

Why Americans Are Such Suckers for Propaganda

To many Americans, high school seems like a normal part of life. To not attend is unheard of; to fail to graduate is a death sentence for one's future.

But what we often forget is that the modern high school is a relatively new concept. As Paul Beston notes in a [recent article](#) for *City Journal*, a hundred years ago America was in the early stages of a high school boom, with 2 million students attending classes. That number rose to 6.6 million by the start of World War II. Today, the number of public high school students measures at [15 million](#).

But as Beston goes on to explain, the high school as we know it now isn't the one America knew in its earlier years. That school was far more rigorous. Today's high schools are the result of several decades of the gradual dumbing down of curriculum.

This dumbing down began in earnest during the Depression years, but as Beston notes, had been encouraged as early as 1912:

"In 1912, The Saturday Evening Post published an article by William Mearns, who taught creative writing at Teachers College: 'Our Medieval High Schools: Shall We Educate Children for the Twelfth or the Twentieth Century?' Mearns attacked the traditional high school curriculum—English, classical literature, advanced mathematics, history—and asked whether such material had any relevance for the vast majority of high school kids."

This attack is particularly interesting in light of an essay which was written in 1947 by Dorothy Sayers, a scholarly peer of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. The essay, entitled [The Lost](#)

[Tools of Learning](#), suggests that those who excoriate the education of the Middle Ages – such as the reference above – have no clue how effective the training of that time period was.

According to Sayers, the modern curriculum consists of “subjects,” which simply throw an eclectic jumble of ideas at students. With little rhyme or reason to these subjects, students “go out unarmed, in a day when armor was never so necessary,” falling prey to their emotions and the latest bit of propaganda, unable to reason and determine truth.

By contrast, medieval education took a systematic approach, carefully laying the ground work by filling students’ minds with facts in the early grades, teaching them how to frame an argument from those facts and argue logically in the middle grades, and, finally, using these tools in the upper grades to hone their skills in rhetoric and oral argument.

As Sayers goes on to explain, a failure to do this will only lead to the prolonging of education, the spending of ever greater amounts of money, a larger burden on teachers, and a student population ill-equipped to defend itself in the age of mass information and propaganda. Sayers concludes:

“What use is it to pile task on task and prolong the days of labor, if at the close the chief object is left unattained? It is not the fault of the teachers – they work only too hard already. The combined folly of a civilization that has forgotten its own roots is forcing them to shore up the tottering weight of an educational structure that is built upon sand. They are doing for their pupils the work which the pupils themselves ought to do. For the sole true end of education is simply this: to teach men how to learn for themselves; and whatever instruction fails to do this is effort spent in vain.”

Her words should be a wake-up call for today’s society,

particularly since more than 60 percent of high school seniors are [not proficient](#) in history, reading, writing, math, or science. Are these numbers living proof that American education has been “effort spent in vain”?