



Whose Children?

Those who educate are more to be honored than those who bear the children. The latter give them only life; the former teach them the art of living.

— Carolyn Warner
former Superintendent
of Public Instruction in Arizona

Each child belongs to the state.

— William H. Seawell
professor of education
at the University of Virginia

Who are the primary stewards of children — parents, or state-appointed bureaucrats? Are parents, as John Locke wrote, instruments in God’s “great design” with “an obligation to nourish, preserve, and bring up their offspring”? Or are they merely temporary custodians of the state’s children, expected to provide lodging and meals during those brief periods when the children are not under the state’s direct supervision? Is the public education system intended to supplement the efforts of parents to educate their children, or to supplant the parents altogether? These questions were examined last fall in Colorado, and the answers are relevant to anyone who wants to understand the character and purposes of America’s public education system.

Preserving Parental Rights

In 1996, citing concerns about the state’s growing usurpation of parental authority, a coalition of conservative groups placed a proposed Parental Rights Amendment (PRA) on the Colorado ballot. Had the measure passed, that state’s constitution would have included specific recognition of the fact that parents have the primary responsibility “to direct and control the upbringing, education, values and discipline of their children,” and pro-family activists in other states would have been emboldened to enshrine that principle in their own state constitutions. Of course, this prospect horrified partisans of the principle of *parens patriae* (“fatherhood of the state”), and in short order a counter-coalition of left-wing activists assembled to defeat the measure.

The anti-PRA lobby, which drew heavily from teachers’ unions, left-wing pressure groups, and hard-core homosexual activists, called itself “Protect Our Children” — a name reflecting the assumption that the state must protect its children from their parents. One major component of the anti-PRA coalition, the left-wing group that calls itself “People for the American Way,” condemned the proposed measure as an “attack on the freedom to learn” and protested that if PRAs were to pass in Colorado and elsewhere “communities would [be] paralyzed under the threat of lawsuits about virtually all the services and programs they provide” — a revealing objection, as it assumes that education requires the envelopment of schoolchildren in a web of state-provided services. Amid great acrimony, the Colorado PRA was defeated.

But Colorado is not the only state to wrestle with a PRA. Last January the Virginia Senate rejected a proposed PRA. The measure’s opponents, according to the Newport News *Daily Press*, described it as a threat to “the health, safety and welfare of children.” How would recognizing parental authority imperil children? According to Democratic State Senator Joseph V. Gartlan Jr., who opposed the measure, recognizing the primacy of parental authority to direct the upbringing and education of children would



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“throw into a tailspin society’s reasonable efforts to protect against abuse and neglect.” This objection illustrates another tacit assumption at work in our public education system: Although parents are not the primary stewards of children, they are the primary threat to children.

The rejection of a PRA by the Kansas state legislature in 1994 was in large measure a vindication of the idea that parents are a threat to their children. The significance of the PRA’s defeat in Kansas was not lost on Jim McDavitt, director of the Kansas Education Watch network. “With the defeat of the Parental Rights Amendment ... every parent in Kansas was told by over half the legislators that they are not the primary decision makers in the lives of their children,” McDavitt observed. “They are, however, as a group at large, considered capable and likely of criminal child abuse.”

During debate over the Kansas PRA, State Representative Denise Everhart declared, “I have a thousand stories of child abuse that I will recite on the House floor one at a time if I have to in order to keep this amendment from passing.” A similar tack was taken by State Representative Rochell Chronister, who told her colleagues that “every time I see this amendment, I cannot help but think of those children that were burned alive by David Koresh in Waco, Texas.” Taking their cues from this dishonest description of the Waco outrage, PRA opponents christened the measure the “David Koresh amendment.”

Abuse by the State

Waco actually illustrates the dangers of entrusting the state with the role of protecting children. In that incident, the federal government sought to rescue children from alleged parental abuse by attacking their home with automatic weapons, tanks, and poison gas. But the Waco tragedy is not the only incident in which the state has abused children in the name of “protecting” them.

