

The Death of Public Education?

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Editor's Note: This is a presentation made to the Lancaster County-based Hourglass Foundation at its January 12 Forum on "Public Education in Crisis." Dr. Frick is the retiring superintendent of the Lampeter-Strasburg School District in Lancaster County. He stated that his pending retirement would allow him "to speak my mind without fear of reprisals from my Board, legislators, PSEA, PSBA, or any other interested parties. Little did they know that I would have been willing to speak my mind even if I had 10 more years in the profession of education." He says he has "been blessed to work for and with persons who encouraged me to share my beliefs and opinions. It is my belief that, progressing the way that we are, public education as we know it will cease to exist in the near future."

OBITUARY

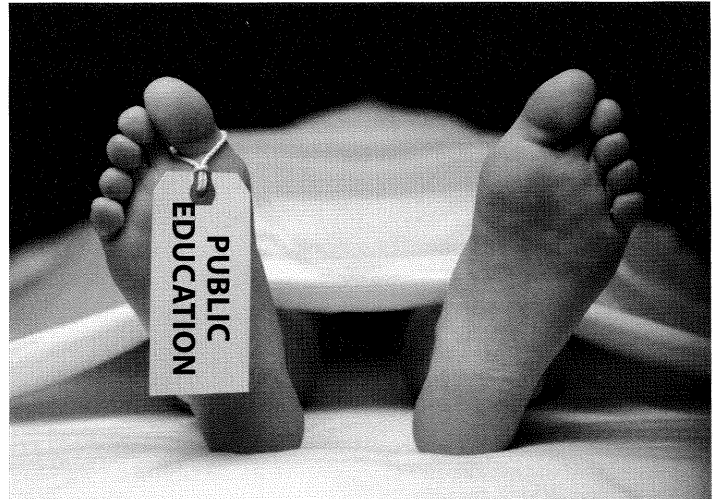
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Dearly beloved, we gather today to celebrate the life of our dear departed friend, Public Education. Born in 1834 with the passage of the Free School Act of Pennsylvania, Public Education was created and sustained through the combined parenting efforts of Thomas Henry Burrowes and Thaddeus Stevens. Those who knew him in his early years were inspired by the opportunities that Public Education provided to all persons, regardless of their wealth or social class. Countless immigrants from many nations benefited from his egalitarian influences. At that time, of course, America was viewed as the "Great Melting Pot," and Public Education was the vehicle that could enable the person of the most humble means to achieve the loftiest of dreams. In his later years, America was viewed more as a "salad bowl," where each human ingredient wished to maintain its distinct and ethnically diverse identity.

Originally, Public Education drew its instructors from a similar pool as the clergy—people who saw themselves as being "called" to their respective professions. At that time even though wages were meager and accompanying fringe benefits were non-existent, those who delivered instruction were respected and looked up to by those in the community in which they served. Their dedication to the children that they served was beyond question.

First housed in basic brick structures, Public Education in rural America functioned in one-room buildings including all eight grades, while his citified cousin operated in multi-room, egg-crate style edifices, most often having one room per grade level. Whether in the rural or urban format, Public Education, as believed and touted by Thomas Jefferson, was a fundamental requirement for the establishment and the maintenance of a democracy. The mainstays of the curriculum were to be reading, writing, arithmetic, and history. Unfortunately for Public Education, reformers such as Horace Mann moved to use schools for a system of social control, an effort that is still in effect today. Schools changed from an organization to promote learning to one that was assigned to repair all social maladies.

Public Education's demise is attributable to a number of causes, and in his later years would have been unrecognizable to his parents. He actually died in increments. The first affliction that he suffered **was Change in Focus:** Following World War II and the economic recovery that the United States experienced



following the Great Depression of the previous decade, the states began to make major upgrades to their respective educational systems. Consolidations were required, and new buildings were built. Hot lunch programs, student transportation systems, and extracurricular programs were incorporated into almost all school systems. Moreover, schools became a place where physical examinations and dental examinations were given and polio and other vaccinations were administered. Like Horace Mann's hopes, the main directive of school morphed from the educating of children to focusing on molding and improving society. Reformers viewed it as an excellent place to inculcate socially desirable practices like giving to the Red Cross, starting a savings account, buying/selling Christmas seals, or contributing to find a cure for tuberculosis. Since the young people of the American Society were a captive audience and since a very high percentage of our citizens of tomorrow attended public schools, it seemed a great plan. Public Education, however, was now unable to focus totally on his initial directive, the education of children.

