

Is there a future for public education in Hawaii?

Governor's Commission on the 150th Anniversary of Public Education in Hawaii
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Jim Dator

I will try to answer the question posed in the title of this paper by first commenting on the function of education and role of the teacher; then about the past and present of public education in Hawaii; and finally something about the future--all in 15 minutes.

I always say, and so I will say again, that the function of education and the role of the teacher are always and every where the same. The function of education is to help students acquire the attitudes and skills necessary to become effective members of the future society in which they will live. The role of the teacher is to be a living example of such a person--to model the attitudes and skills necessary to be an effective member of the future society in which the students will live.

So the question for any teacher, administrator, or parent must always be--what will the future society be like? What attitudes and skills should students be learning now in order to be effective in the future?

No teacher should dare enter a class room, no administrator should place a teacher in a classroom, no parent should send a child to a classroom until first the future of that child has been surveyed, and a curriculum relevant to that future has been devised.

Each day of class should start, not with a pledge of allegiance to the flag and a prayer to whatever god is currently fashionable. Rather, each day should start with each teacher saying to herself, "How is what I am about to teach relevant to the future these students will live in? And how can I be sure?" That is about as close as I can get to an acceptable prayer and a pledge of allegiance to the only thing that should matter to any of us--namely a pledge of allegiance to future generations.

Now, before I comment on the future, some words about the past of public education generally, and in Hawaii.

Publicly-funded education is a very recent social invention. We are here celebrating a mere 150 years of public education in Hawaii. You may think that is a long time, but it is just a drop in the bucket. We're talking about my grandparents' childhood for heaven's sake; something my great grandparents participated in inventing. This is something new, not old. And, like almost everything else only 150 years old, it was a co-invention. It was part of a series of things done over the last century or two which resulted in the creation of the modern industrial state.

So the reason why public education was invented at all was because previous forms of education were inadequate to help children--and immigrants--be successful in the brave new world of modern America--in the industrializing world of the late 19th and early to mid 20th centuries.

You see, it was the task of public education then to take ignorant young peasants away from their parents--by force, if necessary--and send them to a place where only recently "normalized" young teachers could transform them, step by step, from ignorant peasants to semi-literate industrial workers and cannon fodder, or literate industrial managers and generals, in order to serve the newly-created needs of the great emerging industrial state.

These teachers were supposed to model future behavior. They were supposed to be clean, punctual, obedient, diligent--none of which were necessary characteristics for the immigrants or local yeomanry. The classroom itself was to model the future. Bells chimed the assembly and changes during the day. Knowledge was segmented into small, do-able portions. Learning was assembled in a line, bit by bit, day by day, year by year, grade by grade--all early forms of the industrial assembly line with its mass produced parts and tests for quality control--all the way up through college for those very, very few rich or smart enough to be let in on the true secrets of the universe, secrets which were purposely kept from the curriculum, and hence minds, of the many who just didn't make the grade.

What I have just described was generally so for public education in the US. In Hawaii, these general characteristics took on their own peculiar twist because of our special colonial and racial history. Public schools here were primarily for the inferior classes and races. The superior classes and races went to the superior private schools.

Nothing much has changed in that respect in Hawaii between the past and the present.

However, once upon a time--a very brief time indeed, the public schools, including public higher education, happened to become an avenue of upward mobility for some of the inferior classes and races in Hawaii (and it happened because of an anomaly in American history, not because of a progressive development--that anomaly being the Second World War and the tail end of a brief flirtation with social responsibility in the liberal policies of the New Deal). Public schools in Hawaii now are basically a baby-sitting, pre-jail experience for many of the young people who are condemned to go to them. As you well know, the better classes and races, including the children of many public officials, go to private schools, including higher education, in Hawaii and elsewhere.

I alluded to my grandparents at the outset of this talk. Let me drag them back in again. Some of you know that I love to quote an extremely extensive study of public education in the US--probably the most thorough empirical survey ever undertaken--which John Goodlad conducted about ten years ago.

