

Schooling and Education Amid the Siege: A Perspective

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This writing sketches out a perspective on schooling and education (they are different things; more on that later on) for your consideration, including what, if anything, to do about it.

Me: Retired after a career in schooling, first as a high school teacher and later a professor of education. Late in life, the birth of a daughter, now eighteen, who grew up with her mother in another state from where I live. I stayed in contact with my daughter from long range through email and regular visits, which included observing her classes in school and talking with her teachers, and I read the frequent communiques schools sent to parents. A couple of weeks ago as I write this, she started college near where I live. All to say, I bring a parental as well as a professional perspective to bear on this concern.

The context: The full-bore campaign I'm witnessed up close to shape the hearts and minds of students in its favored direction by what, over the half-century span of my career, have become politicized-left American elementary and secondary public schools. (It's going on in universities too, don't I know, but that's not the focus here.) If you're reading this publication you know the thrust: schools have taken it upon themselves—who needs a mandate?—to disparage and demonize this country and its political and cultural heritage as racist, sexist, and oppressive, and use the school and its captive students as a venue for promoting a brand of identity politics that includes beating up on White people and getting them to beat up on themselves. I'm sorry to report that it's being done effectively—not that it takes any great skill to propagandize and browbeat children—and with, I worry, lasting negative impact on the young people who have been subjected to it and—scary thought—on this country. I don't have the space here—or, frankly,

the energy—to do more than affirm that I consider what’s going on to be an alarming turn of events. I’ll leave it with a recommendation of a book I have come upon recently and found useful you may not know about: *The Anti-Fascist Classroom: Denazification in Soviet-Occupied Germany, 1945–1949* by Benita Blessing.¹

With that brief introduction as a backdrop, below is a perspective that has come out of my experiences in schools and as a parent that I think might give direction and impetus to combatting what’s going down currently in our schools. See what you can take from it.

School people are employees.

Teachers, school administrators, counselors, and the rest, like to see themselves as autonomous professionals and the school they work in as their school, and they’ve been good at selling that idea to the public. They call the shots—it’s their classes, their students, their programs. They tell parents what’s up and what is going to go on and it is the parents’ job to go along with it and support their efforts. Students do what they are told, including nights and weekends. It’s called homework and we all know what a good thing that is, don’t we? With homework in place as a hallowed activity, teachers have a claim on your child 24/7. Microsoft doesn’t presume to have that power over its minions, plus it has to pay them and they can quit.

They don’t want to hear this, but school people aren’t Mussolinis. They are salaried employees. And who hires them and who do they work for? In this country, the basic idea is that it’s the local community (or anyway should be), who have directed their elected representatives, the school board, to build a school with funds they provide and set up its curriculum (learning goals and areas of study) and hire people to bring it off. In an immediate sense, the school employees work for the parents and students in a particular school. They serve them, they don’t order them around. Student aren’t their lab animals (“I’ll train them up to do the dance I like”).

The central actor in a school is the individual student.

Think about something you really know about. It could be fixing cars or the Civil War or sculpting or classical music or mathematics or astronomy, you name it. Think about how you came to be so up on it. You may have taken a class in it and been inspired by a teacher, but very quickly, and most basically, *you did it*. You had the goal, the intention—you owned it, it was yours—to get better at whatever it was and you took responsibility for getting it done, and you worked hard at it and had a good time doing it, it wasn't sleep-inducing drudgery.

You tinkered with carburetors and learned from that and improved the next time you fixed one. If it was writing, you reviewed what you put together and ran it by people whose opinions you respect and learned from that, and then you wrote some more and saw how it went. You read books by the finest writers looking for how they brought it off and saw what you could take from them. You sequenced the process: you did the next thing you needed to do, whatever it was.

Tellingly, you *didn't* show up to class at 9:50 a.m. and dutifully do what the teacher came up with for you to do. You didn't get together with a bunch of people to do activities ("Let's us break into groups and roleplay"). You didn't do the exact same thing as everybody else. The relationship that mattered to you wasn't with the teacher— isn't she nice?—but with mathematics or painting and mastering it (*mastering* it; you had high standards).

I get my laptop fixed by a university tech team, as they call themselves. It's university undergraduates. I marvel at how much they know about computers. I've asked several of them how they got so good with computers. "Did you take courses in them?" Invariably it's been, "No, I just picked it up." Teachers think the wheels turn because of their daily lesson plans and assignments, when in fact they get in the way of what needs to be done: individual students taking on the job of learning biology.

