

School Daze

By Mark Y. Herring

Ed School Follies: The Miseducation of America's Teachers, by Rita Kramer (New York: The Free Press, 1991) 228 pages, index.

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The self-destruction of teacher-education schools Rita Kramer discusses in her compact, yet powerful book, *Ed School Follies*. The book is a veritable Q.E.D. why American education desperately needs reforming. Dante warns as much: "Here dwell those who have lost the good of the intellect. All their fear is changed into desire." Kramer chronicles for us the very sad story of the decline in American education and its miseducation of American teachers. In the charnel houses known as teacher-education schools, Kramer shows us the men and women who have lost the good of the intellect. The accompanying decline in student achievement reveals to us the proof of the rest of Dante's contention.

Of all the talk of reform, and there is plenty, Kramer's book tackles the problem at its core: the reform of teacher education. Hoping to answer questions such as, Who goes into teaching nowadays?, What are their beliefs and motivations?, and How do they perceive their role as teachers?, Kramer travelled the four corners of this nation. From George Peabody College for Teachers of Vanderbilt University, to UCLA, Kramer sought, and found, what many of us may have only suspected to be true: the education of teachers is as execrable as the education those same teachers provide to their students.

The obvious she discovered first. Seventy percent of all teachers are female, though we hear no one calling teaching a sexist profession. It also turns out to be the most unionized profession in the world, with eighty percent of public school teachers belonging to the union, the National Education Association. When we realize that these teachers belong to what has become a most left-of-center union, and among the top five most powerful lobbies in Washington, it helps to explain why Johnny, not to mention Sarah, Tom, Billy Jo Bob, and all the rest, cannot read...or write, or add, or subtract. It also helps to explain why students don't know where in the world they are, literally. They do not know if they live in a Democracy or not, and if they have heard the name of Shakespeare, they will argue with you that it is a fishing rod. But they can put a condom on a banana, or a

reasonable facsimile, in less time than it takes to say, “Heaven Forbid!”

Kramer also reports that the average salary for teachers is now about \$25,000 annually. Quick, name another profession that pays as much, allows for three weeks of vacation during the year, adds three summer months off, does not require more than a college education, does not make rigorous intellectual demands of its adherents, and grants lifetime employment after five years? I couldn't think of one either.

If all of this isn't enough to make you take a hickory stick after your nearest school teacher, the rest of Kramer's story will. Educators, from the top of the line to the rookie teacher, are a capricious lot, undertaking radical changes every decade or so. They are not content with a curriculum for more than a few years, and will even adopt curricula that are contradictory to ones chosen a few years earlier. The lot of teachers is astonishingly anti-intellectual, given their chosen profession, and divisively political, especially in a leftward direction. For example, in recent years the national union, the NEA, has supported left-leaning Democratic candidates for nearly every elected office, supported globalism, encouraged radical environmentalism, applauded alternative lifestyles, and favored abortion-on-demand. The last position is especially interesting since a moment's reflection would tell even a differently minded individual (otherwise known as a moron) that long-term adherence to abortion will put most teachers out of work.

Gallery of Horrors

In the Northeast, Kramer found teachers moving from progressive education to peace education, a move that required little effort. Teachers here were given crash courses in global peace and peace education, the kind of curricula that Chester Finn said would squeeze the life out of our children before they were ten. Everyone at this school was sensitive, warm, and open-minded, except when he encountered a viewpoint the opposite of his own.

The class sessions at this college would have been risible if one could forget how important the enterprise of teaching is. Classes were conducted at a near imbecilic level. Discussions were a time to spout off ignorant opinions, and class work ranged between the tenth grade and senior high level of difficulty.

At State University of New York, would-be teachers learned how to play at pedagogy, wanting to grade students for effort as much as for information. One student even suggested, “Why not separate things—give him a ‘D’ for achievement and an ‘A’ for effort.” While it evoked laughter even there, it was clear that this approach was encouraged. “Use grades as positive reinforcement”, they were told.

