

# Public School Nightmare

*The only way to reform public education is to introduce market pressures.*

By John Taylor Gatto

I want you to consider the frightening possibility that we are spending far too much money on schooling, not too little. I want you to consider that we have too many people employed in interfering with the way children grow up — and that all this money and all these people, all the time we take out of children's lives and away from their homes and families and neighbourhoods and private explorations — gets in the way of education.

That seems radical, I know. Surely in modern technological society it is the quantity of schooling and the amount of money you spend on it that buys value.

And yet, last year in St. Louis I heard a vice-president of IBM tell an audience of people assembled to redesign the process of teacher certification that in his opinion this country became computer-literate by self-teaching, not through any action of schools. He said 45 million people were comfortable with computers who had learned through dozens of non-systematic strategies, none of them very formal. If schools had pre-empted the right to teach computer use, we would be in a horrible mess right now instead of leading the world in this literacy.

Now think about Sweden, a beautiful, healthy, prosperous and up-to-date country with a spectacular reputation for quality in everything it produces. It makes sense to think their schools must have something to do with that. Then what do you make of the fact that you can't go to school in Sweden until you are seven years old?

The reason the unsentimental Swedes have wiped out what would be first and second grades here is that they don't want to pay the large social bill that quickly comes due when boys and girls are ripped away from their best teachers at home too early.

It just isn't worth the price, say the Swedes, to provide jobs for teachers and therapists if the result is sick, incomplete kids who can't be put back together again very easily. The entire Swedish school sequence isn't 12 years, either — it's nine. Less schooling, not more. The direct savings of such a step in the US would be \$75-100 billion, a lot of unforfeited home mortgages, a lot of time freed up with which to seek an education.

One of the principal reasons we got into the mess we're in is that we allowed schooling to become a very profitable monopoly, guaranteed its customers by the police power of the state.

Schooling is the single largest employer in the U.S. and the largest grantor of contracts next to the Defence Department. Both of these low-visibility phenomena provide monopoly schooling with powerful political friends, publicists, advocates and other useful allies. This in large part explains why no amount of failure ever changes things in schools, or changes them for very long. School people are in a position to outlast any storm and to keep the public's short attention span thoroughly confused. An overview of the history of this institution reveals a pattern of intervals of public outrage, followed by enlargement of the monopoly in every case.

After nearly 30 years spent inside various public schools, some good, some bad, I feel certain that management can't clean its own house. There are no incentives for the "owners" of the structure to reform it, nor can there be without outside competition.

What is needed for several decades is the kind of wildly-swinging free market we had at the beginning of our national history. It cannot be over-emphasized that no body of theory exists to accurately define the way children learn, or which learning is of most worth. By pretending the existence of such, we have cut ourselves off from the information and innovation that only a market can provide.

Trust the people, give them choices, and the school nightmare will vanish in a generation.

*(Mr. Gatto was voted 1991 New York State Teacher of the Year by his peers.)*