

# From Educating the Whole Child to Educating the Whole Test Taker: What Went Wrong in American Education

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In 1955 my parents moved our family from Brooklyn to Levittown, New York, participating in an unprecedented social movement: the mass suburbanization of America. They were among the first generation of Americans to raise their children without the routine presence and participation of grandparents.

Filling the void were two sources of support: a parenting manual that became the best-selling non-biblical book in U.S. history and remained so for 52 years (*Baby and Child Care* by Dr. Benjamin Spock) and a new philosophy in K-12 education described in the catchphrase “Educating the Whole Child.”

“Educating the Whole Child” required teachers to view their role not merely as providers of academic content but rather as partners with parents in the full development of their children’s potential. The period between 1950 and 1970 generated a surge in membership in the National PTA and its affiliates.

Baby boom students received instruction in all of the traditional core subjects as well as in fine, performing and practical arts. (Junior high school students, currently referred to as middle school students, were all assigned to introductory vocational courses: shop, home economics, typing, sewing, mechanical drawing). Many of us learned how to balance a checkbook at age 13 — personal banking was a unit in home ec.

In December 1960, shortly before his inauguration, John F. Kennedy published “The Soft American,” in *Sports Illustrated*. The incoming president outlined ambitious national goals for youth fitness. Public and private school educators took notice. Physical education courses, including minimum numbers of minutes per week became mandated by state laws. Recess — outdoors, once or twice a day — became a protected element in the school schedule. Free play was understood to be a vital, critical component in healthy child development.

Believing that citizenship and spirituality were important components of the whole child, public and private schools granted weekly “release time” for students to attend religious instruction. Girl Scout and Boy Scout troops were common features in schools, often meeting in classrooms during the school day. Scouting promoted personal responsibility, care for the environment (animals especially) and volunteering. 4-H clubs, and student service clubs associated with national adult organizations (Rotary, Kiwanis, Knights of Columbus), were also viewed as integral to the experience of becoming a responsible American citizen.



College-prep courses were rigorous and there was healthy competition for academic awards and rank-in-class designations. Yet few of us who were educated in this era remember feeling anxiety over college admission. Of course, we had preferences in our college choices, but we trusted that a suitable school would accept us and that, upon graduation, the world of work would offer opportunities to those of us who sought them. The future seemed promising. We felt empowered.

Looking back, it is clear to me that my baby boom, “whole child” education inspired a heightened social consciousness in my generation, providing much of the passion and energy that sustained the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Fast forward to 1992. After 20 years serving as a teacher, coach, adviser and school principal, I became a public school superintendent in an affluent Manhattan suburb. Working with an enlightened local board of education and a world-class faculty, I found myself leading a school system that was evaluated by the state and the federal government using essentially *one* metric: scores on standardized tests. This was a striking departure from the past. In one generation, America shifted from educating the whole child to educating the whole test taker. At a time in history when Google-searchable content is available in seconds to anyone with a device, these tests continue to measure recall of discrete content.

Definitions of school quality that rely on student success in machine-scored, test-measurable skills inevitably diminish all other priorities, including a belief in the power and purpose of the arts, physical education and the soft skills that combine to build a child’s self-confidence and sense of civic responsibility.

I became head of an independent school in 1992. My own “whole child” education and my experience coming of age during what I remember as a pivotal period in American history led me to an environment that was familiar and comfortable despite the fact that I never personally attended an independent school.

The culture of a good independent school is the special creation of its founders, leaders, faculty and parents. These are places where dreams are born for both students and for those who devote their professional lives to the children and adolescents in their care.

Independent schools are also places that have no guaranteed future. Their future rests on market-driven accountability; real world “customer satisfaction.”

In January 2009, a few months after the precipitous decline in the U.S. stock market, a for-profit company surveyed 900 independent school parents. The interviewers asked two questions: First “Given the current financial uncertainty, will you be re-enrolling your children in their independent school next year?” (88 percent in Connecticut answered *yes*, the 12 percent answering *no* included families who were relocating).

The second question (asked of parents who responded “yes”) was “Why?”

Here, in ascending order are the four most commonly reported reasons:

- The skill of the faculty/the high rigor of the program
- The role of the school community as a positive, counter-cultural influence in my child’s life
- The cherished relationships children have with their teachers
- Safety — parents reported that their children feel safe at school in every way that a child can feel safe — physically, socially, emotionally, psychologically

Aristotle wrote, “When we educate, we aim at the good life, and since all people will disagree in their notions of the good life, they will disagree in their notions of education.” That assertion is as true today as it was 2,000 years ago. Obviously, men and women of goodwill are going to disagree about education. The independent school community in Connecticut offers a wide variety of schools and differing missions, pedagogical practices and philosophies.

However, there is universal agreement among independent schools that education is, and has always been, about the acquisition of character.

There is no such thing as a morally neutral school. Independent schools remain *compulsively* devoted to the education of the whole child. It is the theory that educated the grandparents of today’s students; a theory that is both vintage and future-directed.

As a parent of alums at three separate Connecticut independent schools, I see in my own children’s words and ways a confidence and an optimism that exceeds mere academic preparation. They spent their schooldays with professionals who knew them, cared enough to expect their very best in all endeavors, helped them to develop moral habits and were quick to recognize and celebrate their successes.

My wife and I are forever grateful.

P.S. The book that ended Spock’s 52-year record? *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone!*