On March 19, 1996 at the J.T. Lambert Intermediate School in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, 59 eleven-year-old girls were herded into the school nurse’s office, told to remove their clothes, and forced to undergo a genital examination. Many of the children began crying, only to be berated for acting like “babies.” Some of them tried to escape. School authorities explained after the fact that the children were inspected for abnormalities or symptoms of venereal disease and that parents had been given an opportunity to exempt their children from the exam. However, several of the traumatized girls had been examined over the explicit objections of their parents.

Katie Tucker, the mother of an 11-year-old girl who was forcibly examined, told the press: “The girls were scared. They were crying and trying to run out of the door, but one of the nurses was blocking the door so they couldn’t leave. My daughter told the other nurse that ‘My mother wouldn’t like this. I want to call her.’ And they said, ‘No.’ And my daughter said, ‘I don’t want this test done.’ And the nurse said, ‘Too bad.’”

Dr. Ramlah Vahanvaty, who performed the exams, responded to parental criticism by dismissing it as a product of “ignorance.” “Even a parent doesn’t have the right to say what’s appropriate for a physician to do,” Dr. Vahanvaty declared, insisting that the forcible violation of 11-year-old girls was “in the best interest of the children.”

Once again we are brought back to the central point of contention: Is the task of defining “the best interests” of children to be assigned to the state and its agents, or to the parents? This matter is not addressed in the U.S. Constitution — for reasons that are misunderstood by many. As Dr. Allan Carlson of the Rockford Institute observes, “The Founders understood the family to be the social unit that reconciled liberty with order, that kept the individual’s interests in balance with the interests of community and posterity.” For this reason, Carlson writes, “family issues are avoided in the U.S.



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Constitution because they were irrelevant”; the federal government was given no jurisdiction over family life. The Founders understood and sustained Locke’s view that God “made parents instruments in His great design” and had “laid on the children a perpetual obligation of honouring their parents.... From this obligation no state ... can absolve children.”

“Village” Children

To the extent that government at any level had any role in family policy, it was to be a local responsibility. In contemporary America, however, “family policy” is defined by the central government, and the public school system is the primary means through which federal intervention in the home is facilitated. After all, as Hillary Rodham Clinton maintains, “It takes a village to raise a child” — “village” in this instance referring to the state.

“In every country, government must be a partner in the effort on behalf of children,” Clinton declared in a June 6 address to the Second World Congress on Family Law and the Rights of Children and Youth in San Francisco. “Government can help ensure that children have a healthy start in life, a solid education, and skills they need to compete in a global economy.” It is also government’s task, according to Clinton, to “give parents the tools they need to be good parents” — and, presumably, it is government’s job to decide whether parents are doing an adequate job of raising the state’s children.

The implicit assumption in Clinton’s speech — namely, that the role of parents is to act as administrative agents for the state within the home — was made more explicit in remarks offered by Attorney General Janet Reno to the same gathering. According to Reno, the task of raising children involves nothing less than “reweaving the fabric of community around the youngsters who are at risk,” a category which apparently includes all American children. “The first place we need to start is at home,” Reno declared. “We know the risk factors for violence, and, even more importantly, we know what types of support, services, and sanctions children, youth, and families need to develop safely, without violence.”

Reno continued: “We are working together to give them a chance for a strong and tolerant future by doing everything we can to promote parenting skills, to provide proper preventive medical care in the early years, to provide them safe, constructive child care in the formative years, to provide them with the afternoon and evening programs that can make a difference, giving them the education they need to really become productive members of society.” In Reno’s litany of “support, services, and sanctions,” where could parents possibly fit in?

