

Yes, We're Getting Dumber. But Why?

This morning brought the news that long time economist Thomas Sowell is retiring from his position as a syndicated columnist. Curious, I flipped through an [archive](#) of his many columns and stumbled on one entitled [Education: Then and Now](#), written in early 2006.

One paragraph in particular caught my eye. Like [many of the older generation](#), Sowell notes that the education he received in the New York Public School system of the 1940s was stellar and well-rounded, a far cry from that experienced by children enrolled in the New York Public Schools of the late twentieth century:

“Some years ago, when I looked at the math textbooks that my nieces in Harlem were using, I discovered that they were being taught in the 11th grade what I had been taught in the 9th grade. Even if they were the best students around, they would still be two years behind – with their chances in life correspondingly reduced.”

Sowell's words are reminiscent of those from another individual well-acquainted with the New York Public School system: former teacher of the year John Taylor Gatto. In his book, [Dumbing Us Down](#), Gatto declares:

“Pick up a fifth-grade math or rhetoric textbook from 1850 and you'll see that the texts were pitched then on what would today be considered college level. The continuing cry for 'basic skills' practice is a smoke screen behind which schools preempt the time of children for twelve years....”

So why were the students of previous generations able to

handle such difficult material? According to Gatto, the answer is simple: they didn't have a school system which put every student in the same little box. Instead, children were encouraged to learn when they were ready and at the pace which they desired:

"[T]he truth is that reading, writing, and arithmetic only take about one hundred hours to transmit as long as the audience is eager and willing to learn. The trick is to wait until someone asks and then move fast while the mood is on. Millions of people teach themselves these things – it really isn't very hard."

The investigations of Sowell and Gatto confirm what many Americans have long feared, namely, that the content in the classroom has been "dumbed down."

But Gatto also hints at an interesting solution – which many of us never hear – when he suggests that the way out of this problem is to get children out of the institutional mode of schooling.

Do you think he's on to something? Would we see a natural genius and a quest for learning spring out of many children if they were not consigned to a classroom and the learning level appropriated for their age?