

# It Just Ain't So

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Although I wish it were not so, I find nothing to dispute in John Goodlad's analysis of American schooling. The dreary, limited, and limiting schools he sketches from his data are just like the ones I studied and taught in for so many years. As Goodlad recognizes, there are exceptions: classrooms—and even whole schools—where inspired teaching and learning are the norm. But these are few and scattered. As he also recognizes, schools are not going through a period of decline brought on by neglect of the "basics," but are about the same as always: concentrating on facts and mechanical processes and little more.

Extrapolating from Goodlad's observations about weaknesses in curricula and teaching, I'd like to suggest that there are four major school problems, two of scarcity and two of excess. Schools are sick because there is not enough philosophy in them nor enough help in creating good practice. Conversely, there is too much reverence for authority and too much fear.

If schools are to become healthy, they must provide opportunities for teachers to read, think, and talk about what it is they are trying to do. Teachers need to look critically at their goals and figure out how they can be loyal to their employer and still true to their students and themselves. Then they need assistance in turning goals into classroom living and objectives into lessons and materials. Through workshops, demonstrations, readings, teaming, trials (and errors, of course), discussions, and a climate of trust, healthy change can come about. The critical factor is time—not just once or twice a semester for all this, but at least a couple of hours every week. How can we expect teachers

to teach without time to learn? We wouldn't dare ask that of college professors.

If schools are to become healthy, they must also free themselves from the tyranny of tradition, textbooks, test scores, colleges, and the news media. For too long they have let the past define them, faulty tools measure them, and self-appointed authorities with their own axes to grind judge them. By accepting all criticism as valid, even when common sense showed that it was not, schools have consented to an endless wandering in the wilderness.

Schools need to stop being afraid of making mistakes, leaving something out, trying new ways, trusting their own knowledge and experience, but most of all, of incurring public displeasure. Fear is neither a good motivator nor a reliable guide. It cripples the ability to act, numbs judgment, and kills joy. How can anyone teach or administer a school by acting on fear?

All along I have been personifying schools as if they possessed personality and intellect. Although a school, like a machine, can move, it depends on people to direct it. School movers are not teachers, however, but education professors, textbook authors, and adminis-

trators. Professors, who know theory, could teach more of it in their courses. Instead of serving up a smorgasbord of methods and cute lessons, they could take a stand on the principles that underlie good instruction and demonstrate how to apply them to school realities. Forget the rest. Textbook authors—often those same professors—could put the best of what they know into their books instead of purveying—as they do now—the lowest common denominators because they will "sell in Texas." Too many of them excuse themselves by saying, "If I don't write this, someone else will," and save their consciences by sneaking in a bit of quality where it won't be noticed.

But most influential are the school superintendents and principals who have the authority to enact the kinds of changes I propose. Until now they have used their authority minimally and for trivial ends. If they haven't the knowledge and skills themselves, let them at least have the grace to stand aside while teachers teach themselves.

Please don't say that all this sounds great but the public would never stand for it, that parents want the basics, traditional methods and materials, obedient teachers, and six hours a day of babysitting. Speaking as a practitioner still, I tell you it just ain't so. Parents want their children to learn, and even though they might not understand much about the means, they recognize the end (or lack of it) when they see it. The whole tragedy of "back to the basics" is that it didn't have to happen. If we educators had not dug a big hole meant for learning and left it too long empty, the public wouldn't have moved in to fill it with manure. □

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