

Thomas Sowell

# INSIDE

# American

# Education

*The Decline, The Deception, The Dogmas*

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Thomas Sowell argues that the educational establishment of the United States - a vast tax-supported empire existing quasi-independently within American society - is morally and intellectually bankrupt. He suggests in a top-to-bottom tour of the mismanaged institutions, cynical leadership and tendentious programmes of American education, that deceptions and dogmas have concealed or sought to justify the steep and dangerous decline in educational standards and practices across the board.

## Inside American Education Details

Date : Published November 2nd 1992 by Free Press

ISBN : 9780029303306

Author : Thomas Sowell

Format : Hardcover 368 pages

Genre : Education, Politics, Nonfiction, Economics

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## From Reader Review Inside American Education for online ebook

### Mark Geise says

As with every Thomas Sowell book I have ever read, I thoroughly enjoyed “Inside American Education.” Sowell does a great job at dismantling the anti-intellectual trends among American educators. He looks at both universities and America’s public school system, making clear that the issues plaguing both are interrelated and have similar causes. The educational system in the United States has suffered from insularism, anti-intellectualism, and a lack of accountability. “Inside American Education” uses facts, figures, and data to counter every one of the claims made in support of current trends. Sowell also lays a framework for a higher quality educational system.

The United States does a poor job at educating its children relative to other first-world countries while simultaneously spending large sums of money relative to those other countries. Throwing more money at the issue has done nothing to improve education; in fact, one can make a good case that results have gotten worse as we have spent more money on education. Something else is fundamentally broken about American education besides callous politicians that don’t want to spend what needs to be spent to “solve” this problem, as so many claim. First and foremost, American educators and those that educate them in our universities have become increasingly insulated from accountability and from the real world. Teachers’ unions are extremely powerful, and they work hard to protect teachers from evaluation, performance-based pay structures, and any competition from outside the cabal. They have protected American teachers from competition by fighting for more timely licensing requirements, making it more difficult for outsiders to enter the field. They have fought for tenure, the ultimate insulation from accountability and competition. They have favored anti-intellectual trends among educators, producing a system where college students training to become teachers are, on average, among the lowest quality when compared to those from any other academic program. The professors that teach them are of low quality compared to professors in any other discipline. It is no surprise that

Sowell is great at unraveling all of the points made by those in the academic establishment that have a vested interest in keeping the current system in place. The current system protects bad teachers, bad professors, and abuses of power by college administrators. We need to introduce some competition to our schools with school choice. School choice will force public schools to adapt or die. No longer will they have captive customers nor will they be able to count on the same bloated budgets to which they’ve become accustomed. To compete, they will need to pay their best teachers more money while making it easier to get rid of bad teachers. At the same time, schools of education will need to produce quality teachers or fall by the wayside. If they continue to produce lackluster teachers, public schools will die a slow death as private alternatives hire teachers from outside the traditional accreditation process that are more talented than those coming out of schools of education.

If you are interested in this country’s education system, this is a must read. Sowell’s perspective needs to be a part of the national conversation.

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### Ashley says

Thomas Sowell presents clear, commonsense arguments for why American public education at all levels has gone down the toilet in recent years. He spends far more time than I would have liked discussing higher

education, but the chapters on K-12 are particularly good. When my child enters school in a few years, you can bet I'll know *exactly* what's going on in my kid's classroom. At the end, Sowell discusses ways to improve education at all levels, including the inane bureaucracy that rewards seniority rather than outcomes. Some of the ideas and practices he points out were a major part of my educational experience, both as a student and teacher. Forgive the long-winded review, but I just had to include some gems:

p. 55: "The 'objective' specified in one part of a so-called 'gifted and talented' curriculum is: 'To be a *risk taker* by having the courage to expose oneself to failure or criticisms, to take a guess, to function under conditions devoid of structure or to defend one's own ideas.' The epigraph to this handbook is: Better one's own path though imperfect than the path of another well made.' This motto is offered, not to seasoned and mature adults, but to children in grades 4 through 6." My 2nd grade teacher was really into "risk taking." I remember writing something about myself saying that I was a risk taker. Uh, no. I was exactly the opposite of a risk taker. Fast forward fifteen years as I'm subbing in a suburban Chicago high school. There's a poster in the hall that read, "What would you do if you knew you could not fail?" What? Kids need to know there are consequences, both good and bad, to any decision. Telling kids to take risks without weighing the consequences is doing them an enormous disservice.

p. 67, regarding non-academic curriculum that developers don't want parents informed about: "It is precisely the pervasive pattern of undermining parents which makes [these] programs dangerous beyond their particular subject matter.... Even youngsters who develop no problems in these particular areas may nevertheless have their ties with their parents weakened, confused, or otherwise made insecure--especially during the crucial and dangerous adolescent years. The constant conditioning to act independently of parents, and to use similarly inexperienced peers as guides, is an invitation to disaster in many ways....

