

Podcast 543: A History of American Education with Robert Bortins

Episode Transcript

Robert Bortins: It doesn't necessarily require any sort of crazy government program or trillions of dollars of new, national debt to get us out of this situation. E- each individual person needs to take responsibility and say, "Look, I'm going to make sure my kids know how to read above grade level."

Julie Walker: Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, "IEW." My name is Julie Walker, and I'm honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

Julie Walker: So Andrew, when we have a guest on our podcast, I generally just have these lead-in kind of hints that we're going to have a guest. This guest is just so exciting that we're having on our podcast, I just want to jump right in.

Andrew Pudewa: No, no lead in,

Julie Walker: No lead in. Here we go. Here we go. We have Robert Bortins on our podcast today.

Robert, welcome to our podcast. We're so excited to have you.

Robert Bortins: Thanks for having me. Glad to be here.

Julie Walker: And of course, as is often the case when we get someone like Robert Bortins, a name on our podcast that they have a book that they want... And that's what we're doing here today. We're talking about the book

Andrew Pudewa: the book, and I had a privilege of getting the preview of that book, and I think I wrote a little blurb or something, but tell us a little bit about that.

Julie Walker: Okay, well this is not even...

Andrew Pudewa: You have a paper in your hand. You must have something to read.

Julie Walker: I don't really have something to read because this is my notes on the book, the table of contents and everything because I didn't get a book, but you did. So I'm a little jealous. That's okay.

Andrew Pudewa: I'm just, I guess, I'm special.

Julie Walker: You are special.

Andrew Pudewa: We know Robert Bortins because he is the CEO, is that right, Robert? Of Classical Conversations. And I remember having a conversation with Robert before he was even married about one of my kids that got married at 18, and he said, “I can't imagine that.” But now he's all married and has kids up to 11 years old. So, time passes quickly, doesn't it?

Robert Bortins: Yeah, now 18, getting the daughter married off at 18 doesn't sound so bad.

Andrew Pudewa: The thing is you just don't look a day older than what I remember you. Of course, we've known your mother Leigh, and been out to your place many times, and have had such a, a great relationship with Classical Conversations all of these years, and don't get to see you in person as often as we might like, but here we are virtually, and we get to talk about your book.

Julie Walker: *Woke and Weaponized: How Karl Marx Won the Battle for American Education and How We Can Win It Back*

Andrew Pudewa: And that's a bit of a provocative title. I don't think a lot of people would associate Karl Marx with American education. So, that's probably the first thing you're going to have to unpack for us here, Robert, is why Karl Marx, and how does that all fit in, and what is the history of education in America?

Robert Bortins: Yeah, well, the education in America prior to really the 1900s was a lot of homeschooling and little private schools out of churches, and things like that. And so we actually traced the history of the United States education back to the early days in the Revolutionary War. We're celebrating two hundred and fifty years this year.

And the ideas of Karl Marx's just collectivist ideology and how that's kind of infiltrated the US public education system, which was really done by the Soviets pre-wall falling down when they realized they couldn't beat the United States through military force. And so they kind of did a precise hit on us by infiltrating our public education system through the teachers' colleges, so that they could, if they put the ideologies in the teachers' colleges, the teachers' colleges would teach it to the teachers, the teachers would then teach it to the kids—not out of the teachers being Marxist or anything like that, but just that they wanted to do a good job. They're taught that some of these ideologies will help them do well in the classroom, and then of course, students want to get good grades. And so that's why we say Karl Marx won the battle for American education because as we see today roughly half of Americans read below a sixth-grade level.

We have something like only about thirty-four percent of current students read at grade level. So that might be a high water mark for the next twenty or thirty years, where that fifty percent at sixth grade is actually going to keep going down. And Karl Marx really thought of the idea of private property, being this kind of this evil and Christianity being evil, and that was his ideology was to get rid of them.