The bottom line of his survey was contained in the phrase, "back to basics is where we've always been." Indeed, he said that so little has changed in public education since the public schools were established that, in his words, "your grandmother would feel right at home in any public school room in the US"--would feel right at home in the way it looks, they arrangement of seats, what is taught, and the way it is taught. There has been no significant reform nor decline in the amount of time devoted to basics, or how they are taught,

Goodlad concluded. Back to basics is where we've always been. Taught just like good ole grannie learned them.

But a lot has happened outside of the public school system, and much more is about to come. So I will predict, with utter confidence, that there will be no Commission on the 300th anniversary of Public Education in Hawaii. There won't even been a Commission on the 200th Anniversary.

This is the last gasp of public education in Hawaii and throughout the US. Indeed, the 1990s will witness the end of "public" everything.

There are many reasons for this, reasons which I have been monitoring and commenting on for over 20 years. Nothing has happened to lead me to change my forecast. Indeed, the 1980s, and the 1990s so far, indicate that, if anything, I was too conservative in forecasting the demise of the public school system.

And, given the speed at which the Burnam report is being operationalized, we'll be lucky--if that is the right word--if there is a public school system in Hawaii at the end of this decade. I thank this morning's headlines for making that prophecy abundantly clear to everyone.

Why do I feel that way:

First, the US federal government is already dead. Reagan killed it, as he promised to do, and as those few Americans who bothered to vote for him wanted him to do. While the US Congress and Executive Branch still pass laws and try to carry them out, the federal government has no money to back up its decrees. In addition to passing laws and executive orders, the only thing the US Congress and President can do is attack and kill people and problems it does not like. Every act of the US government has now been reduced to a War on something. It is now being proposed that the US military "attack" our environmental problems. When my little boy, Mack, was about 4 years old, he thought the Greenhouse Effect was some brooding omnipresence in the sky, like God. For a person weaned on Ninja Turtles, why not?

Well, it appears that the US government, if it is going to worry about ozone depletion, global warming, sea level rise and global change at all, will take a similar view and ask the US military to attack the Greenhouse Effect. Maybe that is what Star Wars is all about: not as a defense against missiles from the erstwhile Evil Empire but against a sneak attack by the dreaded Greenhouse Effect.

Of course, there is another branch of the US government--the judiciary. Pardon me while I roll over laughing here at any suggestion that we can find support for public anything, other than executions, from the federal judiciary for the next fifty years. The US federal government is being reduced to an army backed by nine old white men, one in drag and one in black face, wholly out of touch with reality, and wholly untouchable by the American people until death do them part.

But the death of and rigor-mortis strangulation by US government is what we want, right? We want to bring government back home, to the people, to the cities and especially the states, right?

I must admit I was falsely optimistic about the abilities of state governments to pick up the governing slack. My experiences over the past ten years with government officials all around the US, including Hawaii, had caused me to be euphoric about the future of state and local government. Now it turns out that most state governments are as poverty-stricken as the US government. And, though Hawaii is not--yet--we are so eager to follow mainland trends that we act as though we were too, and so seem willing to squander our wealth by dribbling it back to people rather than investing it in our common future.

So just looking at that one factor--the future of public governance--I don't see much hope for the future of public education in Hawaii. We seem to believe (strongly, but falsely) that we can no longer afford to have the massive public bureaucracy which is the State Department of Education. Decentralization and local control of schools is simply a way station to the total extinction of the dearly beloved DOE.

And make no mistake about it: you're looking at a dinosaur too: the UH will be among those to be wiped out by the lingering black hole of Reaganomics. Instead of turning over to the homeless the land set aside for future faculty housing, why not just let the homeless have all existing university buildings now? They're going to be vacant in a few years anyway.

Now, a lot of people assume that if public education dies then private education, in many forms, will take over and provide. Well, yes and no.