But the Clinton administration and its allies are not content merely to provide children with “afternoon and evening programs” and “safe, constructive child care.” Throughout the country, school districts are developing “wrap-around support services” that begin with home visits from social workers — often before the child is born. Such programs as “Success by Six” in Minnesota, “Parents as Teachers” in Missouri, and “Open Doors” in Hawaii focus on getting agents of government into the home as early as possible and keeping them there during the preschool years. “I cannot say enough in support of home visits,” Clinton enthused in her ghost-written opus *It Takes a Village*. The administration’s Goals 2000 education program provides federal subsidies for such state-level initiatives as a means of ensuring that all children arrive at the doorstep of government schools “ready to learn” — meaning that they have become habituated to the state’s guiding influence in their lives.

But the Clintonites have even greater ambitions for the state’s role in the lives of “its” children and the administration’s 1995 budget offered a revealing glimpse of its fundamentally totalitarian mindset. In a



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preface to a section dealing with “Family Preservation and Support Funds” — which contained increases in federal funding for Head Start, child immunizations, and other “investments” — can be found the following remarkable pronouncement:

As early as the fourth century B.C., the philosopher Plato stressed the importance ... of investing in children from an early age. In *The Republic*, he discusses the type of poetry youth should learn, physical exercise they should undertake and diets they should follow.... He observes, “The first step, as you know, is always what matters most, particularly when we are dealing with those who are young and tender. That is the time when they are taking shape and when any impression we choose to make leaves a permanent mark.”

President Clinton once recalled that his mentor, the late Georgetown history professor Carroll Quigley, taught him that Plato “was a fascist” — and yet the administration’s preferred template for education and social policy is Plato’s totalitarian republic. Tragically, as we shall see, this is entirely in keeping with the origins and purposes of America’s statist education system.

Fascist Philosophy

“Throughout history, rulers and court intellectuals have aspired to use the educational system to shape their nations,” writes Sheldon Richman in his book *Separating School and State*. “The model was set out by Plato in *The Republic* and was constructed most faithfully in Soviet Russia, Fascist Italy, and Nazi Germany.... One can see how irresistible a vehicle the schools would be to any social engineer. They represent a unique opportunity to mold future citizens early in life, to instill in them the proper reverence for the ruling culture, and to prepare them to be obedient and obeisant taxpayers and soldiers.”

Plato’s model for his own utopian republic was ancient Sparta, in which children were taken from their parents during infancy and molded into soldiers for the militaristic Spartan society. Thus, Plato’s utopian blueprint specified that “no parent is to know his own child, nor any child his parent,” and the society was to be based upon a “community of property and a community of families.”

The Platonic model was embraced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one of the intellectual architects of the French Revolution. Rousseau taught that the state was “the common mother of all her citizens,” and he maintained that “instead of saying that civil society is derived from parental authority, we ought to say rather that the latter derives from the former” — in other words, that parents received a limited child-rearing mandate from the state. This totalitarian concept was embraced by the leaders of revolutionary France. Bertrand Barere, a member of the revolutionary Committee on Public Safety, instructed his colleagues that “children belong to the general family, to the Republic, before belonging to private families.”

Prussia also adopted Plato’s totalitarian model of government education. According to Richman, “Europe’s first national system of education was set up by King Frederick William I of Prussia in 1717. His son, Frederick the Great, following in his father’s footsteps, said, ‘The prince is to the nation he governs what the head is to the man; it is his duty to see, think, and act for the whole community.’” This principle was insinuated into every aspect of the Prussian school system. Following Prussia’s defeat at the hands of Napoleon in 1806, Frederick William III tightened the grip of the Prussian system even further. Notes Richman: “He instituted certification of teachers and abolished semi-religious private schools.... Children aged 7 to 14 years had to attend school. Parents could be fined or have their children taken away if the children did not attend. Private schools could exist only as long as they kept



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to the standards of the government's schools."

When a unified German nation was created, it was the Prussian model of education that prevailed. German philosopher Johann Fichte defined the German education ethic by explaining that schools "must fashion the person, and fashion him in such a way that he simply cannot will otherwise than what you wish him to will." In 1917, German educational theorist Franz de Hovre observed: "The prime fundamental of German education is that it is based on a national principle.... [It is] education to the State, education for the State, education by the State. The Volksschule is a direct result of a national principle aimed at national unity. The State is the supreme end in view." Just a few years later, the Nazi (National Socialist) Party seized control of Germany's centralized educational system — with tragic results for that nation and the world.

