

A Shift To Dumbing Down U.S. Education

The author of this piece, Andrea Neal, is the recipient of the Award for Commentary from the National Education Writer's Association in 1998. She has granted permission to reprint and share her review "*The Deliberate Dumbing Down of America, Chronological Paper Trail*"

If you think there's nothing wrong with America's educational system, you will probably dismiss Charlotte Iserbyt's 660-page tome as the rantings of a right-wing conspiracy theorist who sees danger at every turn.

If you're a back-to-basics reformer, you won't like it either because Iserbyt finds fault with virtually every program being used in America's schools. That includes character education, core curriculum and Direct Instruction, all supported by conservatives as ways to bring morality back into the classroom.

And that's probably the highest compliment *The Deliberate Dumbing Down of America* can receive. As journalists say, being panned by folks on both sides of an issue means the writer has done something right.

Iserbyt has done plenty right, uncovering and quoting directly from educational papers and political writings that document an intentional shift in the purpose of American education: from providing students with a body of knowledge to turning them into members of a global work force with prescribed attitudes about social change

Although she traces some of the trends back to 1762, and the publication of Rousseau's *Social Contract* endorsing child-centered permissive education, Iserbyt deals most thoroughly with trends that began in the 1970s, not coincidentally the decade in which the U.S. Department of Education was born.

Iserbyt had been living abroad for close to 20 years when she returned to the United States in 1971 and became involved in education issues.

"As an American who had spent many years working abroad, I had experienced traveling in and living in socialist countries. When I returned to the United States, I realized that America's transition from a sovereign constitutional republic to a socialist democracy would not come about through warfare, but through the implementation and installation of the *system* in all areas of government –federal, state, and local."

"The brainwashing for acceptance of the system's control would take place in the school through indoctrination and the use of behavioral modification, which comes under so many labels, the most recent labels being Outcome Based Education, Skinnerian Mastery Learning, or Direct Instruction."

Iserbyt was a senior policy advisor in the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education before leaving government in disgust. She vocally opposed a school technology initiative during the first Reagan administration that she felt would usurp local schools' authority to control their curriculums.

She had previously served on a school board in Camden, Maine, so she knew the issues from both the grass-roots and Big Brother perspective.

If any ideology emerges from her writing, it is one of local control. Anything that attempts to put a uniform curriculum into place, even something classical such as E.D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge Curriculum, is suspect because of the potential for centralized control.

She likewise fears the business community's interest in education reform, which she sees as entirely self-serving. School-to-work initiatives, which give course credits to students as they transform from high school to jobs are also dangerous because they lead to a global work force training system.

Another trend discussed in the book is "performance-based" accountability, which typically means standards have been diluted so more people can take part. If teachers don't know their subject matter, it doesn't matter, as long as they can engage students in the creative lesson plans about social justice and other non-academic pursuits.

The goal of this "dumbing down", Iserbyt contends, is to create a system of matching docile students with jobs, much like the controlled economies of Nazi Germany or China.

As for solutions, don't look to school choice or vouchers, the author says, because any private school that has accepted a penny from the government is subject to the conditions and social engineering mandates of the government.

"A massive national effort to restore true local control of our public schools seems...to be the only real long...term solution which will guarantee freedom and upward mobility for all our children."

Readers may not buy into Iserbyt's theories, but they will surely think over their own views on the purpose of education: Do we support the classical notion of learning for learning's sake, or is the goal of an education to condition our children to take their place in the global work force economy? The latter is where we're moving.

"The Deliberate Dumbing Down of America, A Chronological Paper Trail"(soft cover edition, 750 pages, 8 1/2"x12" format for easy copying with permission from author) may be ordered from Barnes & Noble.com and Amazon.com. The book is also available in hardcover.