The second affliction that he suffered was **the Involvement of the Federal Government:** In 1957, an event occurred which caused the federal government to get involved with Public Education for the first time in our nation's history. According to the Tenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, adopted in 1791, "all powers not granted to the federal government nor prohibited to the states by the Constitution of the United States are reserved to the states or the people." Historically, this meant that Public Education was the sole responsibility of the individual states, giving the federal government no role in the process. On October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the first man-made satellite, into orbit, and America panicked. The National Defense Education Act was passed less than a year later, and money was made available to the schools for the improvement of the teaching of mathematics and science. Just as form follows function in the world of art, control follows money in just about everything else. Seven years later in 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed under the President Lyndon Johnson's Administration, and with it the federal government became fully involved in what was formerly a responsibility of the states. This was the equivalent of assigning Public Education's

See Death of Public Education, page 10

The Death of Public Education?

Continued from page 9

power of attorney to the federal government.

The third affliction that he suffered was **Turning Public Education into a Business**: In 1969, the Pennsylvania General Assembly passed Act 195, which granted collective bargaining rights to educators in the Commonwealth, and over the next ten to fifteen years, the pendulum of control swung from Boards of Education to teachers' unions. Strikes for higher salaries, better benefits, and the very control of school systems ensued. Under Act 195, Boards were and are required to sit down with representatives from teachers' unions and negotiate salaries, fringe benefits, and working conditions, a process that is confrontational at best and hostile at its most aggressive degree. As a result, teachers have become very well paid and have benefits that make many in the private sector envious. The pension program provided for public school educators in Pennsylvania is one of the best in the nation, but that benefit does not come without a significant cost, which has been mentioned as one of the problems we face today. With Act 195, the welfare of Public Education became dependent upon the degree of cooperation between PSEA and over 500 local school boards, and entering the teaching profession as "a calling" gradually disappeared. We killed the goose that laid the golden egg.

The fourth affliction he suffered was **the Rise of Special Education**: In 1975, the 94th Congress passed its 142nd piece of legislation that became known as the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA). Originally passed with the stipulation that any district wishing to receive federal funding needed to provide a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), the accompanying mandates made adherence to the requirements of IDEA far from voluntary. The portion of a school district's budget that goes toward meeting the requirements of IDEA continues to grow. At one time, the General Assembly of Pennsylvania reimbursed districts for all additional costs to serve special education students, but that has long since ceased. So in addition to being ill, Public Education was having difficulty meeting financial obligations for his own care.

The fifth affliction that he suffered was **Pandering to the Vocal**: In recent years, Public Education has been expected to be everything to everyone. If a small, vocal group of parents want a sport or an activity that their district does not provide, pressure, accompa-

nied by the reminder that they are "taxpayers," is placed on the Board to initiate it. Bowing to political pressure from their constituents or wishing to do what is politically correct, state legislators pass new laws that significantly impact upon the abilities of districts to carry out their primary mission—the educating of their respective students. The federal governments, in its attempt to fix the social problems in urban areas, pass laws that negatively affect even the most rural districts. Transporting private school students ten miles beyond the district border, attempting to implement non-funded mandates, requiring prevailing wage regulations in school construction, and the recently launched provisions around Race to the Top are but four examples.

The sixth affliction that he suffered was **the Politicizing of Public Education**: How Public Education has been politicized is most demonstratively illustrated by the regulations surrounding cyber charter education. Since the passage of the Free School Act of 1834, parents in the Commonwealth have always had the right to choose to send their children to private school. Obviously, this was at the parents' expense. Some parents choose to home school their children—also at their own expense. Public schools exist to educate the children whose parents choose that option. Currently, school districts are responsible to pay the tuition for parents who choose to enroll their children in charter or cyber charter schools, costing even small districts a substantial piece of their budget for a private education. Charter schools and cyber charter schools are nothing more than a very thinly veiled voucher plan or public choice plan that some legislators have attempted to initiate for the last twenty years. Each time in the past, common sense won the day, and the effort was defeated. This time, the attempt was better choreographed, better cloaked, and more insidious.

In 2010, Public Education was put on life support. The only question that remained was whether he would pass away before his detractors, those responsible for his care, pulled the plug. Unfortunately, over the next few years with the Commonwealth's paying a decreasing percentage of the cost of Public Education's care, he was forced to slip away peacefully. Rest in peace, faithful friend. You will be missed by all, even by those whose actions—or lack of actions—have led to your demise.