Importing *Parens Patriae*

But it should not be assumed that the Germans were uniquely enamored of centralized statist education. Award-winning teacher and educational commentator John Taylor Gatto writes, "A small number of very passionate American ideological leaders visited Prussia in the first half of the 19th century; fell in love with the order, obedience, and efficiency of its education system; and campaigned relentlessly thereafter to bring the Prussian vision to these shores." This admiration for the Prussian system was not based on its ability to impart knowledge or to develop intellectual skills; rather, it was that system's success in creating "obedient and subordinate graduates, properly respectful of arbitrary orders."

Sheldon Richman notes that American public school advocates "imported three major ideas from Prussia. The first was that the purpose of state schooling was not intellectual training but the conditioning of children 'to obedience, subordination, and collective life.'... Second, whole ideas were broken into fragmented 'subjects' and school days were divided into fixed periods 'so that self-motivation to learn would be muted by ceaseless interruptions.' Third, the state was posited as the true parent of children." (Emphasis added.)

But the "parenthood" of the state ultimately rests upon coercion — something that was clearly understood by advocates of the "Prussianization" of American education. Calvin Stowe, author of the 19th-century tract *The Prussian System of Public Instruction and Its Applicability to the United States*, wrote: "A man has no more right to endanger the state by throwing upon it a family of ignorant and vicious children than he has to give admission to the spies of an invading army. If he is unable to educate his children, the state should assist him — if unwilling, it should compel him."

Some state courts eagerly embraced both the Prussian educational philosophy and the associated notion that the state is the true parent of American children. In 1839, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, invoking the concept of *parens patriae*, ruled that the state was entitled to seize children from parents found to be "unequal to" or "unworthy of the task" of educating their children. By the end of the 19th century, the "Prussianization" of U.S. education was well underway, and the doctrine of *parens patriae* had become firmly embedded in America's legal culture. In 1882, the Illinois Supreme Court asserted: "It is the unquestioned right and imperative duty of every enlightened government, in its character of *parens patriae*, to protect and provide for the comfort and well-being of its citizens.... The performance of this duty is justly regarded as one of the most important governmental functions, and all constitutional limitations must be so understood and construed so as not to interfere with its proper and legitimate exercise." A 1901 decision by the Indiana Supreme Court extended this principle backward into the nursery, holding that the state is the principal steward over children even in infancy — thus



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embracing, in principle, Plato's original totalitarian design.

"By the early twentieth century," observes educational historian Joel Spring, "the school in fact had expanded its functions into areas not dreamed of in the early part of the previous century.... The school [became] a central social agency in urban America. The one theme that ran through all these new school programs was the desire to maintain discipline and order in urban life. Within this framework, the school became a major agency for social control."

Elitist Designs

"Social control" was the stated objective of the General Education Board (GEB), a private institution created by John D. Rockefeller in 1902 that developed and promoted various radical schemes to reconfigure American society through the statist school system. "In our dreams, we have limitless resources, and the people yield themselves with perfect docility to our molding hand," wrote GEB Chairman Frederick Gates. "The present educational conventions fade from our minds; and, unhampered by tradition, we work our own good will upon a grateful and responsive rural folk."

As the resources of the Rockefeller, Carnegie, Ford, and other foundations became available to underwrite their designs, subversives and collectivists within the school system became brazen about their intentions. In 1932, George S. Counts, a Fabian Socialist who taught at Columbia University Teachers College, instructed his followers that "teachers should deliberately reach for power and then make the most of their conquest" by seeking to "influence the social attitudes, ideals and behavior of the coming generation." Counts contended that America had entered "a new age where ignorance must be replaced by knowledge, competition by cooperation, trust in Providence by careful planning, and private capitalism by some form of socialized economy."