At Austin Peavy, students were taught, “We expect too much of teachers today. The pool isn't worse, the expectations are higher.” In light of the evidence, *all* to the contrary, the statement is as illogical as a group of doctors arguing, “This medicine works just fine.

The reason the mortality rate is up is that the disease is just too strong for it.” AIDS education and curricula are given center stage at APSU. Discussions on same are underscored with as much opinion as fact.

At California State University at Long Beach, students were made to understand that the bad words in education were “conservative”, “merit”, and “standards”. The professor's anti-authority stance made standard lectures impossible. Students learned from each other in small groups, as they did at nearly all other schools in this study. Forget for the moment that group discussion is much easier on a professor than preparing a grueling fifty-five minute, information-laden lecture. Small group discussion built camaraderie, interpersonal relationships, and a global community, or so students were told. They also cinched ignorance.

And so *Ed Follies* continues throughout its 220+ pages. Of course I have bypassed those isolated occurrences where the education of teachers occurs in a positive light. I have chosen to deal with the preponderance of evidence. That weight is this: our nation's teachers-in-training rank in the bottom half of all other students, are usually women hoping to find easy jobs to do while their own children grow up, and learn from a hodgepodge of professors who are either radical leftist leftovers from the sixties, enlightened sensitivity-trained promoters of yet another Utopia, or full-blooded, feminist Reconstructionists who hope to change the world in their image through a politically-oriented curriculum.

After reading this book, it was far easier to understand why so many goof-ball notions of education filter down the ranks to our children. First, there are the professors. Some of them are intelligent, committed individuals who hope to teach their students how to teach others. But the vast majority are halfwits who have an axe to grind. Into *their* hands come a hoard of females, many of whom (although certainly not all) would fail at nearly any other intellectual endeavor. When the two are put together, the one can indoctrinate the other with every nonsense imaginable.

How Things Got this Way

While the name John Dewey strikes admiration in the hearts of many educrats, it creates heartburn in the hearts of most Conservatives. But Conservatives are wrong to blame Dewey for *everything* that is wrong with American education. For all the histrionics associated with the one-room school house, education is clearly better for Dewey's pedagogical systematization and professional codification of teaching into a quasi-scientific art form. Where Dewey went wrong is exactly where error creeps in most often: he let his biases blind him.

Dewey, like Mann before him, hated religion in general, and Christianity in specific. As he saw it, someone needed to end Christianity's strangle-hold on education. He hoped to find a way to expel it from the classroom, freeing pure education to do the messianic

work he would not receive from the hands of God. Moreover, Dewey even supplied *his* own religion. The differences among the atheist *Humanist Manifesto* and Dewey's *A Common Faith* or "What I Believe" are, if there is any difference at all, illusory. The fact that Dewey is among the dozen and a half signatories of the 1933 *Manifesto* further substantiates the point. Some scholars go even farther, contending that Dewey wrote parts of it.

Dewey's thesis in *A Common Faith* is that man is getting better and more enlightened, and incarnational religion *démodé*. Of course Hitler and his brownshirts dealt the first notion a fatal blow, but never mind. Dewey had an axe to grind, and he ground it into the heads of believers.

Dewey knew that if he controlled American education, separated from religious influence, it would not matter whether the graduate or the dropout was a butcher, a baker, a beggerman, or a priest. They all would be equally secularist in their thinking. For all practical matters, Dewey succeeded monstrously well. Like Dr. Frankenstein before him, John Dewey did not count on the obvious: if you build a monstrous thing it may act like one. The very seeds of Progressivism sown by Dewey in the "Normal Schools" became the man-eating flower, Audrey, of the *Little Shop of Horrors*, not a bad description of our nation's teacher colleges. Rejecting standards, accountability, and any other measure that would prove its progress, American education went on a dumbing down spree that has yet to end. Now, after twenty years of saying so, everyone in America except, perhaps for Dewey's own bastard children in the NEA, are repeating the same word: Reform.

