Taking Back Our Classrooms

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American education is at a cross-road. Teachers and
students are floundering to meet the requirements of a policy, procedure, and data-driven education system
that expects teachers to follow mandated educational policies and standardized curriculum. It's a system that
coddles and rescues students in an attempt to "leave no child behind," and fosters conformity rather than
critical thinking and personal responsibility. It's time to ask
the relevant questions. Should data drive the system? Does such a system hijack the learning process?
Is "corporate education" opposed to learning? Why do students need to be made successful in the same way?
Is an entitlement mentality compromising teachers' professionalism in the classroom? Is digital technology
and social networking having negative effects on students' ability to learn? Are censorship issues stunting
students' higher level thinking skills?

In Taking Back Our Classrooms Barbara Wood explores America's public education system from a teacher's
perspective. It's popular to blame teachers for the current dysfunction in the system. But many factors
impinge on teachers' ability to be effective in the classroom. Barbara sheds light and brings intelligent and
poignant insight on these issues. The concerns addressed in this book should be considered if we are to
truly create an enduring and meaningful American education system.

Taking Back Our Classrooms Details

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From Reader Review Taking Back Our Classrooms for online ebook

Barbara Wood says

This is an interesting, thorough, and well-written book that addresses so many issues facing the American educational system. I love how the author brings in stories and examples from her own classroom experience to show the reader how crazy our school system has become. It's all part of the political debate going on now. As the author so poignantly points out, we are creating a society full of self-centered, irresponsible, demanding students. This book needs to be read by anyone who cares about what's happening to education in our country and who wants to thoroughly consider all the issues before establishing government policies.

Juan says

Reads like elementary fiction.

Jaime K says

I won this in a Goodreads giveaway.

"When schools focus on end results or grades rather than on what the grade is supposed to mean as achievement, it is not any wonder that when young people go out into the work world, they are often less concerned with the work than with the pay for the job." – page 89

Another reviewer said this was well-written. While I don't fully disagree, I felt there were parts that made it "decently written." Wood is repetitious at times (which makes sense given that each section has a theme), but sometimes the same word is used 2 or 3 times in one paragraph, when there are alternatives to the word, or she'll say almost the same thing in more than one paragraph on the same page. Some of her sources are quite outdated, especially those with technology. Some research from the 1990s can still be relevant, I guess, but not when it comes to studying students' reactions to new tech. One would think that an English major with her extensive background would have looked for more recent and relevant sources.
The few times I didn't mind the older materials were when Wood showed that there were similar results over time, and yet educational behaviours haven't changed.

She also seems to take umbrage with differentiating instruction to help students. While many policies about differentiation are indeed crazy, the thought of tweaking instruction to at least attempt to make a concept more interesting to a student is not a strange thought. We may help students understand their weaknesses better, which can, in turn, help their strengths.

Woods delves into quite a few themes that pertain to education in the U.S.:

1) How political and social changes have made their way in education
- The fear of bombs and terrorists have fed the fear of leaving children behind in the educational system and then engineered a "psychologically correct" system. But leaving behind/being left behind is part of the

challenges of personal and psychological growth. And this grows to the fear of being an inadequate school
- There has been a desperate attempt to make the youth look good in order to retain our superpower status
- Narcissism and egotism has spread from merely fearing aging to fearing boredom, inadequacy, and depression...and now children fear those things as well. This is due to industrialization and consumerism. There are also fewer social ties, more self-love, and an increase in distrust.
- Trying to remove suffering from children's lives makes them expect immediate gratification and has fostered entitlement. Pain is part of living! (Some of these things make me wonder if Woods is religious, since most religions teach that pain is a part of growth, or if her background and studies have left her to be more open-minded than many people).

2) The side effects of technology on young people
- There are fewer personal interactions and relationships, leading to a slow decline in interpreting social cues. Many of the youth can't communicate effectively, yet take on leadership roles.
- More time on social media and "plugged in" in other ways has shown a decrease in grades and motivation.
- Multitasking can be detrimental to critical thinking skills and literacy, and actually goes against Bloom's Taxonomy. That is something new and yet, even though I multitask, can firmly agree with.
- Social media, politics, and an "us vs. them" mentality have led to lack of true conversation

3) Politically correct behavior
-Certain censorships, which started with interest groups who were offended by disrespectful language), have grown to lead to entitlement and quick finger-pointing. It also shows a stronger focus on ideology instead of ideas.
- Schools essentially ban books with specific language or themes, "leaving behind" classics and historical accuracy. This, along with other PC-ness, can sometimes discourage children from facing the realities of life. (And yet I hear of more schools allowing quite controversial books. Also, I feel that children face realities even more than I did. I know of more students now than I did in high school who had a loved one young, dealt with horrid family situations, have been abused, have a parent in jail, have been raped, has dealt with true bullying to where words and blows were exchanged...and I work at a Blue Ribbon school. And at my prior school, it didn't phase me when a freshman suggested a book about a drug cartel. The students know more than we sometimes realize - including Wood).

4) Policies in public schools
- Wood seems to have some issues with rules about attendance, against abuse and harassment, and preventing discrimination. Then she contradicts herself and says "okay, without these policies the school would fall apart." (Or, you know...without them a student's life could be in danger).
HOWEVER, her point of the fact that the **policies themselves** are sometimes contradictory is true.
- Many of the policies negate teacher autonomy, creativity, and innovation...particularly since the advent of NCLB. Page 78 lists a few questions that relate to this: *Since when did a school receive a report card? Could a school be punished if it didn't "make the grade?" Could it close if it didn't show adequate growth?* These are all because of NCLB.
Yet some questions don't make sense: *Since when could parents choice out of schools?* Ever since there were private schools and home schooling. Also, most states did not allow for tax dollars to be reimbursed for that. But even so, the choice was always there. *Since when did test data and enrollment stats become the barometer of what students have learned?* Ever since standardized tests were popularized in the '70s or '80s. I feel like some of Wood's arguments hold no ground.
- There are issues with NCLB and school accountability, especially with students with special needs. There are inconsistencies between states and even districts as schools find ways to beat the system.
- There has been too much emphasis on reading and math, undermining other courses/disciplines. While this is slowly changing, tests still focus almost solely on those two skills.

- Race to the Top exacerbated issues, making education a true competition. It helped push us into having a more corporate education that yields profits and products instead of focusing on process and growth.
- Policies are enhanced by commercialism and corporation-like policies - teachers have more work, more fear, more stress...there is less progress and a lack of student focus.

5) What schools needs to do (Just a few things I've taken out)
- Embrace 21st Century Skills while eschewing AYPs and standardized tests
- Revert back to Erikson's philosophical model over the corporate one, and focus on multiple intelligence theories.
- Learn from other countries where the means justify the ends and outcomes aren't predetermined. (Wood suggests having national and state standards but decentralizing the system. To me, that sounds contradictory. I fear that having states fully go their own routes would disservice students who may move from one state to another. However, I do like that she suggests allowing autonomy within states for implementing the standards based on economical and societal differences. Still...I think that, overall, if each state does their own thing, we'll be regressing back to the '80s and '90s where there was less continuity and collaboration between states).
- Distribute funding equally and abolish penalties for "failing" schools
- Pay teachers according to experience and standing, not "merit" and test results
- Better professional development geared towards encouraging creativity and student differences