It's best to think of schools as places where students learn rather than teachers teach and see where that takes you.

The learning process isn't tricky.

The education profession thinks it takes years of university study to get a handle on how to make learning happen. Bullcrap. Back to how much you know about, let's say, gardening. Getting so good at gardening was a matter of common sense. You checked out examples of good gardens, sought out good gardeners and picked their brains, read books on gardening you got from the library, and tried things that worked and didn't work and learned from that and did it better the next time.

You didn't need a bachelor's degree in teaching gardening to figure out how to get good at gardening. You didn't need someone to write up a syllabus that told you precisely what to do for the next three months. You just got on with it, prompted by an interest and hope (an image in your head of a great garden and the satisfaction and pride that comes from creating one).

Schools can serve a good purpose.

What I've said so far may sound like I'm for bagging schools or making a pitch for home schooling. I'm not doing that. Important, significant learning can go on in schools. Teachers can be inspiring examples of people who are really into what they teach—literature, art, science, and so on (which too often isn't the case). Teachers can suggest good work for students to take on and be supportive when they take it on. Teachers can be kind, moral, upright people and exemplify what a good human being is like. It's good for students to be around their peers—they can learn a lot from them, including social skills and the value in looking out for other people and how to go about it. And simply, it is good for students to get out of the house every day, a place that in too many cases isn't a healthy place for them. Covid and the remote learning that schools imposed in its name—which never should have happened, but that's not the

topic here—resulted in regrettable outcomes, including child abuse and mental distress.

Schools can encourage students to learn the basics.

What are the basics? I offer this list:

- *Reading capability.* I'm thinking of at least a fifth-grade level. The ability to read a news article, understand written instructions, that kind of thing.
- *Writing capability.* The ability to write coherent, grammatically correct sentences and paragraphs.
- *Mathematical capability.* The ability to add, subtract, multiply, and divide, know what a percentage is, run a cash register—you know what I mean.

So far, this sounds like readin', writin', and 'rithmetic, and so it is. If you don't have those skills going for you, and a lot of people don't, you've got big problems, and you're very likely to be a drag on society.

- *Political literacy.* This country is a constitutional republic (not a democracy, by the way). You need to have a basic understanding of what this political arrangement is about, because it is the game that's on your table and you'd best learn to play effectively by its rules. Absent dictates from on high, this system is grounded in personal freedom, liberty, and the opportunity and challenge to make something out of your life and be good for the people around you in the process. It depends on you to keep the system going and not be coaxed, bullied, or conned into turning it into an authoritarian, "elite"-dominated, hostile alien-controlled, conform-or-else wet blanket and roadblock. You need to know what the Founders, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and federalism are really about, and what the ideal of republican citizenship is really about (concurrently looking out for you and yours and doing what you can at the local, state, and national political levels), rather than what the marionette string-pullers tell you they are about.

- *Good character.* I'm thinking of three character traits that schools should promote:

Personal responsibility. You don't whine, blame, play the victim, or lay back and wait for someone or something to make things good for you. You don't take handouts. You don't demand special favors. You have jobs to do and people to care for and you shut the hell up and get on with it.

Hard work. You do things the absolute best you can. When you sweep the floor, you *sweep the floor!* If it is a McDonald's job, the uniform is clean and pressed and you're there early and they've never seen anybody flip a hamburger as well as you. If you're writing something, you proof the hell out of it. I watch NFL games and these days the players have sayings on the back of their helmets—"fight racism," "inspire change," and the like. I'd suggest "go to work," though I don't suppose that would go over very well.

Decency. You are kind, giving, you help people out, you don't hurt people (or animals), you protect them. You are a good human being. Sounds like the Boy Scout Oath? Fine with me.

How can a school promote those qualities? It can go public that it believes in these things and wants students to exemplify them in the way they live their lives. The people who work in schools can embody them. They can note and affirm good examples of these qualities—in books, the news, wherever it is. They can celebrate when students exhibit good character. A big part of good teaching (and good parenting) involves catching somebody doing something right and making a big deal of it.

You're picking up on what isn't in this list—no left-wing (or right-wing, for that matter) political indoctrination. No ethnic and race bashing ("privileged Whites and their evil ways"). Schools need to butt out with that stuff, or better, be forced to butt out. They aren't ever going to get off what they are doing until it becomes detrimental to their perceived self-interest to keep doing it, and that state of affairs is going to have to come from the outside (I'm

thinking of politicians and parents); what's going on is too locked in place to come from the inside.