The Record of Reform

Reform, like teacher empowerment before it, and accountability before that, is the new buzz word in American education circles. Like the words and phrases before, it has the earmarks of heading for the same dustbin. Reform is hardly new.

Talk of school reform first surfaced in 1957, right after the Russians had shocked the world by launching Sputnik into space. American children were behind, we were told, especially in math and science. To catch up, we had to move fast. Money, like manna from heaven, but equally bitter, fell from the celestial skies of Washington, and schools doubled in size, adding dozens of methods courses in math and science at teacher-ed colleges. The students, however, did not do appreciably better in either math or science.

Next came the solution of new facilities. Student achievement was subpar because facilities were. This myth vanished with the 1966 Coleman Report. James Coleman and his colleagues found a fly in the ointment. Poor facilities turned out to have virtually nothing to do with achievement. About twenty years later, Hanushek rediscovered this (along with the fact that more money, higher salaries, lower teacher-student ratios, and one or two other factors had virtually no impact at all on student-achievement). In fact, as Coleman first, and Hanushek later, confirmed, achievement had little to do with buildings

or ratios, or salaries, or expenditures. The Coleman report was declared DOA and was not heard from again until the Nixon administration tried to revive it, and we all know what happened to Nixon.

Rumblings were heard again in the seventies with the release of Diane Ravitch's *Troubled Crusade* which chronicled the decline taking place in American education on a nationwide scale. Ivan Illich wrote *Deschooling Society* in which he argued that out-of-school experiences were as important as those going on in school. He maintained that we needed new definitions of schools and new approaches to learning. Educrats saw an industry in this and happily obliged. Meanwhile, back at the schools student achievement continued to decline.

Then came a spate of reform-minded books on secondary and higher education: *A Nation at Risk*, Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*, Kimball's *Tenured Radicals*, Smith's *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America*, D'Souza's *Illiberal Education*, and many others. The facts of the case are as perhorrescent as Bela Lugosi: American students, in competition with twenty-two other industrialized nations, score near the bottom, or dead last, in every academic category tested. On the other hand, American students, when tested on their self estimates of performance, rank first or second in all areas. In other words, our children are feeling good about doing bad, thank you. But this isn't as awful as it seems. Self-esteem has become nearly a monomania among American teachers. It is good to know that there is at least *one* subject that American teachers can teach, and teach well, apparently.

When reform comes to the lips of most educrats, the words, "more money", are often chanted as a mantra. More than one educrat has threatened that if the nation wants education reform, it had better be ready to pay for it. In the state where I live, Tennessee, our Democratic Governor has declared war on bad education by declaring war on its taxpayers. If Tennesseans want reform, our Governor will have to give us an income tax. This is much like going to the doctor and discovering that the cure for your migraine is either grinning and bearing it, or losing your head to amputation. Have middle grounds ceased to exist?

As the nation watched in understandable admiration our highly efficient Desert Storm forces demolish Hussein's defenses, more than one educator said, "Spend that kind of money on education and we will deliver the same." One was tempted to say, "Oh. You'll deliver graduates who are willing to be shot out of planes at bunkers?" But their point was well-taken. The logic ran as follows, spend a million a whack per student, as the Department of Defense does on missiles, and our students will perform just as efficiently. But herein looms the problem.

First, a number of nations spend considerably less than do we on education, yet their students out-think ours so rapidly it would make the thinking caps our students wear, assuming they haven't traded them away for condoms, spin faster on their heads than Linda Blair's did in the *Exorcist*. One cannot deny, for example, that Japan, Korea, and

formerly West Germany spend less than we, yet get a louder bang for their buck.