"Parents are not simply a source of experience from their own lives; they are a conduit for the distilled experience of others in earlier generations, experience conveyed in traditions and moral codes responding to the many dangers that beset human life." He goes on to point out that parents actually have a stake in their children's future, unlike the developers of such curriculum. While I was at SUU, there was a big debate between two professors. One was very conservative, the other very liberal and advocated experimentation rejection of traditional values. At the end of the debate, the conservative professor said, in essence, "You'll hear all these ideas that tell you to experiment and that your parents are wrong, but in the end, you ought to listen to the people who have the most to lose should you make self-destructive decisions. Your professors won't be there to bail you out, but your parents will."

p. 88 has a quote about a "diverse" school in San Francisco at lunch. The white kids are in one corner, the black kids in another, the Asians hanging out in their own group, and the Latino kids by themselves. "SF schools have spent two decades and more than \$100 million on integration programs. Yet outside the classroom--at the lunch counters, on the playgrounds and in the hallways--many ethnic groups still mix as well as oil and water." This was true at my Chicago school. The administration even went as far as to have a week where students were encouraged to talk to someone new at lunch and were provided conversation starters. It went over like a lead balloon. Even in the most diverse schools, students gravitate to others like themselves.

p. 218-19 on classroom visits: "Those who believe that a classroom visit is likely to be a great source of information about teaching repeat the fatal fallacy of education professors, that there is such a thing as teaching, separate from the substantive knowledge being taught. The conveying of that knowledge, and of the intellectual skills and discipline which give it meaning, is ultimately what teaching consists of. If these things are conveyed from one mind to another, then the teaching has been successful, no matter how chaotic and clumsy the classroom management may be. By the same token, if it fails to happen, then teaching has been a failure, no matter how smoothly or impressively the classroom has been managed, or how happy or

inspired the students feel." I wish more than anything someone had taught me how to teach.

p. 288-89 on education courses: "The biggest liability of the American public school system is the legal requirement that education courses be taken by people who seek careers as tenured teachers. these courses are almost unanimously condemned--by scholars who have studied them, teachers who have taken them, and anyone else with the misfortune to have encountered them. The crucial importance of these courses, and the irreparable damage they do, is not because of what they teach or do not teach. It is because they are the filter though which the flow of teachers must pass. Mediocrity and incompetence flow freely through these filters, but the filter out many high-ability people, who refuse to subject themselves the the inanity of education courses, which are the laughing stock of many universities." My education classes were mostly worthless. When you did something incorrectly, you were not given a failing grade; you were told to redo it as many times as you need to in order for you to get it right. I had to make a diagram of my classroom (before I was assigned to a teacher) and reflect on my lesson plans (before I gave them). I had to sit through presentation after presentation by future teachers who didn't know how to project their voices or explain something clearly in a set amount of time. I had no idea how to manage a classroom. I had little idea how to present information to high school students. I learned a lot about how to make accommodations for theoretical ESL and special ed students. I learned how to jump through their stupid hoops. And like many in my profession, I was gone before my third year.

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### **Victoria says**

Whitefield

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### **Jeremy says**

Another solid effort by T Money Sowell. This is a fascinating glimpse inside the problems of education in public schools as well as public and private universities. Tread carefully; the inside is a nauseating place.

A disturbing trend in today's society is that analysts and the general public will look at something that is not a free market, assume it is a free market, and then blame free market principles for the shortcomings of the system. Sowell shows how many of the institutional problems that are ruining education in America are doing so because they create a market that is not free. There is collusion, price discrimination, insulation from accountability, unionization and subsidization. This is not a free market so of course there is mediocrity.

One thing that's not so great about Sowell's writing is the structure and outline of the chapters. For example, he'll list three main reasons for something: tenure, research, and faculty self-governance. Then he'll give subheadings to the first two topics but tuck the third one under the second, rather than make it a third subhead. So as you're reading along you expect to hit that third subhead that let's you know he's changed topics and realize instead that the chapter is over. You realize that he's been touching on the third topic, but you're expecting more. Then you have to go back and review that third topic because nothing more is coming and that's all you get – a few paragraphs.

Also, he refers to himself in the third person in his own book, saying, "Among the early warnings was one in an article...by a black professor named Thomas Sowell." Kinda lame, Tom.

My only other complaint is that Sowell thinks hockey has halves: “At the end of half-time in a hockey game...” Where is his editor on this one? Are they both such nerds that they’ve never watched hockey? Come on.

