

## Schooling for Leveling

*The Assault on Parenthood* by Dana Mack (1997)

This chapter is about school...or about schools in America. Dana begins with an address given by former U.S. secretary of education Richard Riley; in which he outlaid “four challenges” for education in 1996. Part of his address is below:

„,to get America **reading** again...to give **parents the power** to help their children learn...to keep our schools **orderly and disciplined**...and to recognize that we will never help our young people...to measure up if we **lower their expectations** [and] water down their curriculum.

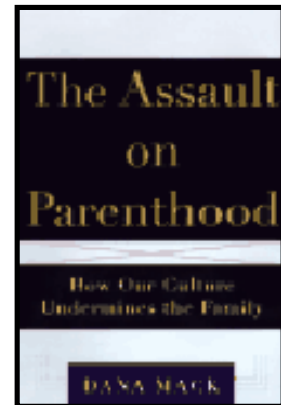
The prevailing attitude or opinion of parents is that schools have failed, according to Dana. And their perspective is not without evidence or reason, as the U.S. Department of Education described in 1987 in a report entitled, “A Nation at Risk”.

### Why does the American school system produce such sorry results?

Parents believe that schools have confused their mission; demoting the traditional priority of academics for the life skills that teach children about sex, relationships, etc. This belief is not without merit as Rita Kramer described in her 1991 study, *The Ed School Follies*:

The overriding pedagogical philosophy promoted in ed schools is that **the major function of schools** is to make children “feel good about themselves.”

Dana adds that “The first task of schooling, many ed school faculty members and administrators maintained, was **behavioral and social adjustment**.



Continuing on the “Kramer” study, Dana describes the training of educators; one that promotes “techniques” in the **realm of psychotherapy**. Such techniques are aimed more at affirming the student than imparting actual knowledge. With this change in delivery comes the criticism that learning about themselves is superseding learning the conventional curriculum.

As a basis for the change (in techniques) is the long believed mission that **educators must prepare students for the democratic ideal** that everyone is equal; thus the title of this chapter and assigned term, “leveling”. Intellectual leveling is described as a method of egalitarian socialization. Some features of this method have reduced or excluded:

- Ability tracking
- Academic acceleration
- Enrichment programs for the gifted

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More emphasis in this method is placed on “cooperative projects and team learning that increasingly replace individual work.” Another noted introduction is life skills (as described previously). In both the demotion of traditional education and advancement or introduction described as “method” is the mission toward:

...inclusion in which a far higher priority is placed on making children conform – on homogenizing them culturally, intellectually, and emotionally – rather than on helping them learn.

With a long list of examples, ranging from scholastic testing to de-emphasized math skills, Dana offers much in the way of the transition from conventional to the modern method involving life skills, homogenization, etc.

This method can be further described to enable the **open discussion of their family lives**. Dana elaborates:

Personal confessions are often also incorporated into the academic curriculum...In some cases, children have been solicited to write about family problems with the promise of confidentiality from their parents.

In the course of “open discussion” – and even solicitations – is the direct and implied criticism aimed at parents. She writes:

To be fair, some life skills programs pursue their intentions quite blatantly...

By “blatant”, she describes notices to parents of their children’s assignment or task to observe and drug behavior to include alcohol and nicotine... Such assignments or general programs – such as DARE – have turned children or students into “police informers”. This criticism of parents is not the only one however; as Dana adds:

At the heart of parents’ frustration with the schools, one senses, is a deep and seemingly unbridgeable chasm between the vocabulary of moral dictates, rules and authority that parents think are best for children and **the vocabulary of autonomy and “emanates” from the classroom**.

While these described programs often purport the dangers of “high-risk” behavior, the autonomy of self-directed promotion encourages experimentation in such as life style, sex, and the like. Dana explains this paradox:

Many life skills programs **encourage children to view high-risk behaviors as personal decisions** they should make all by themselves – without the influence of adults. The implication is that children should not feel bound by the virtue of their emotional immaturity, their physical vulnerability, or even the legal sanctions against certain illegal behaviors to the injunctions of parents or other adults...

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Referred to as “values clarification”, the programs are “prone to disorienting children’s moral compass, and to promoting of the unhealthiest peer-influences on moral development.” In this type of forum is the basic *blind leading the blind* in the sense that children are encouraged to lean on other children in resolving their moral base.

Described as “the bible” of this program, *Values Clarification, A Handbook of Practical Strategies for Teachers and Students*, guides teachers in forming peer group discussions to challenge even the most traditional concepts of morality...and to encourage “risk-taking experiences”. Ms. Mack continues: “Simon and his co-authors also present classroom exercise that **encourage kids to regard the most profound moral dilemmas as if they were trifling matters of personal taste.**”

In the nature of these programs has been the ineffective result of reducing drug use, according to Dana. Programs that encourage experimentation can often liberalize – rather than warn – the students of potential if not real risks. This apparent paradox – of both education and experimentation...coupled with self-direction – has had some further consequences beyond that intended in the design and delivery,

Parents have some understanding of their own direct and desired role – to understand at times their own failures or limitations regarding their children’s choices. But parents “tend to see what is happening in the public schools as the product of a more general revolution in societal values that has exalted the notion of childhood independence and elevated moral tolerance over moral certitude.”

In this spectrum of parents (and other critics) is also the view that schools are “actually at the bottom of the general decay of morals.” Dana cites one critic in this spectrum, Beverly Eakman; in her book, *Educating for the New World Order*, she describes the genesis of the program as the 1960’s and 70’s in the public school system. Beverly writes:

It was the product of a self-conscious effort by educational policy-makers to set the schools up as “agents” of a state-sponsored agenda for “social change.”

### **What would be the nature of this change?**

Dana replies: “Among other things, the schools would prepare children for a planned global society in which political conformity and attitudes of tolerance would erase all possibility of social conflict.”

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I know; it sounds farfetched? But living in 2009, and witnessing changes to our societal, government and economy; the ideal of “social change” through the school systems does seem plausible...don't you think?

The chapter continues at great length in addressing the influence and participation of the National Education Association (NEA) and such programs as Outcome-Based Education (OBE). In the vein of what is described as method or program, is the general changes that mark a less effective system of education and more self-empowered child or student – the decline of conventional education and the rise and influence of a civic mission aimed at denigrating parents and exalting their children.

One test that was described in Pennsylvania as a “behavioral experiment” was “emblematic of an approach” that is designed to “wean kids from their loyalties to families, attach them to their peers, and the result will be a more flexible, forward-looking, and unified society.

As concerning as it may be for concerned parents, the ideal is not new or recent. As noted by Dana, it has its roots in the philosophy of John Dewey, whereby the educational system would be used as a clearing house to basically indoctrinate and homogenize children of different cultures, beliefs, etc.

From this philosophy has emerged programs that attempt to form or re-form moral and social thinking – taking the effort into the curriculum, books, etc. In this effort has been “what parents say” as the “hawking” of political and semi-political causes” as a daily task.