



Written by [Sam Blumenfeld](#) on August 31, 2012

On Teaching and Tutoring (Part 2)

In my previous column I wrote that it is almost impossible to become a good, innovative teacher in today's public schools. I base that statement on the experiences of one of America's great teachers, Marva Collins, who tried to teach her students to read with intensive phonics in a public school in Chicago, and was finally forced to leave the system and create her own private school where she could teach in the one traditional way that produces high literacy as opposed to the public school way that produces functional illiteracy.



According to a Wikipedia biography, Collins was born in Monroeville, Alabama in 1936. She graduated from Clark College (now known as [Clark Atlanta University](#)) in [Atlanta, Georgia](#). She taught school for two years in Alabama, then moved to Chicago, where she taught in public schools for 14 years. Frustrated by the dumbed-down curriculum in the public school, she decided in 1975 to create her own private school, Westside Preparatory School, which became a great educational success. At the school, located in Garfield Park, an impoverished neighborhood in Chicago, Collins applied classical education successfully with students from poor families, many of whom had been labeled [learning disabled](#) by the public schools. She once wrote, "I have discovered few learning disabled students in my three decades of teaching. I have, however, discovered many, many victims of teaching inabilities."

Westside Preparatory was so successful in turning out well-educated students that in 1981 its story was made into a movie, *The Marva Collins Story*, starring Cicely Tyson and Morgan Freeman. Even President Ronald Reagan considered her as a possible secretary of education. In 1996 she began supervising three Chicago public schools that had been placed on probation. In 2004 she received a [National Humanities Medal](#), among many awards for her teaching and efforts at school reform. Marva and her school were also the subject of a *60 Minutes* interview, which questioned the adult graduates of the school and reported that they were all successful in their careers due to the kind of education they got at Westside Prep.

In 2008, Collins made the wrenching decision to close Westside Preparatory after 30 years of operation because of decreasing financial support. The school had charged a tuition fee of \$5,500, which fewer and fewer parents could afford. The school released a statement which said: "We are closing our school ... because the community we wanted to serve has not supported, or could not support the school, to the extent financial considerations demand."

Obviously, Westside Preparatory did not have the kind of endowment that Taylor Mali's Collegiate School had, nor could it charge a yearly tuition of \$39,000.

Instead, Marva decided to offer her services as a consultant, a teacher trainer, and as an advisor to parents and students on the Internet.

When one considers that Marva Collins grew up in Atmore, Alabama, at a time when segregation was the rule and black people were not even permitted to use the public library, the story of how she



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became one of America's great teachers is a remarkable testimony to the great possibilities America offers individuals regardless of race or social standing. In other words, America is still a land of unlimited possibilities provided one knows how to avoid being trapped by the politically correct ideology of the public school establishment.

Indeed, Condoleezza Rice, in her speech before the Republican National Convention, spoke of her childhood in segregated Birmingham, Alabama, and how America's unlimited possibilities and her own individual striving enabled her to become Secretary of State in the G.W. Bush administration.

It took enormous courage and self-confidence to do what Marva Collins did. But that's what it takes to do anything exceptional, and there are thousands of individuals in America today who do the exceptional on their own without the help of government bureaucrats.

I first met Marva at a conference of the Reading Reform Foundation where, every year, those of us who advocated intensive phonics reading instruction for all American children gathered for a productive time of fellowship and continued learning. It was that fellowship with individual entrepreneurs and independent educators that encouraged Marva to make her own way. Since then, she has become a legend.

Another great teacher whom I first met at a Reading Reform Foundation conference is Sue Dickson, a Doris Day look-alike, who has saved the academic lives of thousands of children. Sue tells the story of how her mother became aware of the dispute between phonics and the whole-word method after reading Rudolf Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read* in 1955. When Sue became a first-grade teacher in a New Jersey public school, she quickly found out that what Flesch had written was true. She began to think of ways of teaching her little first-graders to read with phonics, and since she knew that children easily learned to memorize the words in songs, she decided to apply music and games to her phonics reading program, which finally evolved into her highly successful program, *Sing, Spell, Read and Write*.