And now we have, according to Barna, something like three to five percent of Americans have a biblical worldview, and we have Generation Z saying over fifty percent believe Democrat socialism is a good idea. So, it's hard to argue, I believe, when you look at the data pretty simply that Karl Marx, his ideologies haven't really seeped into our current system here in the United States.

Andrew Pudewa: Okay, so that's interesting because there were some other players involved in the development of our modern kind of compulsory education system. John Dewey, Thorndike come to mind. Who are some of the other folks that were...folks... who are some of the other influences on the development of public education in the late 1800, early 1900s? That was kind of the transition period, was it not?

Robert Bortins: Yeah, no, you're absolutely right. So in 1867, Horace Mann, who there's probably some high schools named after him, said, "We who are entitled or engaged in the sacred cause of education are entitled to look upon all parents as having given hostages to our cause." And he wrote that in his lectures and annual reports on education.

And so this guy who's trying to-- He's kind of considered the founder of the public school system. He started them in Massachusetts and then helped get those across the United States. And so how, how is teaching reading and writing, why would a parent think that there'd be a hostage situation in that, right? And so what was he actually trying to do? Well, he was trying to undermine Christianity and the free market system.

Andrew Pudewa: Wow. Hostage is a strong word, isn't it? And then Thorndike.

Robert Bortins: And then there's John Dewey

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, John Dewey. Okay. What was... How did he come into the picture? What was he doing? Where was he doing it? And how does his influence continue?

Robert Bortins: Yeah, so we didn't talk too much about Thorndike in the book, but we did talk about John Dewey, who said "change must come gradually to force it unduly would compromise its final success by favoring a violent reaction." And so Dewey was openly considered himself a Democrat socialism. He wrote *Liberalism and Social Action* in 1935.

And again, his plan was to kind of help organize this Karl Marx movement, these ideas that he saw in Russia and in Germany and, and the Prussian school system and bring them over here to the United States to really, again, change the fabric of our nation. And so they knew that they had to kind of divide children away from their parents and really make it so that parents would have less and less influence on their kids so that the teachers that they could train in their system would have more and more influence.

Julie Walker: So I did a little bit of research and just to find the quote that HSLDA talks about, Homeschool Legal Defense Association. Basically, the idea is regardless of what path of education you're on, the more involved the parents are, the more likely the students are to

be successful. And there was a...probably a doctoral dissertation written by a gentleman, we'll put a link in the show notes to this, "Homeschooling and the Social Life of Families and Communities." And I'll just quote just a little bit from that article.

"Parental involvement in educational activities with their children, according to most research, leads to a host of positive child outcomes, including higher educational achievement."

So it's kind of exactly the opposite of Mann and Dewey.

Robert Bortins: We see a lot of lip service to parental involvement in education and everyone will read that or hear that and kind of agree, and of course it makes 100% sense.

But then are the systems that have been created encouraging parental involvement? Or if I'm a parent and wanting to take a day off of work to go sit in my children's class, would the system they're in, whether private school or public school or charter school, even allow me to do that? Or would they say, "No, parents aren't allowed in this space"?

And so if parental involvement's the number one or, or one of the top ways of knowing if a kid's going to be successful or not, then wouldn't we want to invite them into those spaces? And it, and it's this whole psy-op kind of ideology that we saw through the Soviet Union was let's give them sweet-sounding words of, "Yeah, we want parents to be more involved," but meanwhile creating systems that shut them out.

And so that's why it's super important, no matter where you are as a parent, whatever system or where you send your kid, is that you have to be responsible for their education. Like at the end of the day, it's not this teacher, it's not the school, it's not the principal, you are the one responsible for it, but the system has continually undermined that in such a way. Like probably Andrew, when you were growing up, a parent wouldn't even send their kid to a public school if they didn't know how to read. Now I see articles of like, is it the public school's responsibility to potty train six-year-olds? And so you can see just the devastating effect of removing the parents and having systems that inherently exclude parents from the raising of their own children.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. A lot of people, I have heard them say, "I went to the public schools and I turned out okay. And so therefore, I should be able to send my kids to the schools and they'll be okay." I think that one of the factors that's missing is the family, right? I think about my growing up in the '60s and '70s, and I went to schools, but I don't really remember learning much. I think everything I learned, like how to read, multiplication tables, geography, how to evaluate propaganda, really important and useful things like how to sail a boat and tie knots, how to be in front of a group and speak or play a musical instrument. All those things happened outside the school, so I think those were the things that my parents still felt a responsibility to teach me.