The "knowledge" the educrats had in mind, of course, was not the moral and intellectual wisdom needed to live responsibly in a free society, but the propaganda required to win blind obedience to the arbitrary dictates of an all-powerful state. Students, in fact, would be conditioned to view the state (not the family) as the most important of all loyalties and institutions and (eventually) to love Big Brother. The state would equip its students with enough "knowledge" to perform certain tasks in the interests of the state, but not enough to think independently or to yearn for freedom. As we shall see in subsequent articles in this issue, the "dumbing down" of an entire generation of American youth has been a tragic result of this insidious program.

Socialists of a more militant variety were also making big plans for America's educational system. In his 1932 book *Toward Soviet America*, William Z. Foster, head of the Communist Party USA, declared, "Among the elementary measures the American Soviet government will adopt to further the cultural revolution are the following: The schools, colleges, and universities will be coordinated and grouped under the National Department of Education and its state and local branches. The studies will be revolutionized, being cleansed of religious, patriotic, and other features of the bourgeoisie ideology. The students will be taught on the basis of Marxian dialectical materialism, internationalism, and the general ethics of the new socialist society."

It is not difficult to recognize the fulfillment of many of Foster's ambitions in our contemporary public education: A national Department of Education does set the policy for school systems across the country; biblical religious content has been purged out of public schools and replaced in many instances with the neo-pagan nostrums of earth worship; in the name of "multicultural" education, patriotic depictions of American history have been jettisoned, and once-renowned figures from Columbus to



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George Washington are subjects of ritualized execration; and children are constantly marinated in notions of “world citizenship” and “collectivism.” Even as children in government-run schools are taught subservience to the state, they are encouraged to develop hostility toward other traditional sources of authority, such as the moral teachings of their parents.

Glue of Coercion

Some might object that the proliferating pathologies that characterize contemporary government schools — drug abuse, sexual promiscuity and teen pregnancy, violence, and other misbehavior — effectively rebut the idea that the school system is intended to “maintain discipline and order.” But this misses the point: The government school system has succeeded brilliantly in creating a society that can only be held together by state coercion, in the form of police power.

“For 140 years this nation has tried to impose objectives downward from a lofty command center made up of ‘experts,’ a central elite of social engineers,” John Taylor Gatto told the New York State Senate in 1991 after being named that state’s Teacher of the Year. “It hasn’t worked. It won’t work.... It doesn’t work because its fundamental premises are mechanical, anti-human, and hostile to family life. Lives can be controlled by machine education but they will always fight back with weapons of social pathology: drugs, violence, self-destruction, indifference, and the symptoms I see in the children I teach.”

Gatto pointed out that in the name of fostering collective order, the statist school system is destroying community: “It destroys communities by relegating the training of children to the hands of certified experts — and by doing so it ensures our children cannot grow up fully human” — becoming instead mindless automatons programmed by the state’s change agents. Rather than instilling in youngsters an appreciation for individual liberty, the system has brought to life “the ancient pharaonic dream of Egypt: compulsory subordination for all.... Schools teach exactly what they are intended to teach and they do it well: how to be a good Egyptian and remain in your place in the pyramid.”

“The future of education, and of America as a free society, depends on the liberation of the American family from the grip of the public school,” contends Sheldon Richman. “Regardless of motives, the people who foisted state education on us have committed a grave offense.... Using a variety of strategies, we must reclaim the right to raise our children and to help them educate themselves. In a fundamental sense, that is the American way.” There is no more important task, Richman concludes, than to build “a wall of separation ... between school and state” and restore a system of “family-based learning” in which children can develop their God-given abilities as free individuals.

“It is a great triumph of compulsory government monopoly mass-schooling that among even the best of my fellow teachers, and among even the best of my students’ parents, only a small number can imagine a different way to do things,” laments John Taylor Gatto. To restore sanity to American education, to rescue the increasingly embattled family, and to preserve and perpetuate individual freedom, “a different way to do things” must be found — and soon.



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