Here are a few of my favorite points:

Minority students don’t want affirmative action:

“A survey of 5,000 students at 40 colleges showed that, at predominantly white colleges, 76 percent of black students and 93 percent of white students agreed that all undergraduates should be admitted by meeting the same standards. At predominantly black colleges, more than 95 percent of the students of both races agreed.”

Universities lack quality control:

“There is probably nothing else purchased which has such a large impact on family finances, or on the future of the next generation, which has such lax quality control.”

Universities spend too much money on non-academic endeavors:

“In an academic context, the phrase ‘costs have risen’ often has exactly the same meaning as the phrase, ‘we have chosen to spend more money.’”

Georgetown is awesome; Memphis State sucks:

“Credit is due to some institutions like Georgetown University, where 90 percent of the basketball team graduated, but such institutions are more than counterbalanced by places like Memphis State, where no basketball player graduated for an entire decade.”

Liberals are condescending toward minorities:

“Despite paternalistic concerns expressed that disadvantaged minority children might be left behind in various parental choice schemes, due to the apathy of their parents, polls have repeatedly shown that support for parental choice has been higher among blacks than among whites.”

Scholarships are bogus:

“Scholarships are no longer a reward for being a scholar. They are part of a larger scheme of price discrimination and subsidization of colleges.”

Even college presidents admit this is not a free market. Wouldn’t this be nice?!:

“If colleges were required to assess students’ need independently, we might be dragged into a ‘bidding war’ for the best students – making conservative estimates of the amounts their families could contribute and then beefing up their aid packages.” William R. Cotter, President of Colby College

Money has nothing to do with school performance:

“One of the few rises in test scores occurred after one of the few declines in the real income of teachers.”

Tenure sucks:

“Given the degree of insulation from accountability, the degree of self-indulgence found among academics can hardly be surprising.”

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**Kevin Kirkhoff says**

Although I don't remember specifics about this book, I do remember it being a fascinating breakdown on what has gone wrong with our education system. It's broken down into 3 parts. The first part (elementary schools) discusses the brainwashing of children and the promoting of the education system's ideologies at the expense of parental ideologies. The second part (colleges and universities) deals with admissions criteria, "preachy" professors, double standards, and athletics. The third section is an assessment of where we are heading and what we can do about it.

My only criticism (of myself rather than the author) is that Sowell writes over my head. I have three of his other books (The Vision of the Anointed, The Quest For Cosmic Justice) that I couldn't finish because they were too difficult to understand. I find myself reading sentences and paragraphs several times because I hadn't the faintest idea what he was talking about. What can I say, I like conversational writing as opposed to a master's thesis.

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### **Skylar Burris says**

This is one of the better American education doomsday books I have read. Sowell covers an extraordinary amount of ground, in reasonable detail, in less than 400 pages. He can do so because, unlike most books of this kind, Inside American Education is well organized and succinct. Sowell address elementary, secondary, and college education, with an emphasis on the latter. He is well suited to write about problems with higher education, being an economist, sociologist, and philosopher with extensive experience as a teacher at a variety of schools including Howard, Brandeis, Cornell, and UCLA. As an African-American who achieved educational success prior to affirmative action, he is also in a unique position to observe the effects of educational policies on minorities.

As with all books of its kind, Inside American Education suffers from the flaw of exaggeration, but Sowell generally offers more statistical and logical support for his arguments than most such writers. Additionally, he addresses the objections to his arguments (i.e. the "excuses for failure") one by one, which is something a great many political and sociological writers decline to do. (Indeed, he even addressed one of my own long-standing objections to the relevance of comparisons of American and international test scores.) The book is over fifteen years old, yet I did not find it overly out-of-date. That is because, unfortunately, most of the problems he laments still exist in the American education system.

In elementary and secondary education, Sowell covers such topics as unnecessary barriers to entry in the teaching profession ("the monopoly of schools and departments of education as gatekeepers of the teaching profession"); the lack of academic qualifications among many teachers and education departments (i.e. on average, education majors have lower verbal and math SAT and GRE scores than virtually any other major and almost half of the bottom 40% of high school graduates go on to become teachers, while very few of the top 20% do, and, of the top ones who do, 85% drop out of the profession in a few years); the use of the classrooms for indoctrination ("Much of the politicizing of education during the current era happens to have been done by the political left, and much of the exposure and criticism of it has therefore come from conservatives, but it would be a very serious mistake to think that the issue is basically political...The educational consequences of ideological indoctrination efforts are likely to be far more serious than the political consequences," that is, less time spent on real academics and a destruction of the capacity for critical thinking); multiculturalism, bilingual education, "relevance," "sensitivity," and "diversity" ("the call for cultural diversity is a call for ideological conformity"); the trend towards teaching "the whole person" ("The reason for teaching mathematics, instead of teaching 'the whole person,' is that one may have had some serious training in mathematics, and so at least have the possibility of being competent at it...Other

countries whose educational systems achieve more than ours often do so in part by attempting less.”); the promotion of “self-esteem” (“The very idea that self-esteem is something EARNED, rather than being a pre-packaged handout from the school system, seems not to occur to many educators”).

