

# What's Wrong With State Education?

My years of suffering through the English educational system, and actually running a school, gave me a very jaundiced view of schools in general. But in recent years there seems to be an increasing groundswell of opposition to the way schools have suffered as tools in political battles.

There was a widely praised but controversial documentary in 2010 called "Waiting for Superman". It was a polemic on failed education, with the idea that only Superman could save it all. But Superman was not coming. The film followed mothers desperate to get their children out of the state system for any chance of success in life.

It gave statistical evidence that American children are rapidly falling behind those of other countries and the USA is simply not providing enough well qualified young people to maintain its technological and commercial lead. This despite the massive increase in money being poured into education year by year, and each president since LBJ claiming that education was a top priority. Similar claims could well be made for state education in the UK. But in the UK, state funding for denominational and other types of competitive schools gives many parents more choices.

There are good state schools in both countries, of course. But it is the unacceptable number of failed, so called 'Sink Schools' that is so troubling, because they fail the weakest, most disadvantaged children, which can only spell disaster for the social, economic, and intellectual future of any country.

No wonder in the USA more and more turn to home education. And thank goodness there are fabulous and free educational sites such as Khan Academy where anyone has access to the best.

Now a Hollywood film called "Won't Back Down", starring Maggie Gyllenhaal, is covering similar ground fictionally. Both movies share a theme of how parents have to battle entrenched unions and bureaucracies to get a decent education for their children.

Recently in New York, Mayor Bloomberg was prevented from closing failing and declining schools, and he was forced to reemploy failed teachers. In New Jersey, Governor Christie was so delighted he won a concession not to have to give life tenure for all teachers after one year's service, he put up with being denied the right to fire poor teachers of longstanding over brilliant ones without seniority.

Many people in the US advocate an expansion of charter schools; independent private schools funded by the government. Some of them have been remarkably successful, others less so of course. What charter schools can do is extend the working day, fire incompetent teachers, reward effective ones, and do precisely the sorts of things that the teachers' unions, the biggest and most powerful of all union lobbies in Washington, oppose. An alternative is the

'voucher' scheme, which would allow children to go to good schools wherever they could find them and pay them the money currently wasted on failing institutions. Both of these schemes are resolutely opposed by the teachers' unions.

Unions were founded to protect the rights of teachers who were often taken terrible advantage of, and even today, I believe the good and the best are poorly rewarded. One only needs passing acquaintance with the lot of many teachers in some private Jewish schools who are often not paid on time, given few benefits, and expected to work long and thankless hours, to know that there is still a role for teachers' unions. But if unions refuse to differentiate between the good, the bad, and the incompetent, or stop successful teachers being rewarded and insist that teachers have a job for life even if they can't or won't teach, then they are clearly failing children. New York alone spend millions of dollars each year paying teachers who are not fit to teach in a school, to clock into a 'sin bin' and pass the whole working day playing cards or sleeping because they can neither use them nor fire them, because the drawn out process of discipline takes three to four years. Can any sincere adult accept such a situation?

I was fortunate in my years as headmaster of a private school to be in a position where I could fire poor teachers. I could reward good teachers and we had the results to prove it worked. I would not dream of going back into education today if those tools were denied me.

But the truth is that what the Unions are doing in their way is just one side of a devalued coin and no different to what huge chunks of the financial world do nowadays. They feather their own nests with obscene rewards for taking advantage of the innocence or the greed of ordinary human beings. Just as poor teachers are parasites living off the abuse of children, so too many bankers, financial wheeler-dealers, anyone taking unfair advantage of the needs of investors or legitimate commerce, are parasites. But they usually go unpunished in our corrupt system. Fair reward for time and skill is one thing. Excessive financial rewards millions of times greater than anyone else can ever hope to earn, and awarded contractually, is greed at the expense of others. It used to be said if you owe a bank a hundred dollars you were in trouble, but if you owed it a million the bank was in trouble.

Only successful economies can support the poor and needy. But there is a line to be drawn between encouraging capitalism and indulging it. Because some companies and economies are indulgent, others feel the need to follow suit for fear of losing out in talent and profits. So what was once a matter of keeping up with the Joneses has turned into keeping up with the extortionists.

Vested interests consistently trump morality and equity. The more one small segment of society is rewarded and can pay for services, the harder it becomes for those lower down the financial scale to get any reasonable kind of service themselves. It is no longer a rich man indulging himself. Now it is actually at the expense of others. In the past, this gave rise to the dream that Communism would balance the scales; but Communism became as corrupt a cure as the disease. So today we have the excesses of the unions on

the one hand and the unfettered Capitalists on the other. One doesn't know which is worse.

These two films about education eloquently argue that change is necessary. Sadly, like the ridiculous American obsession with guns, no one seems to have the will, the guts or the power to do anything about it.