Schools should offer rich learning opportunities for students.

What opportunities? I have a bias toward the traditional academic subjects, including for students from less advantaged backgrounds. I see them as personally liberating as they empower individuals by informing and disciplining their minds: history, literature, science, math, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and fine art. Students are invited to study them and are provided support and encouragement as they embark on their individual learning quests. I worry about a vocations-directed focus prior to the post-secondary years because it can pre-judge and channel the scruffier students, if you'll pardon the label, into slots that don't match up with their highest possibilities. To get personal, knowing that Beethoven created music not just Chuck Berry served to keep me off the assembly line at the local Ford plant where I was headed. I'm intrigued by the [K-12 curriculum](#) of Michigan's Hillsdale College. It calls for "a classical American education" and invites you to look into it.²

I'm enamored of physical education of a certain sort. Not the usual competitive team sports where you wear a number and a coach calls the plays and runs you in and out of the game. I mean activities that bring you into contact with your corporal being and its potential. I'm thinking of such things as yoga and dance and meditation and hiking and rock-climbing and sailing. Getting personal again, I either didn't know about the activities just listed or assumed they weren't for the likes of me, and as I think back on it, the schools I went to were just fine with that. I was cut out, so it was assumed, for trying to hit a curve ball and sink a jump shot, neither of which I was any good at doing, and trying to do them got me nowhere.

Schooling and education are not the same thing.

We need to keep in mind that important education—the kind that makes a difference in how people think and live—goes on in other contexts than schools. Peers educate, as do politicians, the clergy,

friends, libraries, movies and TV shows, websites, and recreational activities—the football team, the drama club, and sailing promote different ways of thinking and being. I'll shine a light on two elements of modern life that educate: modes of communication, such as texting and social media, and parents.

Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian communication theorist prominent in the 1960's became famous for the phrase, "The medium is the message." His point was that forms of communication greatly affect people and thus deserve to be areas of serious study.

To illustrate, I get a lot of emails from people who have read my writings in books and online (I'm hearing impaired and can't use a phone). Over the last fifteen years or so, those emails have changed greatly. Correspondents used to write me in crafted sentences and paragraphs that spelled out what they took from what I wrote and ideas it brought up for them. They would ask me to expand upon or clarify something in my writing.

Not now. Now, I get what appears to be a dashed off sentence or two—shallow, simple—that says something about them, not what I wrote. I recently wrote a website thought about the old-time movie and television cowboy Roy Rogers. Or nominally at least; it wasn't really about Roy. I used him as a metaphor to get into a consideration of childhood neglect and isolation. Anyway, a typical response to what I put together has been, "I watched Roy's show when I was a kid." That's it.

I speculate that these kinds of communications, and the level of thinking behind them, such as it is, have been shaped by texting and social media posts. Quick, casual self-presentational, off the top—this is what I'm like, this is my favorite kind of music, here's a picture of me and my friends, etc. On the run, from my phone. These ways of communicating have resulted in people being less thoughtful, less perceptive, more malleable and conformist (like me, oh please like me), a worrisome outcome if you are concerned about

personal autonomy and self-direction in a time of mind management and social engineering.

In an earlier writing, I outlined ten downsides of being heavily—as in every waking moment for a lot of school-aged people—engaged with social media, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and the rest.

The ten downsides:²

1. *The Opportunity Cost.* One way to compute the cost of anything you are doing is the worth of everything else you could have been doing instead. If you are sprucing up your Facebook account, you are not spending the afternoon curled up reading Dostoevsky, taking a walk in the woods and learning Nature's truths, or engaged in serious thought and reflection.

2. *Never Completely in the Room.* With social media, you are always someplace other than in this place, here, now. You are always in the virtual world. In that realm, your focus is on the picture you just sent out on Instagram and reviewing your text messages and sending texts and anticipating what responses you are going to get to what you just sent.

3. "Let Me Tell You What I Think." Social media are centered on off-the-top commentaries and self-references. They are about what I think, what I prefer, how the world looks to me. They are about telling my story and letting people know what somebody else's story brings up for me. Subjective truth, what's true for me, my opinion, my reactions, takes precedence over the search for the truth outside myself. Social media prompt engaging other people's ideas just enough for them to prompt what I want to say about myself with regard to whatever or whoever it is.

4. *Easy Does It.* Tapping little keys with your thumbs, no heavy lifting in that. In fact, effortlessness is a central value in social media, as well as one of its appeals. Another social media value: shallowness. No need to dig deeply into anything.

