

Sample chapter for AuthorsDen
(the first 7 pages)

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Saving K-12

WHAT HAPPENED TO OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

HOW DO WE FIX THEM?

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Somebody does not like our culture

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Why we have 50,000,000 functional illiterates

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SUMMING UP

I N T R O D U C T I O N

The two most challenging questions in education are: why do our public schools settle for so much mediocrity and inefficiency; and how can we fix the situation? This book answers both questions.

Please note, my harsh judgment of the public schools is not something I dreamed up. You hear about it in the media every day. The US has 50 million functional illiterates (an unforgivable failure by self-proclaimed experts). Our students don't compete well on international tests. A brainy guy like Bill Gates studied the public schools and said, you know what, the schools are so bad they are a threat to the country's future! In fact, Gates merely repeated what a huge governmental commission concluded in 1983 (the famous *Nation at Risk* report).

If you look back, you find that many smart, sensible people have been writing laments and alarms about public schools for a long time. The decade 1948-1958 witnessed the publication of at least 10 major books with titles such as *Retreat From Learning*, *Quackery in the Public Schools*, *Educational Wastelands*, and *Why Johnny Can't Read*.

So we can take it as stipulated, I think, that the nation's public schools ran wildly off the tracks, starting a long time ago.

RUDOLF FLESCH'S BIG MISTAKE

Explaining why this happened, and illuminating the many specific ramifications in the schools, is for me a fascinating quest. Causes and cures are rarely obvious. The Education Establishment (the top people responsible for making the schools mediocre) seem to do everything possible to hide the truth and confuse the debate.

Why Johnny Can't Read was published in 1955, sold eight million copies, and is one of the most important books in American intellectual life. Flesch intended to end the argument about how reading (the essential skill) should be taught. He explained that English, a phonetic language, must be taught phonetically. If you teach it as Sight-Words, you are turning English into Chinese. Flesch thought this idea was so silly, he needed to debunk it only once. We are still paying for this miscalculation.

Virtually every aspect of our K-12 schools is confusing and, I would say, deliberately murky. For that reason, many issues need to be examined again and again. I've thought a good deal about Flesch the last few years. I believe that if he had added a few more paragraphs to his 200-page book, he would have saved millions of Americans from the agony of functional illiteracy.

This book tries to explain everything several times coming from different directions, in different contexts. The goal is that ordinary citizens, with little background in education, will understand all the subtleties.

SAVING THE COUNTRY BY SAVING K-12

If you think of the elite educators at Harvard and Teachers College as brave and noble people, you'll find this book a bit of a shock. It's difficult to conclude that they are noble and brave and have good intentions when you look at the pervasive decay and deliberate dumbing-down in the schools.

I have no grand theories. One simple principle guides everything I say about public schools. Let's educate all children as far as each child can be educated. Why isn't that perfectly reasonable? Surely, anything less is deliberate dumbing-down and a form of child abuse.

The articles are divided into ten sections but it's the sort of collection you can dip into wherever you please and read in any order.

These articles, for the most part, first appeared on many different websites and were focused on a variety of audiences and problems. So you will find that some are grimly serious, some are sarcastic and funny, some are primarily historical, and some are rather scholarly. All of them, I hope, are lively and engaging. All are definitely obsessed with exposing folly and improving education in the public schools.

My fear is that if we don't save our public schools, we won't save much else.

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1-CULTURE WARS

Someone does not like our culture.

The evidence is everywhere.

American Children Are Strangers In A Strange Land

The Education Establishment has managed to separate the country's children from the country. A secret quarantine is in effect; children have been consigned to live in detached bubbles. To a degree rarely seen in history, children are exiles in their own country.

Physically, kids look the same. They are babies in cribs; play in the backyard; have pimples, and become restless teenagers. Little by little, they become adults. You could alter the hairstyle, do a little photo retouching, and all the children would look like the children at the time of the Revolution. Nothing has changed. In appearances, that is.

Inwardly, everything is changed. American children wander forlornly in an alien landscape they know little about and understand less. They have no history, no geography, no math, no science. They've been taught to dislike their country. Instead of knowledge, they've learned detachment and sarcasm, indifference and boredom. They've been systematically deprived of the skills and perspectives that would allow them to enjoy culture or navigate intellectual pursuits.

They are inside the society but curiously outside. Separated from it in the way that a neighborhood's birds and rabbits exist separately from the humans in the neighborhood. They see each other and warily pass; maybe some minor interaction takes place. But birds and rabbits grasp little about what humans are doing or why. Similarly, children stare uncomprehendingly at those strange creatures, adults, living in some parallel life.

The goal for the country's children seems to be the attainment of a pleasant emptiness. White marks on a white wall. It's long been common to say that children's minds are a blank slate, a tabula rasa. But what American public education has achieved is unprecedented: the tabula remains rasa.

How do we describe this state? An intellectual lobotomy? Cognitive

neutering? Certainly not all children are stunted in this way. Perhaps 10% or 15% receive a good education. I'm talking about great majority of average kids. Soon they'll be raising kids themselves. They'll vote. They'll build a country. Or unbuild it.

How in the world did the Education Establishment create this brave new child? In fact, there are four steps, which can be quickly described:

First, every school has to discard as much information as possible, using whatever pretext is handy. Some facts are not relevant; some are not multicultural; some are politically incorrect; some facts are too difficult for a particular group. It doesn't matter how you do it. The goal is that everything be thinned until finally you turn chunky beef soup into watery gruel. All the facts taught anywhere in the entire school should not fill up a small booklet. Now you're talking.

Second, insist for a hundred reasons that kids not be expected to remember or retain any of this thin fare. Rote memorization is laughed at. Drill and kill is scorned. Teaching to a test is attacked. So, there is little in the school to start with, and little of that ends up in a child's head.

Third, create easy, preferably subjective tests so that almost everyone gets an A or a B. These good grades suggest that children are mastering a great deal of knowledge. Parents are charmed by all the success. Nowadays educators are coming up with even more devious forms of testing, such as scrapbooks, peer review, and authentic assessment. The drift is away from expecting children to actually know anything specifically. Feelings and opinions are quite enough. Explaining how you approach the problem is praised. Correct answers are frowned upon.

Four, everything in the school and in the classroom must be enveloped in a smog of important-sounding, newfangled methods: Constructivism, Self-Esteem, Cooperative Learning, Critical Thinking, National Standards, 21st Century Learning, and dozens more. Gobbledegook is made flesh. Apparent activity is all-important. In many respects the school is theater, show biz, mime. Teachers pretend to teach; students pretend to learn. At the end of the process, the children know nothing.

Everything that occurs in school is like a dream you had last night or the night before. Surely some interesting things happened. But you can't say exactly what. It's all very hazy now. Then even the memory of having a dream is gone. *Rasa*.

More evilly, what might actually be possible, and even easily achieved, is lost on the wind. In a world where everyone walks with a limp, running is no longer imaginable.

And so children, as never before in history, are turned into eunuchs of the mind. To the degree the Education Establishment can pull it off, children remain knowledge virgins. They are not unhappy. It's all they've ever known, these strangers in a strange land.

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FYI: As of September 1, the book can be pre-ordered on Amazon and will be published on November 17