The second problem with this notion of spending more money is far more internecine. *We already have spent more money.* Never mind that the Constitution requires us to spend for defense but does *not* make a similar requirement for education. In the decade from 1980 to 1989, the U.S. spent, from all sources, about \$220 billion annually on education. This is over \$2 trillion for the decade, 1980-1989, and what did we get: students whose SAT math scores declined once again, and whose verbal scores *hit an all time low!* The record of government success on social problems via *dégagé* funding is more incredible than the phrase, “honest politician”.

How Bad Is It?

That brings us back to the core issue of Kramer's book: Is it really as bad as she suggests? I have been through the teacher-education process myself. I received a doctorate in education from a Tennessee university in 1990. The stories told by Kramer were all too familiar. Moreover, one summer I taught both undergraduates and graduate teachers, residing superintendents, and practicing principals. Neither experience is recommended for the soft-hearted.

The education for my doctorate was taught at about the eleventh grade level at its best, the ninth grade the rest of the time. Almost without exception, the classes were dull, drab, intellectually stultifying, and professionally depressing. The university had two things going for it: a dean, who wanted reform while remaining hopelessly wedded to what brought this college of education to the abyss in the first place, and a young, ambitious professor who worked like a banshee and made his students work equally hard. Although he admitted far more than his colleagues would about what was wrong with education, he, too, was protective of the NEA and its stranglehold on American education. My own conservative views were supported by only one professor in the entire department. He and I met behind closed doors to talk quietly about what could be done. It felt like being in a totalitarian country.

Just how bad was it? In one class, the professor read, actually *read*, from the textbook for each of the two and half hours of our fourteen meetings. Playing Hardy to his Laurel was a student, enrolled in the class, who made out the tests. This student distributed the answers to those whom he liked (he did not care for me). The test had as much to do with the class as NASA does with the immigrant problem. Another professor spent much of his time rambling from one point to another, never prepared for class, and seemed to wear his libido on, well, his pants leg. A final I took in one class consisted of 100 true/false questions—all of which turned out to be true. I knew after taking it I had either made a 100, or would have to re-take the course.

Students matched these professors in every detail. Most of the students (I noted about three exceptions) were likable, unassuming, grossly uninformed about anything remotely

unconnected to teaching, and credulous of nearly every liberal notion about any matter that came along. Most of them wanted to get in and get out of the program as quickly as possible. On this matter we were in agreement. They also wanted to do as little as possible along the way.

For example, during one non-credit seminar residents were required to take, I recommended we study Bloom's then recently released *The Closing of the American Mind*. Not one of them could understand why I wanted to read such a book, what good it would do since we were not getting any credit for it, and what possible purpose it could serve later.

Class discussions and preparations were equally embarrassing. In one History of Education class, a group of young girls made a presentation on Progressivism. Not only did their poster remind the audience of that little bumper sticker that cautions us to PLAN AHEAD, but the poster also had misspelled words on it. I remember thinking I had stepped back in time, to, say, the fourth grade.

The students I taught did not prove exceptions to these rules. The undergraduate students groaned and wailed because I attempted to teach a summer course with as much work as the same course required during the regular school year. "Don't you understand", they argued, "you can't teach a fourteen week class in seven weeks? That's why we're taking it now." I tried to explain to them that since they were getting an equal amount of credit as those taking the fourteen week course, they had to do equal work. They didn't buy it and ten of them dropped the course the day I handed out the syllabus.

I looked forward to the post-graduate course I taught later that summer to teachers, principals, and school superintendents. Lamentably the course turned into a nightmare. *These* students also complained loudly about the work. "Gosh, we have this 600 page textbook to read and you are making us read at least an article every night." They also objected to my teaching style. They seriously thought I violated a school rule by not teaching them from the textbook. When I explained to them that I would not simply repeat in the lectures what they had read the night before, assuming that they could read it for themselves, they became nearly mutinous. "Then you can't test us over the textbook!" they declared. Of course I could and did. When I required a writing assignment each week, assuming that they would use the huge university library nearby, they called my supervisor. They still got the writing assignments, but I have not been asked to teach again.

