

December 2001

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Students Lack Knowledge of History

Seattle received another unneeded black eye last week when the media reported that the “Emerald City” leads the nation in the numbers of children opting-out of public schools in favor of home, private, and Christian schools. A shocking survey reveals that more than a third of school-age children in Seattle, do not attend public schools. Education officials quickly opined that the many high-tech professionals in the region have the money to send their children to private schools. But, really, are the rich to blame?

Recently, I had the pleasure of meeting with 60 to 70 pastors of Ukrainian descent, to talk about the mission of the Christian Coalition. Many of them immigrated here following the collapse of the former Soviet Union. As would be expected, these pastors and their people, place a high premium on quality education and want to be part of the American dream. However, for many immigrants, public schools are simply out of the question—not because they arrived at our shores with pockets full of cash to lavish on education. Rather, they are shocked to find in America, that God is forbidden in our schools.

Lori Yaklin, a former college teacher who now directs the Michigan School Board Leaders Association, suggests reasons for the flight from public schools. She recently wrote an op-ed piece for United Press International, titled, “School Days, school daze,” which was read on-air by Dr. Laura Schlessenger. I thought you might be interested:

DAVISON, MICH., OCT. 25 (UPI) — “We are not teaching our young people to understand and value the American experience. I came to this conclusion after teaching college for six years. It is not an exaggeration to say that this does not concern me--it frightens me.

Academically they are not equipped to pursue the American Dream. Many children graduate from high school with good grades, but without fundamental skills. This fact is supported by the expensive array of remedial education classes that most colleges must provide freshman, as well as our dismal test rankings among other developed countries.

And, conceptually, many don't even understand the underpinnings of America, which, according to Thomas Jefferson are freely-elected government, free enterprise, and moral and spiritual values. . . In many textbooks all governmental systems are treated equally, therefore communist dictatorships are presented as just an alternative system of government.

My observations, as well as recent surveys, indicate that students have very little knowledge of American history. . . Students believe that government “for the people” means that the government is supposed to do everything for the people. My classroom would become quiet when I would tell my students that the Declaration of Independence only gives them the right to PURSUE happiness--they have to catch it themselves.”

“This may seem bizarre, considering that my students were usually business majors,

but they also had no appreciation or understanding of the beauty of the free enterprise system, or its role in the success and freedom of our country.

But the good news is that when I explained Adam Smith's Invisible Hand Theory and showed them how a person's quest for profit ultimately (like an invisible hand) brings prosperity to others in the community, they understood it.

Because truth and common sense usually prevail, most teachers can take a classroom of 35 statists and turn them into capitalists in 10 weeks. We should be examining why so many of our public high schools are turning out graduates with a socialist mentality.

These are not difficult concepts. Recently my 12-year-old was playing a computer game called SIM City with a friend, in which they could design their own city and government and set taxes, etc. As I looked at the boys' city I saw a few cars moving through the streets and a small business district.

A few minutes later, they yelled for me to look at how their city had changed. There were more cars and a larger, bustling business district. Unfamiliar with the program, I asked them what they had done and my son said: "We lowered the taxes!" And he rolled his eyes as only a 12-year-old can, with an unspoken "duh, Mom!" I told them that they were brilliant and that I was putting them on the first plane to Washington.

My students' lack of understanding of Jefferson's third foundation--moral and spiritual values--was most alarming.

My most discouraging day was in an ethics class in which I had asked the students to list the characteristics of an ethical person. After a few minutes and a lot of silence, they listed: A person who recycles, a person who does not make ethical judgments about others and a person who does not lie.

The reason they had such a difficult time with this exercise is that they have collectively been taught that the only truly unethical act is to brand anything that anyone else does as unethical. That night I thought, 'I can turn a socialist into a capitalist, but I cannot, in 10 weeks, undo the damage of a lifetime of being taught that there are no moral absolutes.'

Time and time again our founding fathers reminded us that this noble experiment would not work without ethical and spiritual values because a government of the people, by the people and for the people can only be as good as its people.

It is easy to identify the problems but much more difficult to admit to some responsibility in the problems these young people face. We must reclaim our heritage and pass it on to our children before it is too late. It is time--it is past time--to take back the textbooks and the classrooms and teach young Americans what it really means to be an American. They owe a debt of gratitude to those who worked and died to give them a freely elected government, a free enterprise system with opportunity for all, and a moral foundation on which to rest these freedoms."¹

Statistically, three out of four kids in our churches who leave for college, will depart the faith by the time they graduate. While the Church may prefer not to be directly involved in public education, the future of both may depend on it.

Rick Forcier

Executive Director

¹ Website for Lori Yaklin and the Michigan School Board Leaders Association is: www.msbla.org.