

Let's Really Reform Our Schools

Anita Garland

PREVIEW

In the landmark study *Nation at Risk*, published by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, commission members described what they saw as a "rising tide of mediocrity" in our schools. Other studies have pointed to students' poor achievement in science, math, communication, and critical thinking. What can our schools do to improve students' performance? Anita Garland has several radical ideas, which she explains in this selection. As you read it, think about whether or not you agree with her points.

American high schools are in trouble. No, that's not strong enough. American high schools are disasters. "Good" schools today are only a rite of passage for American kids, where the pressure to look fashionable and act cool outweighs any concern for learning. And "bad" schools—heaven help us—are havens for the vicious and corrupt. There, metal detectors and security guards wage a losing battle against the criminals that prowl the halls.

Desperate illnesses require desperate remedies. And our public schools are desperately ill. What is needed is no meek, fainthearted attempt at "curriculum revision" or "student-centered learning." We need to completely restructure our thinking about what schools are and what we expect of the students who attend them.

The first change needed to save our schools is the most fundamental one. Not only must we stop *forcing* everyone to attend school; we must stop *allowing* the attendance of so-called students who are not interested in studying. Mandatory school attendance is based upon the idea that every American has a right to basic education. But as the old saying goes, your rights stop where the next guy's begin. A student who sincerely wants an education, regardless of his or her mental or physical ability, should be welcome in any school in this country. But "students" who deliberately interfere with other students' ability to learn, teachers' ability to teach, and administrators' ability to maintain order should be denied a place in the classroom. They do not want an education. And they should not be allowed to mark time within school walls, waiting to be handed their meaningless diplomas while they make it harder for everyone around them to either provide or receive a quality education.

By requiring troublemakers to attend school, we have made it impossible to deal with them in any effective way. They have little to fear in terms of punishment. Suspension from school for a few days doesn't improve their behavior. After all, they don't want to be in school anyway. For that matter, mandatory attendance

is, in many cases, nothing but a bad joke. Many chronic troublemakers are absent so often that it is virtually impossible for them to learn anything. And when they *are* in school, they are busy shaking down other students for their lunch money or jewelry. If we permanently banned such punks from school, educators could turn their attention away from the troublemakers and toward those students who realize that school is a serious place for serious learning.

You may ask, "What will become of these young people who aren't in school?" 5 But consider this: What is becoming of them now? They are not being educated. They are merely names on the school records. They are passed from grade to grade, learning nothing, making teachers and fellow students miserable. Finally they are bumped off the conveyor belt at the end of twelfth grade, oftentimes barely literate, and passed into society as "high school graduates." Yes, there would be a need for alternative solutions for these young people. Let the best thinkers of our country come up with some ideas. But in the meanwhile, don't allow our schools to serve as a holding tank for people who don't want to be there.

Once our schools have been returned to the control of teachers and genuine 6 students, we could concentrate on smaller but equally meaningful reforms. A good place to start would be requiring students to wear school uniforms. There would be cries of horror from the fashion slaves, but the change would benefit everyone. If students wore uniforms, think of the mental energy that could be redirected into more productive channels. No longer would young girls feel the need to spend their evenings laying out coordinated clothing, anxiously trying to create just the right look. The daily fashion show that currently absorbs so much of students' attention would come to a halt. Kids from modest backgrounds could stand out because of their personalities and intelligence, rather than being tagged as losers because they can't wear the season's hottest sneakers or jeans. Affluent* kids might learn they have something to offer the world other than a fashion statement. Parents would be relieved of the pressure to deal with their offspring's constant demands for wardrobe additions.

Next, let's move to the cafeteria. What's for lunch today? How about a Milky 7 Way bar, a bag of Fritos, a Coke, and just to round out the meal with a vegetable, maybe some french fries. And then back to the classroom for a few hours of intense mental activity, fueled on fat, salt, and sugar. What a joke! School is an institution of education, and that education should be continued as students sit down to eat. Here's a perfect opportunity to teach a whole generation of Americans about nutrition, and we are blowing it. School cafeterias, of all places, should demonstrate how a healthful, low-fat, well-balanced diet produces healthy, energetic, mentally alert people. Instead, we allow school cafeterias to dispense the same junk food that kids could buy in any mall. Overhaul the cafeterias! Out with the candy, soda, chips, and fries! In with the salads, whole grains, fruits, and vegetables!

Turning our attention away from what goes on during school hours, let's 8 consider what happens after the final bell rings. Some school-sponsored

activities are all to the good. Bands and choirs, foreign-language field trips, chess or skiing or drama clubs are sensible parts of an extracurricular plan. They bring together kids with similar interests to develop their talents and leadership ability. But other common school activities are not the business of education. The prime example of inappropriate school activity is in competitive sports between schools.

