

# A Decline in Reading Skills Makes Geese for the Plucking

A teacher-friend of mine recently expressed sadness over the stagnation of her students. Before the pandemic she could see students steadily gaining ground. Now she was seeing zero progress on their tests—and maybe even some declines. Tests aren't everything, she admitted, yet after struggling through online teaching and masks and other troubles, she was disheartened to see ground being lost.

Unfortunately, it appears my friend is just one of many teachers experiencing such discouragement. The effects of the pandemic are beginning to show up, and the results aren't pretty, particularly in the area of reading for younger students. [\*The New York Times\* reports](#), "If children do not become competent readers by the end of elementary school, the risks are 'pretty dramatic,'" according to Dr. Tiffany Hogan, the director of a speech and language literacy lab in Boston. "Poor readers are more likely to drop out of high school, earn less money as adults and become involved in the criminal justice system."

This is undoubtedly true. But Hogan overlooks one of the biggest dangers facing this up-and-coming population that can't read: they will be all the more easily taken in by propaganda, sucked onto the conveyor belt of yes-men that do anything the media and government tell them to do.

Former public schoolteacher John Taylor Gatto tells us why this is so in his book, [\*An Underground History of American Education\*](#). "Close reading of tough-minded writing is still the best, the cheapest, and quickest method known for learning to think for yourself," he wrote. Students who only learn to read at a superficial level will struggle with ever doing such close reading, however. In turn, they will lose the

opportunity to expand the mind and make important mental connections.

But a student who can read and digest a certain text will be able to use knowledge gleaned to engage others in society. "Reading, and rigorous discussion of that reading in a way that obliges you to formulate a position and support it against objections," Gatto wrote, "is an operational definition of education in its most fundamental civilized sense." In other words, the serious reader should be able to use the material he has digested to connect the mental dots, enabling him to stand strong on a position without yielding to the sway of the crowd.

It is in doing such "reading, analysis, and discussion," Gatto wrote, that we are able to "develop reliable judgment, the principal way we come to penetrate covert movements behind the façade of public appearances." Put differently, capable readers are able to cut through the 24/7 propaganda that surrounds us and discern what is true and what is not.

As Gatto put it, "Without the ability to read and argue we're just geese to be plucked."

That's a painful wake-up call. But one that every parent should heed.

Teaching your child to be a strong reader is not just the domain of a schoolteacher; parents can teach a child to read just as well. In fact, it is in the home that a love of reading is established, as I recently observed by way of a friend. He realized that his young daughter wasn't talking as much as her siblings had done at the same age. When he sat her down and began reading regularly to her, her verbal communication soared.

The more parents read to children, the more thinking citizens we will have one day. And the more thinking citizens we have, the fewer geese there will be for the plucking.

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