

What's Really Wrong with American Schools

With the confirmation of Betsy DeVos to head the U.S. Department of Education, it's a good time to think about what's wrong with our schools and what will have to be done to fix them.

DeVos is most notable for her efforts in support of school choice. School choice is important, but it is only a first step toward the real reform of schools. That being said, school choice and charter schools do one necessary thing: They break the stranglehold that teachers' unions and education colleges have over schools.

Teachers unions are subject to incentives that distort the way schools work. While posing as an interest group looking out for quality education, they are, in reality, labor unions for whom salaries, health plans, and retirements trump issues of education policy and practice.

But the most destructive player in the modern education establishment is teachers' colleges.

Education majors [are almost always near the bottom](#) in terms of academic achievement compared with other college majors, and the standards in education departments are correspondingly low. It is a tragic irony that the students being trained to staff the nation's institutions of learning are among the least well-educated themselves.

Even given the low quality of the education students, teachers' colleges do two things that make the situation worse.

The first is that their view of how teachers should teach is stuck in the 1920s. The "child-centered learning" of John

Dewey, despite its abject failure in actual practice, is still taught as dogma by those who teach our teachers. In fact, they haven't even bothered to update the slogan.

Anyone who doubts the time warp in which teacher training programs find themselves need only pick up [a copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*](#) and read chapters two and four, in which the techniques of Dewey and other progressive reformers first reach rural Alabama school districts in the early 1930s. Cooperative learning, projects, unit studies—all the fixtures of supposedly modern education are there.

That the highest aspiration of modern teacher training is what was being done in rural Alabama schools in the 1930s is an irony yet to find its full appreciation.

But perhaps worse than the deficient teaching techniques still being taught is the utter lack of attention to academic content. Education should inculcate three things: functional, cultural, and moral literacy. But go try to find a teacher training program that even has a class on traditional phonics reading instruction. There are a few, but they are far between. Try to find a program that emphasizes the reading of classic literature, or a program that has something even approximating instruction in how to conduct meaningful character education.

Instead, aspiring teachers are subjected to the constant drone of “tolerance” and “diversity.” Properly understood, these things are not bad. But they will do virtually nothing to improve education in this country.