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Set the Prisoners Free **by Scott McPherson**

School is the cheapest police.

— Horrace Mann, first secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education

The immense edifice of teacher instruction and schooling in general rests on the shaky hypothesis that expert intervention in childhood produces better people than might otherwise occur. I've come to doubt that.

— John Taylor Gatto, *The Underground History of American Education*

In criminal-justice circles there is often discussion of “recidivism,” the habitual return to crime. Many in that field believe that by increasing prison sentences, for example, and scaring prisoners into adopting a different career upon their release they can reduce recidivism.

Now many in the education establishment want to shorten the summer holiday, keeping kids in school longer each year. An Associated Press report in the September 2 issue of the *New Hampshire Union Leader* states,

3,000 [schools] across the nation ... have tossed aside the traditional calendar for one with a shorter break.... The goal: preventing kids from forgetting what they have learned.

No one has apparently cared to ask some searching questions about this rationale. For instance, can a child be said to have really *learned* something if he forgets it after a three-month break? And are the schools tacitly admitting that their methods, including rote memorization, “whole word” reading, and “new math,” are a failure?

The story editorialized that kids at one such school “are fine” with their new schedule. Really? Have the architects of mass compulsory schooling finally succeeded at one of their primary goals, that being the substitution of state institutions for the loving, nurturing environment of the home and family? It's hard to believe that if given the choice between going

back to school and staying at home, kids would voluntarily opt for the former; but if that is genuinely the case we should be concerned.

The report continues,

The number of schools on modified calendars with shorter summer breaks more than doubled in the last 15 years. Today, 46 states have schools operating on these calendars — up from 23 states in 1992. The entire Hawaiian school system recently moved to a nontraditional calendar with a seven-week summer break.

It's worth noting at this point that many schools are also implementing full- and half-day kindergarten, canceling recess (more appropriately called a "furlough"), and expanding their "after school" programs to keep kids in the classroom longer each *day*.

Let's just cut to the chase and give them what they really want: year-round control over kids' lives.

One revolt against this regime isn't as promising as it appears at first glance. A school district in Alabama raised "an outcry" over the proposed change. Not because of any principled stand against further state encroachment on nonschool time, mind you, but because the new schedule would have longer breaks at other times of the school year, most objectionably during football season! "You don't touch football here," a campaigning father said. Lock kids in a classroom for 12 years (at least) — the most formative years of their lives — and there's nary a peep from America's parents. But don't touch football!

To sweeten the deal, "educators" at Barcroft Elementary School in Arlington, Virginia, are including "fun electives that aren't typically offered during regular school periods." They can't manage to effectively teach kids the essentials, despite the fact that they have a captive audience for nine months of the year, so they bring them back early — an entire month or two early, in some school districts — so they can devote *more* time to important subjects, right? Of course not! "One recent program [at Barcroft] was devoted to wetlands," the AP says, which a second-grader "described with glee": "'We made clay things,' he said breathlessly. 'We made clay turtles and lily pads for frogs. It was fun!'"

Kids in alarming numbers can't read, write, do math, construct an intelligent sentence, or think in anything resembling a logical fashion — but cutting-edge pedagogy has them constructing clay lily pads. Your tax dollars at work.

Compulsory attendance

A common half-truth wrapped up the report: "The traditional school calendar dates to a period when children were more likely to be needed on family farms in the summer." This tells only half the tale: compulsory school laws started in 1852 in Massachusetts and had completed

their takeover of American education by about 1920. This didn't happen all at once. The advocates of compulsory schooling started small, often over widespread objection, by making only a few years of school mandatory. As their grip tightened they expanded the laws to apply to younger and younger students at the one end, and slowly required longer attendance at the other.

Compulsory schooling didn't grow like a weed; it slowly spread like a seemingly docile hydra whose full threat wasn't realized until its tentacles had the country by the throat. That parents were able to find *some* reason to limit its reach — by demanding a summer holiday so Johnny and Jane could help out on the farm — is hardly the tranquil image held up by liberals and conservatives alike that some kind of great compromise had been reached whereby everyone got what he wanted. Parents in the late 19th century were actually highly suspicious of government schooling. (In *The Underground History of American Education*, John Taylor Gatto, a former teacher, writes that some schoolhouses were burned down and teachers run out of town). Parents wound up with little say over their kids' lives and education, and today we call it a "traditional school calendar." How quaint.

At an education summit two years ago, Microsoft founder (and college dropout) Bill Gates accused public schools of "ruining" the lives of many of America's approximately 40 million students. This is a damning statement, especially coming from a huge supporter of public schools. Mr. Gates is instrumental in the "Ed in '08" campaign, which asks all presidential candidates to focus on education as a priority in the country so that "we" can build "strong American schools." Like many, he is ignorant of the fact that the nationalizing, centralizing, and "strengthening" of schools is precisely the thing that destroyed a once-highly literate, independent, innovative, educated populace by placing it under the control of utopian idealists who wanted to mold a brighter future.

One final note: the September 4 issue of the *Union Leader* carried another worrisome headline: "Diagnosing kids as bipolar surges."

Researchers looked at the number of times children under 19 went to the doctor and were diagnosed with or treated for bipolar disorder, also known as manic depression. They found a 40-fold increase, from an estimated 20,000 visits in 1994 to 800,000 [!] in 2003. The jump coincided with children's rising use of antipsychotic medicine.

If these figures represent an increase resulting from growing pressure that is put on parents by schools to dope their kids (as in the ADD and Ritalin phenomenon of the late 20th and early 21st centuries), then we have genuine reason to be extremely concerned for their mental and physical safety under the *parens patriae* of state schooling. But at least that can be countered by a sudden shift in popular opinion, ideally translating to a radical composition of our legislative bodies. If, however, this rise in child psychosis is real, then we are quite possibly reaping the

whirlwind of a century of confining children like inmates (and laboratory rats) to what education historian Gatto more accurately calls “the prison of modern schooling.”

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