Sue invested lots of time, energy, and money in perfecting her reading program which she has managed to get adopted by many schools over the years. But it hasn't been easy. For example, her program was adopted by the primary schools of Memphis, Tennessee, much to the delight of the teachers and parents. But then the higher-ups decided to replace it with an inferior federally-subsidized reading program that the teachers hated. Apparently, the dumbing-down police, who make sure that the schools are teaching in the politically correct way, became aware that kids in Memphis were actually learning to read and decided to put a stop to it. That sort of thing goes on all over America, which is why we continue to have this insoluble reading problem that no one in the education establishment really wants to solve. But if it were not for Sue Dickson, thousands of Memphis students would have been condemned to lives as functional illiterates. Her program is now used the world over.

Another exceptional and gifted American teacher is John Taylor Gatto, a conservative who taught in the public schools of New York City for most of his teaching career. A severe critic of government schooling, Gatto quit after 30 years of teaching and having won the Best Teacher of the Year Award in New York State in 1991. He had already won the New York City Best Teacher of the Year Award in 1989, 1990, and 1991. In his acceptance speech for the state award, he said:

We live in a time of great social crisis. Our children rank at the bottom of nineteen industrial nations in reading, writing, and arithmetic. The world's narcotic economy is based on our consumption of this commodity. If we didn't buy so many powdered dreams the business would collapse — and schools are an important sales outlet. Our teenage suicide rate is the highest in the



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world — and suicidal kids are rich kids for the most part, not the poor....

I've noticed a fascinating phenomenon in my twenty-five years of teaching — that schools and schooling are increasingly irrelevant to the great enterprises of the planet. No one believes anymore that scientists are trained in science classes, or politicians in civics classes, or poets in English classes. The truth is that schools don't really teach anything except how to obey orders.... Although teachers do care and do work very, very hard, the institution is psychopathic; it has no conscience. It rings a bell, and the young man in the middle of writing a poem must close his notebook and move to a different cell, where he learns that man and monkeys derive from a common ancestor.

Gatto also talked about the innovative way he conducted his classes and how the establishment finally put an end to it. He wrote:

For five years I ran a guerrilla school program where I had every kid, rich and poor, smart and dippy, give three hundred twenty hours a year of hard community service. Dozens of those kids came back to me years later, and told me that this one experience changed their lives, taught them to see in new ways, to rethink goals and values. It happened when they were thirteen, in my Lab School program — only made possible because my rich school district was in chaos. When "stability" returned, the Lab closed. It was too successful, at too small a cost, to be allowed to continue. We made the expensive, elite programs look bad.

Since retiring from teaching, Gatto has lectured at many homeschool conventions and delivered his radical message to all kinds of organizations. His book, *Dumbing Us Down*, has become a classic in the literature of educational dissent. But his magnum opus, *The Underground History of American Education*, has provided us with the best untold history of American schooling ever written. In September 2011, Gatto suffered a serious stroke. He is presently in recovery.

What all of these teachers have in common is a basic conflict with America's failing public education system and the strong desire to give students a fair chance at real educational success. They show how it can be done. But they have no illusions that our politically correct education establishment will permit these ideas to prevail in our atheist schools.

John Gatto, Marva Collins, and Sue Dickson all agree that family is the key to a child's education. Gatto writes: "Family is the main engine of education. If we use schooling to break children away from parents ... we're going to continue to have the horror show we have right now. The curriculum of family is at the heart of any good life."

And that is why homeschooling has been so successful. During my lecturing around the country, I had the pleasure of staying with many homeschooling families. The children I met and got to know were invariably so bright, so friendly, so alive that I was continually amazed. We, in our confused society, have no idea how healthy, happy, and intelligent children can be when they are properly educated at home. These children are not only loved by their parents, they are integrated in their parents' lives.

Gatto finds great promise in the homeschool movement because he sees in it a means of rescuing the family as well as the children. He finds schools and schooling "increasingly irrelevant to the great enterprises of the planet." As mentioned above, he calls the institution of public education "psychopathic," because it has no conscience. It just rings bells.

"It is absurd and anti-life," he writes, "to be part of a system that compels you to sit in confinement with people of exactly the same age and social class.... It is absurd and anti-life to move from cell to cell at



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the sound of a gong for every day of your youth.” The system “cuts you off from the immense diversity of life.... It cuts you off from your own past and future, sealing you in a continuous present much the same way television does.”

The system cannot respond to Gatto’s indictment because everything he says about it is demonstrably true. Its atheism is so deep, so pervasive, so blasphemous that it has rendered the system unsalvageable. It permeates the curriculum to such an extent that most children emerge from the system permanently damaged morally, spiritually and academically. At a hearing in New York, Gatto castigated the school system “for the murder of one million black and Latino children.” He was given a standing ovation.

(To be continued.)



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