

# What American Education Has in Common with the Dark Ages

The period of the “Dark Ages” is synonymous with cultural deterioration in the West. It is typically applied to those centuries following the fall of the Roman Empire at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and is regarded as a time when education dramatically declined.

In his classic [\*Education and Culture in the Barbarian West\*](#), Pierre Riché offers the following four characteristics that signaled this decline in education at the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century:

## **1) Greek was largely forgotten.**

“Even more serious for the future was the growing ignorance of Greek and, thus, the abandonment of an entire segment of ancient culture... Having forgotten Greek, the lettered of the sixth century had no contact with the culture which previously had come to them from the East, that is, philosophical culture.”

## **2) The number of teachers declined, and the ones left had to teach remedial classes.**

“Teachers were fewer and were obliged to teach grammar as well as rhetoric, thus confusing secondary instruction with more advanced instruction.”

## **3) The number and quality of students declined.**

“Students, also less numerous, were neither competitive nor greatly interested in their work. [The famous teacher Ennodius] often complained about the laziness of his young correspondents... In Gaul, [the aristocrat and bishop] Ruricius scolded his son for ‘thinking too much of the girls’ choir and of Bacchus.’”

#### **4) People didn’t continue their education after school, and the highly educated no longer sought public office.**

From a letter written by the famous educator Cassiodorus in 527 A.D., in which he complains about students forgetting their education once they left school:

*“What use is it that so many men brought up on literature remain hidden? Their children want to go to secondary schools and could soon be worthy of the activities of the forum; as soon as they return to their homes in the country, they begin no longer to know anything. They make progress in school, only to unlearn everything. They educate themselves so that they never have to bother with it again, and while they love their fields, they no longer know how to love themselves.”*

Interestingly, in America today, one finds some of these same trends: fewer students are exposed to philosophy ([which used to be taught at the high school age](#)), there are [reports](#) of teacher shortages, [20%](#) of four-year college students now take remedial courses, and [27% of adults](#) didn’t read a single book last year. The general consensus is that American education is in crisis.

Do you think we have entered another Dark Ages?