

WELCOME TO THE GREAT CONVERSATION

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“Man prefers to believe what he prefers to be true.”—Francis Bacon



Just when was the Golden Age of American Education?

It wasn't in the '90s ▶

It wasn't in the '80s ▶

It wasn't in the '70s ▶

It wasn't in the '60s ▶

It sure wasn't in the '50s ▶

It wasn't before World War II ▶

It wasn't before World War I ▶

It wasn't before the Spanish-American War ▶

Nostesia

Millions of Americans argue, often vehemently, that today's schools are dreadful compared to the temples of learning that existed in our golden past. In their view, we all would be better off if schools could just be the way they used to be.

These people are suffering from a debilitating mental condition that I have named nostesia: a hallucinogenic mixture of 50% nostalgia and 50% amnesia that distorts rational thinking.

I have created the following equation to quantify the severity of an individual's delusion:

$$A \times O = NQ$$

A represents a person's age. O is number of years he or she has been out of school. Multiply these together and you get NQ - the Nostesia Quotient. The higher a person's NQ, the more advanced the disease and the less likely the person will respond to reasoned argument.

Mitigating factors exist that can reduce a person's NQ. Aggravating conditions exist that can increase it. If, for example a person works in a school, or actively volunteers, we can divide his or her total NQ by 2. On the other hand, if the person is running for political office, multiply by 5.

One of my earliest exposures to nostesia came during a talk I gave in western Nebraska. I had just reviewed public education's history of achievements, and listed the challenges that lay ahead, when a big fellow stood up and said, "You know, I listened to all your talk, and as far as I'm concerned if schools could just be the way they used to be around here, everything would be all right"

"Yes sir," I said. "What year would that be?"

"1953. Those were the really good schools."

"The dropout rate in Nebraska in the early fifties was fifty percent," I said. "In fact, in those days dropout counseling consisted of principals encouraging certain kids to drop out."

"No," said an elderly woman in the front row, "you have to go back to 1939 for the really good schools."

It wasn't before the Civil War▶**Conclusion▶**

"Ma'am," I said, "the dropout rate in the 1930s was 80%. Today, your schools have that number down to single or low double digits."

Immediately, the big man proclaimed, "Oh, that's not true. Everybody I graduated with graduated!"

Priceless.

Of course, the nostesia pandemic is not new. Each succeeding generation of young people is regarded by their elders as academically challenged. Written expressions of doubt and disapproval regarding "these kids today" and "these schools today" go back as far as Plato. My brothers and sisters in the magnificent boomer generation are no different. The same people who once said, "Never trust anyone over thirty," now insist that today's young people don't know as much or work as hard as we did when we were young.

Every nostesiac has his or her rationale. Some are convinced that schools in the past were better because everybody got a job. They forget that most of those jobs - now gone - required little more than a strong back and a willingness to work. Some people are alarmed because "these kids today" don't know the same things that they know, especially historical facts that they consider essential to being a good American. These adults forget that most of what they know they learned after they got out of school. They also fail to see that it's not possible for today's students to learn everything their parents and grandparents learned plus everything that has happened since—especially in a school year that has not added a minute in decades. Some nostesiacs parrot the dreary assessment of public schools offered by media pundits; they don't want to admit that they have been duped by people on the radio they trust. Some adults cling to the fantasy because they refuse to believe they've been surpassed by new generations of kids. This is especially pronounced among the college educated. Finally, there are those who are CAVE people: Citizens Against Virtually Everything. No amount of reasoned discourse will eradicate their disease. It's genetic.

Nostesia can be cured, but it must be aggressively treated. The most effective treatment includes direct exposure to students and teachers in schools—the more interactive the better—coupled with regular, powerful doses of good news about our schools

I have found that the best way to break the spell is to provide a little context.

