



There are some schools that are alive!

TERMINAL ED:

Our Schools are Dead

Tom Bender, 12 Dec '01

I think it is hopeless.

The problems with our public schools are so great and convoluted that the best thing we can do right now is give up. Give up control, when it is obvious we're controlling the wrong things and that we don't even know what *should* be controlled. Give up the federal regulation and the absurd trickle of aid that comes with it. Give up state regulation (for a period of ten years?), set up a voucher system, track what good alternatives spring up. Share the best that arises.

There will be bad, we're capable of that. But there's a whole lot of bad already. We need a fresh start, fresh visions, and new enthusiasm not strait-jacketed by incomprehensible layers of bureaucracy and regulations. Scarily bad text books that tell you what they're going to tell you, tell you, then tell you what they've told you - and all of it irrelevant. Fewer teachers teaching, more filling forms. *Teaching* "facts" like stuffing food into a pâté goose - not enabling *learning*, eagerly sought by students. Sitting for hours in front of corporate TV "news". Yes/no, black/white, teacher's right. Head, not heart; selling souls. Wearing down, disciplining, drugging any spark of life . . . molding life-filled kids into future-less, mind-less drones feeding corporate profits. The Prozac classroom. Testing, teaching to tests; what answer is *wanted*, not what answer is right. Hour-long commutes in busses filled with bored kids.

The regulatory structure is wrong, the teacher training is wrong, the culture that is taught is wrong. One of the roots of today's religious fundamentalism and terrorism is a very valid refusal to accept removal of the sacred from our lives and the commercialization, commodifying, and degrading our lives into materialistic consumerism. There *is* a fundamental emptiness and wrongness to what our schools do to our children, that must be changed. We need to heal, not cause, epidemic diseases of the spirit.

What could we try? Starting the day with improv music, song, and dance - whole-body and soul, rhythm that blesses us with an inability to be wrong. No *right* sequence, no *right* way to play. Just the making of fullness and joy - together. Bring the spirit world and the sacred dimensions of existence into learning - but not religion that denies our direct experience of the sacred. Waldorf Schools are the only ones I know that acknowledge our direct connection with the sacred. Learn from them, but not the authoritarian, inflexible, lock-step learning that many of them represent.

Teach and enhance the psychic skills that each of us have, experience, then are taught to repress. Massage, loving touch, healing . . . learning to keep our hearts open and care for others. Make useful things - sewing, carpentry, pottery, metal, electronics. Fix meals together. Acknowledge that each of us learns differently, are ready for different things at different times, and that there are no "right" answers. Teach about life-force energy - qi gong, tai chi, martial arts, meditation, yoga. Make art part of everything - in *how* we do things - not as a product.

Learn in the real world, not in buildings isolated from the rest of life. Apprentice with skilled people, in meaningful projects. Do real work that is worth being proud of. Give to the community. Weave learning places in with home, with industry, with the elderly, with the ill, with other life. Have places where kids can challenge themselves - physically, mentally, spiritually. Where they can sit around a fire learning from their elders. Where they *are* safe, surrounded by love and caring. Where they can learn by doing, where it's okay to make mistakes. Where they can learn to learn.

Acknowledge drugs. They are there, good luck stopping them. There's bad stuff and abuse, but also good. The sad thing is that most drugs are better than most classrooms in most schools. The biggest problem - but also value - of drugs is that they expose the wrongness of our everyday culture. Teach what drugs can give used sacramentally, not as a crutch. Learn from what drugs reveal - change our schools and culture so they aren't lies. Deal with the issues of legal drugs adults abuse - alcohol, caffeine-colas, cigarettes, coffee, and that there are positive reasons for certain drug use. Kids wouldn't need drugs much if school was exciting.

Escape the false wisdom of "facts" and logic. Our sense of our world comes from awareness of our inner world, the inner world of others, how we appear to others, and how others appear to us. We can't access two of those areas directly, and logic only works on the last. The most important things are unquantifiable, and qualitative differences are often ones that are *too substantial* and too important to have common basis for comparison. Success has to embrace all people and all life.

Get the TV and the kids out of the classroom, along with culture that perverts, corrupts and debases the wonder and beauty of sex, love, passion, and beauty into a tool to deceive us. Teach enoughness, not greed and violence; inner rather than outer qualities; the power of our inner resources. Add fairness, equity, diversity and sharing to our vocabulary of action. Learn to count what *really* counts.

Let kids choose what they are ready for, interested in, and excited about. Keep a rich palette of opportunities and options in front of them. Let them work with people who are passionate about their own work. Let them experience excitement, competence, achievement, extra-ordinariness in others and themselves. Let them tackle things we don't know the answers to.

"But," you say, "kids with that kind of learning won't be employable." Of course not! - they won't stand for demeaning jobs that don't employ and enrich skills, that destroy self-esteem, that don't let them contribute something of real value to their community. Yes, they will avoid or drop out of college, refuse meaningless work. No, they won't buy into another piece of our culture that is wrong. But they *will* have what we need - the capabilities to help transform what else needs it, and the abilities to truly contribute to a society that is

nurturing and rewarding to all.

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