5. *Affinity for the Pop Culture.* The social media message (both pronunciations) people in the direction of the popular culture. Being on top of contemporary mass entertainment and its messages and ways is a major value in social media.

6. *“Nowism.”* Social media are all about this time, now. What’s on for today, that’s the ticket. Who cares about the past? They know no history.

7. *Puts You in Show Business.* Facebook and Instagram and Twitter put you and Jimmy Fallon in the same line of work; you are both in show business. You and Jimmy are both engaged in self-promotion, exhibiting yourself in such a way as to get attention and go over big with your audience and being popular. Popularity is a major value in the world of social media; get that lineup of friends expanded, get a lot of action coming your way. The way to do it: get along, go along.

8. *Imprecise Word.* Social media is about tossed off, ungrammatical, on-impulse tweets and chatty, informal, two-line text messages. A free society depends of people who think hard about things and act accordingly.

9. *Groupthink.* Social media breed a collective, identity; you become a member of a virtual community and absorbed into it. With social media, you are never private. You are always on display: nine o’clock on a Thursday night, there you are, they can see you. A life in public contributes to an increased need to belong, and the way to belong is to go along with the crowd, conform. Social media involves self-disclosure. The more you talk about yourself—in any context, not just the internet—the more you reveal about yourself, especially negative self-disclosures, the more subject you are to control by others. Social media breed a kind of networked intelligence: accepted, and acceptable, thought is whatever the wisdom of the collective happens to be. Morality becomes shared morality. Truth, proof, becomes social, what is in the wind, or better, what is in cyberspace.

10. *Why Grow Up?* There is a stress in social media on youth, newness, immaturity. We all have to figure out how to pitch who we are to the world, and to ourselves, and many people these days have decided to “play it young,” and the social media push them in this direction. Children are especially prone to manipulation and intimidation.

Personally, I won't have anything to do with texting and social media. Bottom line in this writing: if you are the Pied Piper, social media obsessions provide you with good prospects to entice.

Of special mention in this context is TikTok. Owned by a Chinese company, launched outside China in 2016 and aimed at young people, it became the most popular website in the world in 2021, surpassing Google. If you want to understand who/what is educating today's youth, check out TikTok. One way of seeing the schools' use of Covid to justify locking down children in their homes is turning them over to TikTok.

This is not the place to go into a long discourse on TikTok. I'll leave it that as a parent I find it addictive, vulgar, and base. I watched my respectful, hard-working, National Honor Society, academic- and athletic-achieving daughter turning into a snippy, "show-offy," "consumerized," sexualized, lower-element-emulating urban teen. Ouch.

And last but absolutely not least, parents as educators. The people doing the talking center stage in society these days love to get across the idea that parents don't matter for much in their children's lives ("Back off and leave your children to me"). My working life that got me around young people surfaced just the opposite reality, at least potentially. Mom and Dad can have an enormous and lasting positive educational influence. It's not so much what they say that has the impact on their children. Rather, it is what they *are*. The challenge for parents is not so much pointing the way as *being* the way. What does your life example teach your child?

What do you do with any, all, of this?

I don't know what you do. You have to decide that. I only know what I decided to do: write this up. Given my age (advanced), circumstances, obligations, ambitions, and capabilities, it was the best thing I could think of to do. What you do depends on who you uniquely are as a person, where you are in your life's journey, your particular situation and responsibilities and possibilities, and your

beliefs and commitments. Maybe you do something, maybe you do nothing. “Somethings” that come to mind include publicly critiquing what I’ve written here and improving on it, setting out to become more informed about schooling and education, expressing your views to your family, friends, and neighbors, giving your children good books to read of the sort that schools aren’t about to give them, speaking up at schoolboard meetings and parent conferences, writing online or in articles and books, organizing other parents, participating in a schooling-oriented organization, supporting a politician or running for office yourself, and taking your role as a parent more seriously. Whatever you do, nothing is too small; everything matters. It could be voting in the next school board election when you haven’t in the past, fine. Little things you and I do encourage other people to do little (and big) things and it snowballs. What’s most important is that we take ourselves seriously and get in the game and do the best we can while we still have the gift of life.

Endnotes

1. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Expensive, get it from a library.
2. Robert S. Griffin, *Personal Computer Use in Our Time: An Addiction?*, 2014. In the writings section of my personal website, www.robertsgriffin.com