exact social structure undermined by the compulsory modern school system.

Finally, proponents of the current public school system argue against teaching based on subject matter and memorization. Rather, teaching students "critical thinking" and having

students "learn to learn" is espoused as the goal of the modern school system. Much research demonstrates that the necessary skills of reading, writing, and critical thinking can only occur in the presence of a content-rich educational method. The Modern School system, with its focus on skills over content and student over subject matter, actually hinders the very things it purports to impart. So while advocates of the compulsory modern school system state that it focuses on the individual needs of the student, provides equal access to all students in order for them to be able to advance socially, and teaches critical thinking and skills of learning, it actually forces conformity of the individual, retards their potential to raise beyond their economic status and hinders their ability to learn critical thinking skills by depriving them of a content-rich education.

The modern public American school system has failed to educate our youth.

According to the Bible, children are a blessing, and their education is the responsibility of the family. Our current society views children as a burden and their education only to be trusted to "experts ." Multiple generations of processing through the public institute of schooling have disintegrated the integrity of the family structure and made parental involvement in the education of our youth available only to the wealthy or those willing to sacrifice material wealth and status. Adulthood is no longer the natural progression out of childhood, but instead has become a cultural construct, a feeling or sense of adulthood, and, even more recently, a verb for perpetual children who play at adulting. The compulsory public school system, which removes the authority of children's education from the family, does not have to be the only option. It has resulted in a burgeoning bureaucracy that stifles competitive modes of education and cripples the American dream of rising above the status to which one was born. The inherent value of the family structure should be edified rather than crippled. The ideal of personal liberty and trust in the free marketplace of ideas and models of education can and should be placed centrally in any

discussion of education going forward, not just for the benefit of our children but for the survival of our country.

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