Today, one of the hot button issues of the "back-to-the-past" contingent is the seemingly large number of college freshmen who require remediation. This subject receives a lot of press, and is offered as positive proof of failing schools. In this context, I offer the following quote. It appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* attributed to Professor Theodore M. Greene of Princeton University.

I know of no college or university in the country that doesn't have to offer most or all of its freshmen courses in remedial English, beginning mathematics, beginning science and beginning foreign languages. Consequently, we give two or three years of college [courses] and the rest is high school work.

Most people agree that this is a perfect example of the declining quality of our schools. The problem with the argument, however, is that Professor Greene uttered this statement about the poor quality of high school graduates in March 1946. And when he spoke, he became part of a long line of complainants. Thirty-eight years prior, a 1908 Carnegie report discovered that large percentages of America's high school graduates were being admitted to elite colleges with "conditions," i.e., in need of remediation. Further back, in 1900, when only the top 2 percent of high school graduates went on to college (compared to 62 percent today), 378 of America's 450 colleges reported that incoming freshman needed remedial work. Eighty-four percent!

There never was a time when remediation of a significant percentage of new students was not required.

A curious thing about the people afflicted with nostesia is that when they are cornered on one issue they quickly skate to the next. For example, high on their list of complaints is the

rank ignorance that “these kids today” display regarding the most basic points of American history and geography. This really rattles people. Listen to the audience nervously laugh and groan as Jay Leno wanders the streets of L.A asking pedestrians seemingly simple questions concerning past and current events. It is a funny bit, but it is not new.

In 1943, The New York Times and Columbia University did their own version of “Jay-walking.” The results were just as pathetic. A large percentage of the people questioned could not identify the names of Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, or Theodore Roosevelt. Only 6 percent could identify the thirteen original colonies. Abraham Lincoln was identified as our first president, and he was said to have “emaciated the slaves.” When asked to identify the great American poet, Walt Whitman, hundreds said he was a bandleader, apparently confusing him with the jazz musician, Paul Whiteman. Their understanding of geography was equally thin. Most had no idea what America or the world looked like and could not correctly place our major cities on a map.

On its surface, this 1943 exercise does much to refute the notion that previous generations of Americans were more knowledgeable, especially about the “important stuff.” Look below the surface, however, and it gets worse. The interviewees were not a random sample of Americans. They were all college freshmen, America’s finest high school graduates. The Times and Columbia had not just exposed cultural illiterates, but elite cultural illiterates.

Nostesiacs howl in protest when I tell them this. They refuse to accept it, and one word makes it easy to see why. Television. We are daily exposed to a frightening array of fatuous, vain, half-naked specimens of America’s youth. How easy it is to unfavorably compare this horde with the clean-cut, well-mannered TV kids of yesteryear. But the comparison is false. Until quite recently, only a certain kind of young people were allowed to talk on TV: the ones who were taught how. Adults carefully scripted every line spoken by the kids in the old sitcoms. The only young people speaking extemporaneously on TV were the teens on Bandstand (“I like the words but not the lyrics.”), or those who wore jackets, ties, and dresses on the General Electric College Bowl. (Oh, those thirty point bonus questions!) Absent were the muddled freshmen quizzed by the Times and ordinary kids from the neighborhood. Now, their modern counterparts display their “brilliance” on reality shows and Jerry Springer’s stage fifteen times a day. This might be a statement on the sorry state of television, but it says nothing about the relative strength of our schools.

Every issue nostesiacs are likely to raise can be placed in historical context. Whether social promotion, lack of discipline, basic literacy, or dropout rates, there is ample evidence that it was no better in the past. No matter how far back I look, I can find no evidence of the golden era when we were “a nation of learners.” Nor can I find a time when parents were better educated than their children.

There is no doubt that America’s schools need to change to better serve the needs of the time, but not by going backwards. The vast majority of public schools are doing a better job now of educating America’s youth than they have ever done before. By employing the techniques prescribed in The Great Conversation we can provide the facts and turn nostesiacs into allies as we work to increase student success.

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