And I'm pretty sure that's because their parents felt the responsibility to teach them. But now we see so many added influences, just eroding the family structure. It's a higher percentage of broken families. It's screens. Screens, I think are part of the reason the kids just don't read or can't read is because we are replacing the family pastime of reading aloud with children and teaching children to read with "let's watch funny videos."

And it's not necessarily even that what's coming through the screen is morally problematic. I think a lot of parents are sensitive to that. It's just the existence of the screen has replaced literacy in the home.

Julie Walker: Yeah, whenever you say yes to something,

Andrew Pudewa: You have to say no to something else.

Robert Bortins: That whole idea of "I was raised in that system and I turned out fine." I think a couple things that I like... The system is not the same as it was 20 years ago or 40 years ago, that this process has continued to infiltrate the system. So we've just, we've lost our heritage, and each generation loses a little bit more of it.

And to your point, like you can probably have a system that's manageable if 5 or 10% of the people are in bad situations. But now we have, I think a third of boys are raised in a home without a father or a third of children now. And so the system, it can't-- There's no system that's going to work for that.

Julie Walker: Well, and I have to, I have to insert something here because yes, this is pretty, pretty dismal and pretty disturbing to hear. But I know our families, our teachers that listen to our podcast, Andrew, they are, they are not of that ilk. In fact, I was talking with a group of teachers last week and a little workshop I was doing, and they were complaining how, that their parents weren't willing to be the editors of their student's paper, which of course is what we do at IEW, is we really encourage the teachers to get the parents more involved by having them become the editors. So wow, what, what's the solution to all this, Robert? You've have to have a happy ending to your story.

Robert Bortins: I applaud all of our teachers. It's not about the teachers. It's about what the system is doing to the students and the teachers themselves

Andrew Pudewa: And I would guess if there were some studies that might confirm this, my thought that over the past half century, 50 years since I was in school, teachers have lost a lot of autonomy because the schools have adopted greater standardization in order to try and ensure better results. But as we can see, the standardization is handicapping teachers from meeting the needs of their children, being able to be innovative and creative.

I think the teachers I remember in school were the ones that had kind of the, the most interesting ideas for us. And we see a lot of teachers who say, "I would love to do that, but..."

Now on the bright side, since you want to have a bright side,

Julie Walker: Of course I do

Andrew Pudewa: I think the kind of classical renewal that we see in schools and in particular some of the charter schools, is very hopeful because they're kind of saying no to the standardization, the modern curriculum.

And what's really interesting is those schools need parental involvement because that's how they come into existence, right? It's a group of parents who say, "Well, let's start a school that will meet our needs that we have and like-minded families have" whether it's a private school or a charter school, a lot of these schools are the result of parents saying, "Okay, the buck stops here. We're going to do something about it."

And, Robert, you'll love this. I meet a lot of teachers in these charter schools, the classical charter schools. They were homeschool kids, a lot of them in Classical Conversations, shows how long we've all been around, who, who grew up and said, "Well, I want to make a difference by going into teaching," and bringing that classical education they had, and that's very hopeful, I think. And then their enthusiasm, their experience sometimes is inspiring to people who didn't have that in their own childhood and education, but now they see it and they want more of it.

Robert Bortins: Yeah, I think we are. I mean, the one silver lining for COVID was it woke up a lot of parents and that idea of that "just because I went through this system, I turned out all right, that my kids are going to turn out all right." That idea was shattered, very visually in some instances for many of these parents.

And so whether it's the rise of the classical education movement continuing to grow, charter schools, these co-ops, these cul-de-sac schools, these outdoor schools now that they have. There's an organization called Vela that's helping parents start these small schools in their areas.

