

Teach Your Own John Holt

John Holt was a pioneer in unschooling and homeschooling

As I read about homeschooling, I found several references to this groundbreaking book. John Holt was an educator who traveled what has become a common path among educators. It starts with enthusiasm to teach, followed by the discovery that one is really good at it. The kids love you. Then, looking around, the educator discovers that the educational bureaucracy loves him a whole lot less than the kids do.

They don't trust him. First of all, he doesn't have a great deal of respect for established curricula, schedules, standardized tests and the other trappings of classroom education. A real teacher looks at each kid as an individual challenge, and does the best with every one of them. Administrators hate that. It is said that in France, a Minister of Education boasted that one any given November 5 he could walk into any eighth grade history classroom in France and know what was being taught. It seems that all pedagogues like that kind of control, and hate the maverick who would challenge it.

Teachers generally belong to unions. Unions demand equal pay for everybody, which they justify with the assumption that all workers are interchangeable. A teacher who is visibly effective and loved by his students is a threat to that comfortable assumption, and hence to the whole system. Only a few schools, mostly private or charter, can tolerate such personalities, and even then only up to a degree. I say this wryly; I taught private school after I retired, and only one headmaster out of ten was able to deal with the fact that I did it because I enjoyed it, and what he paid me did not give him control over my life. Thanks, David Schapiro.

Holt's book is dated. He devotes a great deal of it to strategies on how to beat the system, how to get your kids out from under compulsory education. In the second decade of the 21st century these battles have more or less been won. The failure of the public schools is so palpable, so widely recognized, that the school system will not put up a terrible struggle if you want to do it yourself. Also, the reasons which he so effectively advances for teaching your own kids are more generally agreed. Most of the concerns about homeschooling, such as the adequacy of the curriculum or the socialization of the children, have also pretty much been laid to rest. At least one generation of homeschoolers have gone through college now, and admissions officers generally like to see them. Still, I think you will find it worth having access to the chapter entitled "Common Objections To Homeschooling" to focus your own thoughts and to make your arguments to the grandparents, who may not understand.

The quarter-century since Holt's death has seen some major transformations in our society. Computers, and especially the Internet, have changed the way that everybody learns. Holt saw a bit of benefit in television. My personal judgment would be that the medium wasn't great even when he wrote, and it is worse now. I would attempt to keep kids away from television to the extent possible. And, in this day and age, I would add to that video games, mindless Internet surfing, Facebook, downloadable videos,

music TV, and the thousands of other electronic distractions. In structuring a curriculum, I would recommend that parents read books on this electronic invasion, most particularly "The Shallows," which I also review. Read "The Dumbest Generation" for a litany of horrors of what is happening across the millennial generation, giving you all the more incentive to take control of your kids' education. And lastly, I would recommend the most persuasive book on taking control of your children's education, "An Underground History Of American Education" by John Gatto.