In the realm of higher education, Sowell discusses the inadequacy of college rankings (“Top colleges turn out extraordinary graduates because they take in extraordinary freshmen. That tells very little about what happened in the intervening four years, except that it did not ruin these individuals completely...the real problem is to match individuals with institutions, not to rank institutions.”); the reasons for the rising costs of tuition; preferential admissions and “affirmative grading” (“The issue is not whether minority students are ‘qualified’ to be in college, law schools, etc., but whether they are systematically MISMATCHED with the particular institutions they are attending...The larger issues is the impact of such double standards—both academically and socially...As for the minority students themselves, many—and probably most—of their academic failures throughout the various levels of colleges can be traced to the systematic mismatching resulting from preferential admissions policies.”); double standards for behavior based on race, gender, and sexual orientation (which, along with preferential admissions, Sowell sees as the primary cause of the rise of the “new racism” on college campuses); ideological double standards (“Students, for example, may go unpunished for major violations of campus rules, including disruptions and violence, if these actions were undertaken to forward some ideological agenda currently in favor among academics. But mere infringements, or even inadvertent actions construed as infringements, may be very severely punished...when those accused are ideologically out of step.”); students’ lack of access to professor and courses; and the extent of athletic support.

Sowell is long on diagnosis but short on cure. The diagnosis is bankruptcy: “Johnny can’t think.” However, Sowell cautions that this is “not a blanket condemnation of every aspect of American education. Even an enterprise in bankruptcy often has valuable assets. Both the assets and the liabilities of our educational system need to be assessed, to see what can be salvaged from the debacle and reorganized into a viable enterprise.” He proposes no specific solutions, but offers four vague steps to reorganization: (1) “destroying the monopoly of credentialing held by schools and academic departments of education” (2) abolishing tenure (3) allowing “some form of parental choice among schools”, and (4) implementing effective monitoring of schools and teachers through “some independent source of information.” It’s been over fifteen years since this book was written, and none of these reforms have been made with any consistency. This is not surprising, given the educational industry cartel Sowell describes.

Far more interesting than *Inside American Education* is Thomas Sowell’s autobiography, *A Personal Odyssey*, which recounts his fascinating personal experiences inside American education.

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### **Sylvester Kuo says**

Easily one of Thomas Sowell's best works. *Inside American Education* is a non-fiction horror story about the education system in America and how political correctness and multiculturalism are corrupting it. Although there were some repeats from his previous works, it was well crafted and worthy of a good read.

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### **Michael Connolly says**

The part of this book that stayed with me was Sowell's description of death education in the public schools.

Students are asked to discuss the deaths of their family members, and to practice writing suicide notes and their own obituaries. Sometimes, they even have field trips to the morgue and are encouraged to touch the corpses. Perhaps there is a place in public education for learning about sex, religion and death, but it should be done in an objective and unemotional manner. Children should not be subjected to such a great invasion of their personal privacy. Sowell compares these desensitizing experiences to brainwashing techniques. I see a similarity to the sexual histories that Alfred Kinsey attempted to take from most of his visitors.

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### **Gavin says**

Recommended to anyone interested in a very clear and concise explanation of the state of American Education—filled with facts and information that supports Sowell's analysis.

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### **Toe says**

Another example of the problem with liberalism. A government monopoly run by a union of government employees with no incentives to innovate or succeed results in failure. American education has declined since the 1960s when Libs hijacked it. Money is not the problem for at least three reasons. First, the money spent does not actually improve student learning. Second, real spending (meaning inflation-adjusted dollars) has increased somewhere between 3 and 8 times what it was 50 years ago with no tangible benefits. Third, other countries that perform much better on international tests spend less per pupil than the U.S. America must introduce competition into the educational system to lower costs and get a better product: educated children. School vouchers are the answer.

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### **Lucy Chronicles says**

Damning and the book is now almost 20 years old. Anyone who has spent time in the bowels of graduate school will sadly appreciate this work.

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### **Ted Heitz says**

I expected this to be too old to be relevant. Not the case. Infallibly accurate and conscious as usual.

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### **Matt says**

Devastating examination of the American educational system. Teacher's unions (and some individual party-line teachers) hate this book, and politicians ignore it, but everyone who cares about future generations should give this book a read. This book was one of the nails in the coffin of our kid's public school education. We now home-school.

