

# Beyond the Department of Education: John Dewey's Legacy and the Decline of Public Education

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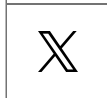
*Commentary*

Education in the United States and Canada is decentralized and controlled at the state or provincial level, based on the belief that local governance leads to more tailored and responsive systems.

In the United States, this decentralization has sparked debates over the federal government's role, especially since the creation of the Department of Education (DOE) in 1979 under the Carter administration.



Since its inception, the DOE has been a political flashpoint, with many conservatives calling for its abolition, arguing that the federal government should not dictate educational policy to the states. The Trump administration's [promise to eliminate the DOE](#) is significant.



However, the more profound challenge facing North American education today is rooted in the enduring influence of John Dewey's educational philosophy.

Dewey's ideas have shaped education for over a century in the United States and Canada and continue to affect policy and practice in both countries. He stands to modern educational theory as Aristotle stood to Medieval philosophy: omnipresent. His philosophy even shapes educational frameworks abroad, as I noticed while teaching in Thailand, where Dewey's ideas are central to the national K-12 curriculum.

Education is essential to the well-being of a nation, as Canadian classicist Hilda Neatby emphasized in her 1953 book ["So Little For the Mind: An Indictment of Canadian Education"](#): "Education supplies all other industries, including those concerned with the government and the defence of the country. If the educational industry falters, it necessarily follows that the whole structure of the nation is threatened."

Neatby was scathing in her assessment of the effect of Dewey's ideas: "The pupils and their interests are ostentatiously put first; the pupils' problems and frustrations are the subjects; the pupils' personalities and motivations are the aims. How can young people in such an atmosphere be anything but self-centred little automatons?"

Dewey's principles, especially his emphasis on social engagement, "relevance," and personal growth over academic excellence, remain potent in American public education despite being excoriated by various prominent thinkers. As historian Richard Hofstadter described in "[Anti-Intellectualism in American Life](#)," Dewey's philosophy had a "devastating" effect on curricular systems. The novelist [Flannery O'Connor](#), a graduate of a progressive teacher's college, dismissed Dewey's ideas with blunt advice to parents: "My advice to all parents is ... anything that William Heard Kilpatrick or John Dewey say do, don't do."

Why are his critics so vehement in their denunciation?

At its core, Dewey's educational philosophy promoted social reform and vocational skills over the study of history, literature, philosophy, and the arts—disciplines he sneeringly dismissed as "Mandarin knowledge" (that is, the classical education that emphasized mastery of timeless subjects such as literature and philosophy).

His approach is anti-intellectual, dismissive of traditional educational models and their broader cultural and political implications. Dewey's emphasis on the primacy of experiential learning, social engagement, and individual development over the cultivation of intellectual discipline is a direct challenge to the intellectual foundations of education. His ideas throughout his voluminous writings are an extended meditation on the primacy of experiential learning, the desirability of "growth" (notoriously unspecified), and the need for "relevant" knowledge over the study of the past.

Dewey's emphasis on the present and the relevant fosters a kind of intellectual amnesia, where the study of history—vital for informed citizenship—is displaced by a focus on contemporary issues and "social studies." Students are increasingly taught to view the contemplation of the past as either a harmless escape or, at worst, an undemocratic exercise. This narrow focus on the immediate—a kind of presentism—undermines the essential understanding of history crucial for meaningful engagement with the world.

David Livingstone, professor of liberal studies at Vancouver Island University, writes: “This disparaging of tradition flows from Dewey’s historicism. He dismissed the notion that there are permanent truths available to the human mind through the careful and difficult contemplation of the works of past authors or in the direct confrontation with nature.”

Rejecting traditional teaching methods focused on intellectual discipline and the mastery of core subjects, classrooms became arenas for socialization, personal development, and democratic participation. Teachers were cast as facilitators rather than authoritative sources of knowledge. Students were immersed in “discovery learning” by appealing to their individual passions and interests.

Though Dewey intended his philosophy to democratize education, it has led to a system where critical thinking and academic rigour are sidelined in favour of practical vocational training. By marginalizing subjects that foster deep intellectual reflection, such as philosophy and history, Dewey’s approach has contributed to the decline of academic content.

In a world driven by practical concerns, it’s easy to overlook the role of philosophy in shaping our world. Yet, as economist John Maynard Keynes famously noted, the ideas of economists (or, in this case, educationalists) often hold more power than people realize. To adapt Keynes’s observation, “The ideas of educationalists, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Practical men, who believe themselves exempt from intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct educationalist.”

Until Dewey’s influence is reevaluated, discussions about eliminating the DOE are beside the point. Only by starting from first principles and shifting away from Dewey’s progressive model can the United States hope to restore intellectual rigour and critical thinking in its classrooms.

Perhaps the most fitting conclusion comes from President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who wisely cautioned, “Educators, parents, and students ... must be induced to abandon the educational path that, rather blindly, they have been following as a result of John Dewey’s teachings.”

His words remind us that the uncritical adherence to Dewey’s philosophy has led education down a garden path that risks undermining the very intellectual foundations essential for a thriving democracy. It is time to reconsider and reevaluate the principles that have guided American and Canadian education, ensuring that future generations are equipped for the rigorous intellectual engagement necessary to confront the challenges of our time.

*Views expressed in this article are opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Epoch Times.*

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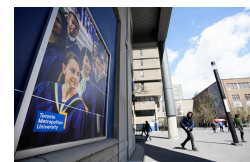
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