The whole dreadful scenario is made complete with a few anecdotes from public school teaching experiences. In one eighth grade Social Studies class, the subject matter was Democracy and Communism. Nearly accurate definitions for both were in the textbook. After one student read them, he exclaimed, "I didn't know the US was a democracy!" Of course liberals would make much of this, but be assured the child was simply expressing a profound ignorance, not a political sentiment.

In a fifth grade class, students, shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, were asked what had been going in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe that was so important. Not *one* of the twenty-five “advanced” students knew. But they can hardly be blamed. In a related matter, a Scholastic News reported on events in South Africa. In this reading, students were *not* told the following: that the ANC was filled with Communists; that Chief Bulthelezi opposed divestment; that Nelson Mandella had been imprisoned for a federal offense; that his wife, Winnie, had been indicted for murder; or that necklacing was the preferred method of 'dealing' with those who opposed Mandella.

Prescription

If reform of American education is to come about, it must begin with the education of our teachers. Before anything else can occur, teachers must be taught in a different way. Allowing the blind to lead the blind, a good description of our present state of affairs, will not leave just teachers and teacher-education colleges in the ditch; it will put the whole enterprise of American education there as well.

While teacher-education is being improved, we must allow for alternative certification, a subject matter that sends NEA bureaucrats into apoplexy. When one understands that neither William F. Buckley Jr. nor Arthur Schlesinger Jr. could teach in any school system in America, one begins to see what is wrong with American education.

Stiffer entry requirements into teacher programs for candidate teachers also should be established. Students can now enter graduate programs with virtually *any* academic record, good or bad. Also, reducing by half the number of methods courses required for certification would free students to take more courses in the subject area of their certification, something all of them could use.

Further, the teaching pool must attract a more highly qualified would-be teacher. The PPST, a qualifying test for students entering a teacher education program at the undergraduate level, either must be made more demanding, or the cut off score set higher. Educrats think the teacher pool will enlarge if beginning salaries are raised. But it will not. Raising starting salaries to \$18,500, for example, attracts only well-paid dunderheads. Of course if teaching paid \$90,000 annually to begin (I have actually heard this argued by a teacher), it would then compete with law and medicine. But to do that, its pedagogy will have to be equally rigorous—and it misses rigor by a few light years.

The problem isn't, however, limited to lousy teacher-ed programs, lousy teachers, and a liberal NEA union. The problem also rests on the shoulders of Conservatives. At this point I expect any applauders of this review-essay will begin to settle down. I can almost see some of them arch their eyebrows. Conservatives cannot simply pull their children out of public schools to home-school, or place them in a private school, and think that's the end of it. They must continue to work to improve the system. I cannot honestly blame

anyone for home-schooling their children or for placing them in private schools. I have one child in a private school, the other in a public one. But we cannot withdraw completely.

We cannot withdraw completely because the education of our nation's children is much too important to leave in the soiled hands of a minority of bunglers. Moreover, not everyone is capable of teaching their children at home, and of course not everyone can afford private education (though choice will make this more affordable if implemented nationwide). For those who fall into either of these groups, some suitable alternative to current public education must be made available. If it is not, then Conservatives will have to settle for dramatic increases in welfare rolls—where inevitably these children will wind up.

We have to keep fighting, working hard to improve the miserable status of American education. We can do that, as distasteful as it may be, by becoming certified ourselves, by teaching in the public schools, by serving on school boards, by backing candidates that favor choice and other right-minded reforms, and by organizing our friends and neighbors to help find workable solutions. This is no longer a partisan matter. It will matter deeply to you and to your children what happens to the public schools. We simply cannot leave them in the hands of those who now hold the keys to Minerva's kingdom. Equally important, however, is how much the improvement of education matters to our nation. It matters so much that mere words simply fail to capture the urgency with which we must tackle education reform.