

Why Our Coercive System of Schooling Should Topple

Written by Peter Gray.

I've been called a crazy optimist, a Pollyanna, a romantic idealist. How can I believe that our system of compulsory schooling is about to collapse? People point out that in many ways the schooling system is stronger now than ever. It occupies more of children's time, gobbles up more public funds, employs more people, and is more firmly controlled by government – and at ever-higher levels of government – than has ever been true in the past. So why do I believe it's going to collapse – slowly at first and then more rapidly – over the next ten years or so? Here are four reasons:

1. Our coercive schools have become increasingly and ever more obviously harmful to kids.

Decades ago, schools were tolerable primarily because they didn't take too much of young people's time. Children and teens had much time after school, on weekends, and all summer long for self-directed pursuits. But over the years, the school system has intruded increasingly, and ever more disruptively, into children's and families' lives. The length of the school year has increased (it now averages 5 weeks longer than in the 1950s). The number of years of required attendance has increased. The amount of homework has increased immensely, especially in elementary schools. Recesses have been reduced, or even been eliminated. Creative activities, such as art and music, have regularly been dropped from curricula in favor of more time for worksheets and test preparation. Teachers have been given less freedom to depart from the standard curriculum, and ever-greater pressure has been placed on children to score high on standardized tests.

Children now often spend more time at school and at homework than their parents spend at their full-time jobs, and the work of schooling is often more burdensome and stress-inducing than that of a typical adult job. A century ago we came to the conclusion that full-time child labor was child abuse, so we outlawed it; but now school is the equivalent of full-time child labor.

The increased time, tedium, and stress of schooling is bringing many kids to the breaking point or beyond, and more and more people are becoming aware of that. It can no longer be believed that schooling is a benign experience for children. The evidence that it induces pathology is overwhelming. Here is just some of that evidence:

- A large-scale study involving hundreds of students from many school districts, using an experience sampling method, revealed that students were less happy in school than in any other setting in which they regularly found themselves.¹
- Verbal abuse from teachers is a common occurrence. In one survey, for example, 64% of middle school students reported experiencing stress symptoms because of

verbal abuse from teachers.² Another study revealed that nearly 30% of boys are verbally abused by teachers in kindergarten, and the abuse increased in years after that.³ Surveys of adults indicate that between 50% and 60% recall school-related experiences that, in their view, were psychologically traumatic.⁴

- In a study in which adults were interviewed to find out about positive, peak learning experiences occurring in their schooling, few could recall such experiences, but many recalled negative experiences, which interfered with rather than supported their development.⁵
- Hair cortisol levels in young children were found to be significantly higher in samples taken two months after starting elementary school than in samples taken two months prior to starting elementary school.⁶ Hair cortisol level is reflective of chronic stress, the sort of stress that can seriously impair physical growth and health.
- A large-scale national survey conducted by the American Psychological Association (reported here) revealed that U.S. teenagers feel more stressed-out than do adults and that school is by far the main cause of their stress (noted by 83% of the sample). In the same study, 27% of teens reported experiencing “extreme stress” during the school year, compared to 13% reporting that during the summer.
- The rate of emergency mental health visits leading to at least one overnight stay (the sort of visits that derive from serious breakdowns or attempted suicide) at a children’s medical center was found to be more than twice as high during school months as compared to summer vacation months (here).
- At present, 20% of school-aged boys are given the diagnosis ADHD, a “disorder” that is largely defined in terms of failure to adapt to the tedium of schooling, and most of that group are treated with strong drugs to get them to adapt (here).

It is not unreasonable to say that standard schooling is state-sanctioned (or even state-mandated) child abuse. More and more people are coming to that realization, and that is why more and more people are looking for ways to remove their children from the schools. (For more about the harm done by standard schooling, see here.)

2. Evidence has mounted that children and adolescents can educate themselves remarkably well without coercive schooling.

Summerhill (the famous boarding school for Self-Directed Education founded by A.S. Neill) has been operating in England for nearly a century. Sudbury Valley (the famous day school for Self-Directed Education founded by Daniel Greenberg and others) has been operating in Massachusetts for nearly half a century, and dozens of other schools have been modeled after it. Forty years have elapsed since the educator and philosopher John Holt coined the term unschooling to describe the homeschooling practice of allowing children to pursue their own interests, with no imposed curriculum.