Intramural sports are great. Students need an outlet for their energies, and a friendly competition against one's classmates on the basketball court or baseball diamond is fun and physically beneficial. But the wholesome fun of sports is quickly ruined by the competitive team system. School athletes quickly become the campus idols, encouraged to look down on classmates with less physical ability. Schools concentrate enormous amounts of time, money, and attention upon their teams, driving home the point that competitive sports are the *really* important part of school. Students are herded into gymnasiums for "pep rallies" that whip up adoration of the chosen few and encourage hatred of rival schools. Boys' teams are supplied with squads of cheerleading girls . . . let's not even get into what the subliminal message is *there*. If communities feel they must have competitive sports, let local businesses or even professional teams organize and fund the programs. But school budgets and time should be spent on programs that benefit more than an elite few.

Another school-related activity that should get the ax is the fluff-headed, money-eating, misery-inducing event known as the prom. How in the world did the schools of America get involved in this showcase of excess? Proms have to be the epitome of everything that is wrong, tasteless, misdirected, inappropriate, and just plain sad about the way we bring up our young people. Instead of simply letting the kids put on a dance, we've turned the prom into a bloated nightmare that ruins young people's budgets, their self-image, and even their lives. The pressure to show up at the prom with the best-looking date, in the most expensive clothes, wearing the most exotic flowers, riding in the most extravagant form of transportation, dominates the thinking of many students for months before the prom itself. Students cling to doomed, even abusive romantic relationships rather than risk being dateless for this night of nights. They lose any concept of meaningful values as they implore* their parents for more, more, more money to throw into the jaws of the prom god. The adult trappings of the prom—the slinky dresses, emphasis on romance, slow dancing, nightclub atmosphere—all encourage kids to engage in behavior that can have tragic consequences. Who knows how many unplanned pregnancies and alcohol-related accidents can be directly attributed to the pressures of prom night? And yet, not going to the prom seems a fate worse than death to many young people—because of all the hype about the "wonder" and "romance" of it all. Schools are not in the business of providing wonder and romance, and it's high time we remembered that.

We have lost track of the purpose of our schools. They are not intended to be centers for fun, entertainment, and social climbing. They are supposed to be

institutions for learning and hard work. Let's institute the changes suggested here—plus dozens more—without apology, and get American schools back to business.

VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

1. The word *affluent* in "Kids from modest backgrounds could stand out because of their personalities and intelligence. . . . Affluent kids might learn they have something to offer the world other than a fashion statement" (paragraph 6) means
 - a. intelligent.
 - b. troubled.
 - c. wealthy.
 - d. poor.
2. The word *implore* in "They lose any concept of meaningful values as they implore their parents for more, more, more money to throw into the jaws of the prom god" (paragraph 10) means
 - a. beg.
 - b. ignore.
 - c. pay.
 - d. obey.

READING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Which of the following would be the best alternative title for this selection?
 - a. America's Youth
 - b. Education of the Future
 - c. Social Problems of Today's Students
 - d. Changes Needed in the American School System
2. Which sentence best expresses the main idea of the selection?
 - a. Excesses such as the prom and competitive sports should be eliminated from school budgets.
 - b. Major changes are needed to make American schools real centers of learning.
 - c. Attendance must be voluntary in our schools.
 - d. The best thinkers of our country must come up with ideas on how to improve our schools.

3. Garland believes that mandatory attendance at school
 - a. gives all students an equal chance at getting an education.
 - b. allows troublemakers to disrupt learning.
 - c. is cruel to those who don't really want to be there.
 - d. helps teachers maintain control of their classes.
4. Garland is against school-sponsored competitive sports because she believes that
 - a. exercise and teamwork should not have a role in school.
 - b. they overemphasize the importance of sports and athletes.
 - c. school property should not be used in any way after school hours.
 - d. they take away from professional sports.
5. We can infer that Garland believes
 - a. teens should not have dances.
 - b. proms promote unwholesome values.
 - c. teens should avoid romantic relationships.
 - d. proms are even worse than mandatory education.
6. The author clearly implies that troublemakers
 - a. are not intelligent.
 - b. really do want to be in school.
 - c. should be placed in separate classes.
 - d. don't mind being suspended from school.
7. *True or False?* ____ We can conclude that the author feels that teachers and genuine students have lost control of our schools.
8. The essay suggests that the author would also oppose
 - a. school plays.
 - b. serving milk products in school cafeterias.
 - c. the selection of homecoming queens.
 - d. stylish school uniforms.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

About Content

1. What reforms does Garland suggest in her essay? Think back to your high school days. Which of the reforms that Garland suggests do you think might have been most useful at your high school?