And so there's a big lift going on, and we see so many people fleeing the, what we call, the traditional government school system. Their enrollment is declining while private schools, charter schools, homeschooling continues to grow in our country.

And so, I think that's great. You see a lot of Generation Z, especially on the men's side, seem to realize that a lot of their lives they've been either lied to or deceived, that the world doesn't work out quite like they were told it was going to work out in the government schools.

And so they're looking for new answers. They're searching for truth. They're getting back in, into church and getting involved in their communities. I saw some stuff where dads are becoming more involved in their homes than ever before. So I think there is this grassroots effort by individuals and groups to get this fixed. And that's ultimately what it's going to take because if we're a self-governed nation as the founders envisioned for us 250 years ago, that requires individuals to self-govern themselves. And so that's ultimately, the direction that we need to go in our country. And in some ways, I hope that we are hitting rock bottom. And the

good news is none of this is difficult to... it's not impossible. It's not some crazy calculus equation to get this fixed. Grandparents can get involved and read aloud to their grandchildren. Do it over an iPad if you need to if you don't live close by.

And so it doesn't necessarily require any sort of crazy government program or trillions of dollars of new national debt to get us out of this situation. Each individual person needs to take responsibility, wherever you are and whatever system you're in and say, "Look, I'm going to make sure my kids know how to read above grade level. If that means I have to spend fifteen minutes to thirty minutes a night reading with them, then that's what I'm going to do," or, "I'm going to make sure my grandchildren are going to read above grade level." And, and just take personal responsibility for the two people, two, three people around you. And if everyone does that, we can have this solved in three or four years.

Andrew Pudewa: Well,

Julie Walker: There's an optimist.

Andrew Pudewa: We are all over the read to your grandchildren side as I'm sure your mom is too. I'm guessing you did quite a bit of research for the book. Would you share with us maybe a couple things that people could explore if they are interested in kind of following the path you took? Aside from reading your book, what might you recommend in addition to that?

Robert Bortins: Yeah. I mean, I think, there's a book called *Abolition* by Kevin Novak, which is really good. It's just about parents taking the responsibility for their, their kids' education. There's a report by UNESCO, which is the United Nations arm of education, UNESCO GEM Report. It's probably a good, good thing to read while you're trying to go to sleep, but it really talks about the United Nations' plans for education around the world and what they're trying to do.

And of course, that's going to be a globalist, centralized education, which we've seen in the United States doesn't seem to work very well if individualized parent-led or parent participatory education is going to be important. So those are two kind of resources, one on both sides of the aisle.

And then, yeah, we have I think we have like about 12 or 16 pages of sources at the end of the book, where we got our information. So it's real important to us that not only is it a fun and easy read, but it's scholarly. That this isn't just like my opinion or my co-author Alex Newman's opinion, but these are quotes directly from those leaders.

And then again, another kind of report if you want to read before going to sleep if you have insomnia, is the Reece report. So the Reece report kind of explored how we were funding this, takeover of this communist ideology, into our own school systems at that time

Andrew Pudewa: All right. Well, that's a load

Julie Walker: That is a lot. But how about they just start with your book.

Robert Bortins: Yeah, read the book. I did all the hard work.

Julie Walker: He did all the hard work. Here, this book is from Amazon. It says, "Perfect for parents considering homeschooling, Christian families, classical education advocates, and anyone concerned about parental rights in education."

Andrew Pudewa: Which should be most all of us

Julie Walker: Should be most all of us, right?

Well, thank you, Robert, for being here.

Robert Bortins: Yeah. Thank you for having me. Go pick up a copy of the book and yeah, you guys enjoy the rest of your year

Julie Walker: Thank you.

Andrew Pudewa: See you soon, I hope

Robert Bortins: Yeah, I hope so

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you will find our show notes and relevant links. One more thing: would you please rate and review our podcast? This helps other smart listeners like you find us. Thank you.