Over the last few decades, many thousands of young people, from a wide range of backgrounds, have educated themselves through these means, and follow-up studies

have shown that they are doing very well in life. They have had no apparent difficulty being admitted to or adjusting to the demands of traditional higher education, if they choose to pursue it, and they have been successful in the full range of careers that we value in our society. As adults, they generally report that their experience with Self-Directed Education benefitted them by allowing them to develop their own interests (which often turned into careers) and by fostering such traits as personal responsibility, initiative, creativity, curiosity, critical thinking, and ability to communicate well with people regardless of status.⁷ [Note: I have elaborated on the biological foundations for Self-Directed Education, and the reasons why it works so well, in many previous posts, but for concise definitions and explanations see [here](#) and [here](#).]

In recent years, partly because of increased awareness of the success of Self-Directed Education and partly because of the growing toxicity of coercive schools, ever more families are choosing Self-Directed Education for their children. As more families are choosing it, many others are getting to know people who have chosen it and can see firsthand the evidence of its success. At some point, when everyone sees the evidence, the gates will open and the coercive schools will begin to empty out. People will begin to demand that some of the public funds currently spent on coercive schools be spent on learning centers and other facilities that support Self-Directed Education, so all families, regardless of income, will have that option.

3. Self-Directed Education is easier to pursue now than it was in the past.

Self-Directed Education is becoming ever easier to pursue. One reason for this lies in the increased numbers of families taking this route and, consequently, the increased acceptability of Self-Directed Education in the culture at large. The availability of schools and learning centers designed for Self-Directed Education has been increasing, and the number of homeschoolers engaged in Self-Directed Education has likewise been increasing. As Self-Directed Education becomes more common, as more and more people, including education authorities, know young people taking this route and see their success, the social barriers against it are decreasing.

Another reason for the increased ease of Self-Directed Education lies in technology. Today, anyone with a computer and Internet connection can access essentially all the world's information. Self-directed learners who want to pursue almost any subject can find articles, videos, discussion groups, and even online courses devoted to it. They can gain information and share thoughts with experts and novices alike, throughout the world, who have interests akin to theirs. Students in standard schools must study just what the school dictates, in just the ways that the school decides; but self-directed learners can find subjects and means of study that match their own particular interests and styles of learning. Self-directed learners are not held back by the slow pace of a school course, nor are they rushed ahead when they want more time to think about and delve deeply into any given aspect of the interest they're pursuing.

4. Changes in the economy favor the skills developed by Self-Directed

Education.

Because of changes in how we make our livings, the skills exercised by coercive schooling are even less valuable, and those exercised by Self-Directed Education are even more valuable, now than they were in the past. We don't need people who can memorize and regurgitate lots of information; we have Google for that. We don't need many people to do routine, tedious tasks dictated by others; we have robots for that.

What we do need, and will continue to need, are people who think critically and creatively, innovate, ask and answer questions that nobody else has thought of, and bring moral values and a passionate sense of purpose into the workplace. These are the kinds of skills that are continuously honed in Self-Directed Education. In coercive schools, the requirement that everyone follow the same curriculum, motivated by reward and punishment rather than genuine interest, guarantees that most students will not develop passionate interests, deep understanding, or a sense of purpose other than that of making it through the next hoop.

"Okay," I hear some say, "these are all good reasons why our forced system of schooling *should* topple soon; but *will* it topple soon?" Yes, it will, because it really is reaching the end of the line. In fact, much of the increased odiousness of school has come about precisely because of the increased recognition that our schools are failing. Stupidly, in recent times we've tried to "fix" the schools by doing more of what doesn't work. But that can't go on forever. The revolution will come not because authorities within the coercive school system become enlightened, but because a growing number of families who are victims of that system will realize that they have an option - a good option - and they will take it.

But let's not just wait for that social change to occur; let's push it along. Let's develop an organized movement to inform people about this option and how they can pursue it. That's the purpose of a new nonprofit organization that I'm a part of - the Alliance for Self-Directed Education. Maybe you'd like to join it.

References

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7 See research studies reported in: (a) *American Journal of Education*, 94, pp 182-213; (b) *Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives*, 4, 33-53; and (c) Book by Greenberg, D., & Sadofsky, M. *Legacy of Trust: Life after the Sudbury Valley School Experience*; and (d) book by Greenberg, D., Sadofsky, M., & Lempka, J. *The Pursuit of Happiness: The Lives of Sudbury Valley Alumni.*)

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