

Review of:
Doomed to Fail:
The Built-in Defects of American Education
By Paul A. Zoch
Publ: Ivan R. Dee, Chicago 2004
202 pp, plus 35 pp notes and index.

Identifies the ideas that have caused the decline of American Public Schools

Paul Zoch has done a great job of tying together the ideas in educational philosophy that have led to the tragic decline of American public education. His story of the psychologists, and pedagogs who enthusiastically promoted their ideas shows how the schools have been transformed for the worse. His history correctly takes up most of the book since it is important to understand the blend of diverse ideas that taken together have moved our public schools away from academic prowess.

If you have an interest in the future of American public schools you must read this book. It provides the background you need to focus on the essentials of public schooling.

Although he does not use the word, Mr. Zoch makes an excellent case for academic rigor. He shows how it has been removed from the public schools and the effect on students. The result is a less egalitarian, less capable of recognizing merit, public school that provide less opportunity for the students and will likely be a disaster for our nation.

This trend was very well advanced when I went through the teacher training curriculum 45 years ago. At that time we joked that our professional department was good only for providing examples of how not to teach. From Mr. Zoch's descriptions things have not improved.

Mr. Zoch's prescriptions are less robust and consist primarily of trying to emulate the highly centralized Japanese school system. That would not be possible since American parents have nothing comparable to the single minded concentration the Japanese families devote to their child's schooling. We might be better advised to let provision of schooling be a private matter and relegate government to the provision of partial funding.

His emphasis on the primacy of intense student work on their education is refreshing. Teachers cannot drill a hole in each student's skull and pour in an education. Some home-schoolers have demonstrated, in fact, that a subject outline, some books, and intense questioning can produce superior students with minimal actual "instruction." As usual the top 15 % of American students will obtain an education by attending private schools, being home-schooled or just plain taking charge of their own education. The remaining students will obtain a minimal education that is worth only a small part of the many years and countless dollars that have been devoted to it.

If teachers try to run their classrooms as the current theory suggests they are in for a lifetime of misery. The current public school system expects the impossible from teachers and then pays too little to attract expertise in any technical subject. School administrators divert attention for miserable classroom conditions by talking about minor problems such as class size, as if a slightly smaller class would make up for a "mainstreamed" psychotic or students whose parents refuse to discipline them.