2. Garland's idea of voluntary school attendance directly contradicts the "stay in school" campaigns. Do you agree with her idea? What do you think might become of students who choose not to attend school?
3. At the end of her essay, Garland writes, "Let's institute the changes suggested here—plus dozens more." What other changes do you think Garland may have in mind? What are some reforms you think might improve schools?

About Structure

4. The thesis of this essay can be found in the introduction, which is made up of the first two paragraphs. Find the thesis statement and write it here:

5. The first point on Garland's list of reforms is the elimination of mandatory (that is, required) education. Then she goes on to discuss other reforms. Find the transition sentence that signals that she is leaving the discussion about mandatory education and going on to other needed changes. Write that sentence here:

6. What are two transition words that Garland uses to introduce two of the other reforms?

About Style and Tone

7. Garland uses some colorful images to communicate her ideas. For instance, in paragraph 5 she writes, "Finally [the troublemakers] are bumped off the conveyor belt at the end of twelfth grade, oftentimes barely literate, and passed into society as 'high school graduates.'" What does the image of a conveyor belt imply about schools and about the troublemakers? What do the quotation marks around *high school graduates* imply?
8. What do the boldfaced words in the following three colorful images from the essay imply about today's schools and students?

... don't allow our schools to serve as a **holding tank** for people who don't want to be there. (paragraph 5)

A good place to start would be requiring students to wear school uniforms. There would be cries of horror from the **fashion slaves** ... (paragraph 6)

Students are **herded** into gymnasiums for "pep rallies" that whip up adoration of the chosen few ... (paragraph 9)

9. To convey her points, does the author use a formal, straightforward tone or an informal, impassioned tone? Give examples from the essay to support your answer.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Personal

Assignment 1: Writing a Paragraph

Write a persuasive paragraph in which you agree or disagree with one of Garland's suggested reforms. Your topic sentence may be something simple and direct, like one of these:

I strongly agree with Garland's point that attendance should be voluntary in our high schools.

I disagree with Garland's point that high school students should be required to wear uniforms.

Alternatively, you may want to develop your own paragraph calling for reform in some other area of American life. Your topic sentence might be like one of the following:

We need to make radical changes in our treatment of homeless people.

Strong new steps must be taken to control the sale of guns in our country.

Major changes are needed to keep electronic devices from dominating the lives of our children.

Academic

Assignment 2: Writing a Paragraph

If troublemakers were excluded from schools, what would become of those troublemakers? Write a paragraph in which you suggest two or three types of programs that troublemakers could be assigned to. Explain why each program would be beneficial to the troublemakers themselves and to society in general. You might want to include in your paragraph one or more of the following:

- Apprenticeship programs
- Special neighborhood schools for troublemakers
- Alternative schools
- Work-placement programs
- Community service programs

Personal

Assignment 3: Writing an Essay

Garland suggests ways to make schools "institutions for learning and hard work" (paragraph 11). She wants to get rid of anything that greatly distracts students from their education, such as having to deal with troublemakers, overemphasis on

fashion, and interschool athletics. When you were in high school, what tended most to divert your attention from learning? Write an essay explaining in full detail the three things that interfered most with your high school education. You may include any of Garland's points, but present details that apply specifically to you. Organize your essay by using emphatic order—in other words, save whatever interfered most with your education for the last supporting paragraph.

It is helpful to write a sentence outline for this kind of essay. Here, for example, is one writer's outline for an essay titled "Obstacles to My High School Education."

Thesis: There were three main things that interfered with my high school education.

Topic sentence 1: Concern about my appearance took up too much of my time and energy.

- a. Since I was concerned about my looking good, I spent too much time shopping for clothes.
- b. In order to afford the clothes, I worked twenty hours a week, drastically reducing my study time.
- c. Spending even more time on clothes, I fussed every evening over what I would wear to school the next day.

Topic sentence 2: Cheerleading was another major obstacle to my academic progress in high school.

- a. I spent many hours practicing in order to make the cheerleading squad.
- b. Once I made the squad, I had to spend even more time practicing and then attending games.
- c. Once when I didn't make the squad, I was so depressed for a while that I couldn't study, and this had serious consequences.

Topic sentence 3: The main thing that interfered with my high school education was my family situation.

- a. Even when I had time to study, I often found it impossible to do so at home, since my parents often had fights that were noisy and upsetting.
- b. My parents showed little interest in my schoolwork, giving me little reason to work hard for my classes.
- c. When I was in eleventh grade, my parents divorced; this was a major distraction for me for a long time.

To round off your essay with a conclusion, you may simply want to restate your thesis and main supporting points. After you finish a first draft, swap essays with a classmate and share revision advice; use the checklist on the inside back cover to guide your critique.



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