



JOHN DEWEY AND THE DECLINE
OF AMERICAN EDUCATION







JOHN DEWEY AND THE DECLINE
OF AMERICAN EDUCATION

HOW THE PATRON SAINT OF SCHOOLS
HAS CORRUPTED TEACHING AND LEARNING

Henry T. Edmondson III

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To Teachers





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Twenty years is all I can give it, Gene.

I’d like to thank Jeremy Beer of ISI Books for his patience and hard work. He has an editorial wisdom beyond his years.

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A thank you is due also to our family and friends who have helped us through recent challenging years and have shown us the true meaning of family and friendship. Without that support, this project would have perhaps died for lack of spirit.







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Preface

“Don’t worry, Scout,” Jem comforted me. “Our teacher says Miss Caroline’s introducing a new way of teaching. She learned about it in college. It’ll be in all the grades soon. You don’t have to learn much out of books that way—it’s like if you wanta learn about cows, you go milk one, see?”

— Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

AMERICAN EDUCATION HAS DETERIORATED SINCE the beginning of the twentieth century, a decline especially pronounced since the 1950s. While most acute in the elementary and secondary schools, this decline is evident in higher education as well. In April 1983, the Department of Education issued “A Nation at Risk,” the report that made explicit what many already knew anecdotally or intuitively: American public education had degenerated badly; the current system fares poorly when compared to the American past and when compared to the educational systems of other industrialized nations. The report initiated a wave of concern and debate over educational reform, discussions that have grown ever more intense, if not better informed. In 1998 a fifteenth-anniversary study, “A Nation Still At Risk,” concluded that very little had changed since 1983. Despite numerous reform efforts, almost every means of evaluation draws the same conclusion: not only is education not improving in the United States, it continues to decline.¹



This decline is usually defined in terms of:

- a steady drop in standardized test scores, especially the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the American College Test (ACT);
- the low percentage of high school graduates who are prepared to enter the university without remedial work;
- the widespread necessity of remedial programs at American colleges and universities, programs that have become a fixed and thriving industry in higher education;
- comparative international test scores, especially as measured by the International Association for the Evaluation of Education Achievement (IEA). Moreover, it seems that the further American students advance through elementary and secondary school, the worse they do in comparison with international students;
- various measures of historical and literary knowledge, all of which—almost without exception—reveal abysmal ignorance and illiteracy among U.S. students;
- various indications that students are all too often followed in their academic descent by the very group responsible for teaching them;
- the opinion of many American parents, based on experience, anecdotal evidence, and in some cases intuition, that U.S. schools are failing their children. This opinion is expressed in part by the growing number of parents who opt for private schools, charter schools, or home schools—often at great personal sacrifice;
- measurements indicating that the rate of “functional illiteracy” in the United States is twice that of many other industrialized nations;
- and clear indications that each of the above trends is even more pronounced among many minority communities.

Reform initiatives aimed at addressing these concerns typically attempt to restore academic excellence in our schools by concentrating on one or more of three distinct levels of action. The first is the *constitutional* level, on which reformers must grapple with a long train of Supreme Court opinions, many of which are confusing. These Court decisions have affected, for better or worse, many educational activities, from prayer at the beginning of the day to the bus route taken after the closing bell. The most significant decision in recent years is the Supreme Court's *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, announced on July 2, 2002, in which a bare majority of the Court sensibly declared that the school voucher program in Cleveland, Ohio, did *not* violate the establishment clause of the First Amendment, notwithstanding the fact that some parents might redeem those vouchers in "religious" schools.

This decision prompted immediate and intense action on the second level of educational reform effort, the *political* level. Anyone involved in these struggles knows that education politics can be especially vicious. Woodrow Wilson was once asked why he resigned as president of Princeton University in order to run for the U.S. presidency. He explained, "I couldn't stand the politics." Today, powerful educational interest groups, including the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, and their allies in Washington, DC, and the fifty states, have pledged to wage a fierce battle against any Cleveland-type voucher initiatives that communities elsewhere in the country might wish to undertake. Their ostensible motive for doing so is to protect the future of the public school system and especially the interests of poorer families with school-age children, yet most objective observers agree that the NEA and the AFT cannot or will not distinguish between the welfare of students and their own desire to maintain the power and prestige of their respective organizations. The NEA and AFT rightly fear that the power of their organizations will be weakened if the states' education monopolies are broken. The outcome of this po-

litical battle is uncertain, largely because it is tied to the overall balance of political forces in the country at large. That is, unless there is a sea change in the political and ideological balance of power, the battle over school vouchers will probably remain in a stalemate for some time. On the other hand, it may well be that this very issue could itself be the catalyst of a significant shift in the political landscape, given the swelling tide of dissatisfaction over the state of American public education.

However, even if the constitutional and the political dimensions of this struggle were to become characterized by sensible and fair-minded debate, practice, and governance, there is no guarantee that education would improve significantly—not if there is insufficient clarity in educational philosophy. This third dimension of reform, the *philosophical* level, has received less attention than the other two, but it may be the most important. Indeed, until the deep flaws in American educational philosophy are confronted, efforts in the political arena, if not the constitutional, are likely to continue to fail. And to the degree that American educational philosophy is unsound, that weakness is largely attributable to the influence of John Dewey, the progressive turn-of-the-century reformer whose impact on American education is incalculable. Yet Dewey's ideas, and their impact on American educational thought, are poorly understood, especially among the very people who run our schools.

Hence this book, the purpose of which is to explicate the principle elements of Dewey's philosophy and to suggest the ways that his work has harmed American education. In doing so, I hope to call attention to the power of ideas in education, a phenomenon insufficiently understood. In Dewey's case, these ideas, often imported into the schools without sufficient consideration, have gone on to undermine and distort American educational philosophy. The result has been the deterioration, confusion, and disarray we see all around us, a situation that will not markedly improve until we acknowledge and understand the intellectual source of our plight.²