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On Chesterton

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This article is a brief introduction to G. K. Chesterton's thought on education. Excerpts of Chesterton's work on this theme can be found in our new [Re-Source: Classic Texts](#) section.

The one thing that is never taught by any chance in the atmosphere of public schools is this: that there is a whole truth of things, and that in knowing it and speaking it we are happy.

—G.K. Chesterton, "The Boy," *All Things Considered*.

When G.K. Chesterton identifies “what’s wrong with the world” in his prophetic 1910 book of that title, he lists “public education” as one of the main culprits, along with Big Government, Big Business, and Feminism. The reason? All of them have combined to undermine the family. When the job becomes more important than the family, the family falters. When the job takes both father and mother out of the home, the family falters. When the family falls apart, there is only one entity that can replace it and will replace it: the state. And when the state takes over education, it replaces the authority of the family. The public school system, created with the best of intentions, was once locally controlled and accountable to the parents who sent their children to the schools. Now the state has made the parents answerable and no longer reflects their values and convictions—the very things they would want taught to their children. The public school not only separates parent from child, it separates subject from subject. The “whole truth of things,” celebrated by Chesterton above, is lost. Learning becomes fragmented, succumbing to the modern trend of separating everything from everything else, so that the world has become, in Chesterton’s phrase, “one wild divorce court.”

“There is a tendency,” he says, “to forget that the school is only a preparation for the home, and not the home a mere jumping off place for the school.” The school is secondary to the home. So is everything else in the world. The home is the place of freedom and creativity. The outside world is the place of conformity and fads and trends and all forms of slavery, political and commercial and cultural.

In *What's Wrong with the World*, Chesterton says that the problem is not that man has lost his way—man has always lost his way—the problem is that man has lost his address. We are plagued by purposelessness. Along with that we have lost the purpose of education. It is supposed to be “truth in the state of transmission,” the process of passing the truth from one generation to another. The school has not only lost the purpose of education, it has lost the truth. It is not that public school is evil; it is that it no longer does what a school is supposed to do. The teacher is supposed to work on behalf of the parent, not instead of the parent, and certainly not against the parent. And the private schools have basically copied the public schools in this regard, only with a higher tuition. And saddest of all, most Catholic schools have merely aped the other private schools as well as the public schools. Even the extra religion class has been separated from everything else, rather than integrated into the whole. The whole truth of things is not taught.

And the problem is that most parents, even though they know the system is not working, feel

powerless, and simply put up with it. We have succumbed to the huge modern heresy of altering the human soul to fit the conditions of the modern world, instead of altering the conditions of the world to fit the human soul.

In 1937, the president of the University of Chicago, Robert Hutchins, addressed the National Catholic Education Association. He said the Catholic Church possessed “the longest intellectual tradition of any institution in the contemporary world”; yet Catholic education in the United States had “imitated the worst features of secular education.” But, unfortunately, Catholic educators failed to heed Hutchins’s warning, and the Catholic schools have continued to imitate secular education even more up to the present time. The latest development has been Catholic schools adopting the “Common Core” program.

I think the Chestertonian response to the proposition of “Common Core” is that it’s not common, and it’s not the core. It is exactly what Chesterton warned about in a speech in 1927 at the University of London, called “Culture and the Coming Peril”: “To put it shortly, the evil I am trying to warn you of is not excessive democracy, it is not excessive ugliness, it is not excessive anarchy. It might be stated thus: It is standardisation by a low standard.”

The solution? If Education is, as Chesterton says, merely truth in the state of transmission, then we need to start by teaching the Truth. In other words, we have to center a curriculum around the Incarnation. Without that, whatever we teach is “windy and barren.” We have seen the results of taking God out of the curriculum. We have created a myriad of social and psychological problems for ourselves by deliberately teaching something less than the truth. Chesterton says, “Take away the supernatural, and what remains is the unnatural.”

The point is, if Christianity is true, it is a truth that affects everything. If Christ has died for the sins of the world and risen with the promise of eternal life, then all history, all literature, all art, all philosophy, all science is part of the story of salvation. There is no understanding of current events without understanding the Fall. Even mathematics must stand in awe of the perfect equation which is the Trinity.

The Gospel is the whole truth of things that makes us happy. The true Common Core is Christ that makes everything else fit together. Without the ultimate meaning of things, whatever facts we gather are merely broken pieces, which are confusing and which most people do not recognize as anything they hold in common.

We must teach what is right, what is true, what is good, what is beautiful, the classical precepts which do not change and are still lively and provocative with each new hearing. The history of education for almost the past two centuries has been one new educational philosophy after another, one fad replacing another fad. Chesterton says that children are continually exposed to educational ideas that are younger than they are. The result? A steady decline in education even as the education industry swells. It is destined for total collapse and the whole culture is in danger of collapsing with it. That is what happens from following the fads instead of following the truth.

Chesterton’s classical understanding explains why his ideas have stood the test of time, and why the following excerpts from his writings reveal an extraordinary analysis of the problems with our schools today.

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