First of all, it is very farsighted of the Governor's Commission to hold this meeting on the grounds of a private, or at least parochial, school. It is a good idea to make friends with your future masters.

Of course corporations are more likely than religious groups to take over the function of basic education, and will ultimately provide it in the effective, dehumanizing, and empty manner of a fast-food franchise. But the demise of most present enterprises and of welfare-capitalism itself will both precede and follow the demise of the nation-state, given the now world-wide embrace of voodoo economics. So do not expect the so-called private sector to provide education superior to that of the public schools for very long. The future of capitalism is even more problematic than the future of public education.

So, the public, citizen- and nation-building, quality of education is rapidly being lost as the nation-state itself passes from the scene and global, local, and selfish loyalties and concerns rise to dominance and as rapidly fall.

I for one mourn its passing. But it is passing, so we might as well announce that "the king is dead, long live the king."

After all, it is not as though people will be unaware of the world around them if they don't go to public schools. That will happen only if HECO no longer generates electricity; our television and cable stations go black; our VCRs don't operate; and Nintendo actually goes the heavenly way, as its name implies.

What Marshall McLuhan said 20 years ago is even more true today: a child's education is set back seven years when she enters the first grade of public school. I believe it will be set back seven more years when those schools are truly locally-controlled, but never mind: suicide is painless. Why try to defend

the public good of taxation and indeed of increased taxation, of the liberal welfare state, and of public education when we can join forces with the enemy and kill ourselves instead?

I am not saying education by TV is good education, but it is exceedingly effective education, as everyone who believes Desert Storm was a real and necessary war and a great American victory will certainly testify. Nothing our public schools can do is as effective as the education television provides us all. Or, given who controls the media, as dangerous.

But that is just a short hand way of saying that, in addition to economics and politics, technology is a major contributor to the demise of our public school system as well.

The function of education via TV is to teach people how to be consumers. The role model of a good consumer is, well, shown in and between every single TV program.

You see, we do not need people who are trained to be producers any more. Goods are increasingly produced not by people but by robots. Therefore, we do not need people who are clean, punctual, obedient, and diligent workers, as before. Now we only need couch potatoes who are obedient and who can be lifted off the couch only long enough to go to the phone and dial a 1-800 number which will deliver to their couch some commodity made by a robot. Having to go to school only interferes with this process. Moreover, schools persist in teaching people to want the one thing that they can not have now or in the future: good jobs. Knowing this, TV merely teaches them to be consumers.

But is consumerism a sustainable occupation in the future?

Not likely. Not if the warnings of environmentalists are correct. And I think they are absolutely correct, though I think environmentalists are naively wrong in what they suggest we should do about it.

We cannot and we will not stop the rape of mother earth. The whole point of public education has been to teach us how to be more effective and rapid rapists--how to be good and obedient workers the great industrial state. Television is only taking over where public school left off, by training us to be cannibals: to eat the mother we have raped.

Now, it is not clear to me that we should want to find a solution to this problem. We homosapiens were arguably much better off over the tens of thousands of years we did not have public schools, modern technology, and Two Live Crew. There may be something profoundly dangerous about homosapiens, as the Earth First! environmentalists say.

But, as you can tell, I take a much more optimistic view of the future. I believe that we humans are at the end of our evolutionary line. We are in the process, through all the things we study in school--genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, molecular engineering, and the rest--we humans are in the process of creating our own truly-intelligent successors.

Public education, by creating the instruments and instrumentalities of industrialism, and leading us into a post-industrial society and an environmentally-devastated and wholly-artificial world, has set the stage for one of the greatest leaps in evolution the earth has ever experienced, a leap which is now underway and will be in full spring by the early 21st Century.

So thanks to 150 years of public education in Hawaii for being the cradle of the future. But it is now time for us to leave the cradle, to kiss our dying mother goodbye, and to head for the stars.

The last one there is a rotten egg!