

# Schools on Trial: How Freedom and Creativity Can Fix Our Educational Malpractice

By Nikhil Goyal



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#### **Editorial Review**

#### Review

"Schools on Trial is a terrific book, terribly important, written with the kind of energy that ought to stir a lot of students and then parents to resist the dismal status quo. Nikhil Goyal made me nostalgic: John Holt and I taught together in the first year of Upward Bound. George Dennison and I became good friends three years later. Ivan Illich called me on the phone in 1968 (I had no idea who he was) and literally ordered me to spend a month with Paolo Freire. I can't tell you how grateful I am that Nikhil Goyal is bringing fuel to an old fire that Holt and Freire first ignited for us almost 50 years ago." —Jonathan Kozol

"Science fiction writer Ray Bradbury and many other famous writers, artists, journalists, and computer coders would have failed in today's educational system. *Schools on Trial* will force you to think deeply about problems in today's schools." —Temple Grandin, author of *Thinking in Pictures* and *The Autistic Brain* 

"This well-documented, solid, highly engaging book gives me hope for the future of education. Nikhil Goyal does much more than explain the failings of our standard, coercive schools. He reviews the growing number of alternative educational routes that are empowering and joyful rather than demeaning and dreary. We look to the day when such choices are available to everyone." —Peter Gray, Research Professor at Boston College and author of *Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life* 

"Rarely do we think of high school students as prisoners, but Nikhil Goyal does—and he should know because he was one until just a few years ago. His book is a powerfully written, revolutionary indictment of our system of schooling. Goyal makes a compelling case for the need to listen to the voices of kids and offer meaningful learning alternatives." —Tony Wagner, author of *Creating Innovators* and Expert in Residence at the Harvard Innovation Lab

"A blistering critique of the damage and injustices wrought by standardized education and a visionary, practical vision of the essential alternatives that lie in our reach. Highly recommended for anyone with a serious interest in the well-being of our children and the sanity and health of our communities." —Sir Ken Robinson, author of *Creative Schools* and *The Element* 

#### About the Author

Nikhil Goyal is a journalist who has appeared on MSNBC and FOX and has written for *The New York Times*, MSNBC, *The Nation*, and other publications. Goyal has also had speaking engagements with the Clinton Global Initiative University, Google, Stanford, the University of Cambridge, SXSW, and the LEGO Foundation, among others. In 2013, he was named to the *Forbes* 30 Under 30 list. He is also a recipient of the 2013 Freedom Flame Award. He lives in New York.

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#### Introduction

On most mornings, millions of young people depart from their homes and travel by cars and yellow buses to drab-looking, claustrophobic buildings. Here, they will be warehoused for the next six to seven hours. Some are greeted by metal detectors and police officers, others by principals and teachers. In the hallways, security

cameras keep tabs on them. Every forty minutes, they are shepherded from room to room at the sound of a bell. They sit in desks in rows with twenty to thirty other people of similar age, social class, and often race. They are drilled in facts and inculcated with specific attitudes and behaviors. They are motivated to participate in this game by numbers, letters, prizes, awards, and approval of various authority figures. If they get out of their seat, talk out of turn, or misbehave, they risk being drugged to induce passivity. Their day is preplanned for them. In a world of increasing complexity, there is little critical thinking expected of them. To succeed, orders and rules must be followed. The fortunate ones have recess. During lunch, many have little choice but to consume unhealthy, unappetizing food. At the end of the day, they return home bone tired. There, they are forced to complete a few more hours of free labor, known as homework. They follow the almost exact same routine five days a week, 180 days a year, for thirteen years, until they are set free or begin another game called college with its own set of absurd rules.

This is what is known as school for most children. If a sensible race of aliens paid a visit to our planet, they would think we are crazy. It still amazes me how most people don't find it particularly odd that you have this small subset of the population—people from ages five to eighteen—who are locked up in buildings for seven hours a day, while most of the rest of us are living and learning in the world.

During a visit to an alternative, progressive school, I remember someone once asking me, "So when did you realize this whole compulsory school system was bullshit?" There wasn't one specific moment or event that triggered my awakening. It was more of a gradual change in beliefs over some time.

In the summer of 2010, my family and I moved from Hicksville, New York, to Woodbury, a couple of towns over on Long Island. I transferred from the Bethpage to the Syosset schools, one of the highest-ranking and wealthiest school districts in the country. That fall, I enrolled as a sophomore at Syosset High School. There are more than two thousand students in the school. Almost three-quarters are white, about one-quarter is Asian, and just 4 percent are black and Latino.

Every school morning at 6:30 a.m., my alarm clock began to blare. After I mustered enough courage to crawl out of bed, I dragged myself into the bathroom to get ready, wolfed down my breakfast, and caught the bus. I usually plopped into a seat in the back and nursed my sleep-deprived self by dozing off for the next twenty minutes or so. Once I arrived at school, my way-too-energetic principal greeted me at the door. Then the social ostracism began. Each clique of each grade generally gathered in a different part of the building: the football players and cheerleaders near the science wing, some of the nerds in the student lobby trying to squeeze every last second of studying in before the bell. I trudged to my first-period class, like thousands of my fellow inmates—I mean students—while fluorescent lights beamed down on my half-closed eyelids.

For the next seven hours, it was as if I were on a conveyor belt. At each station (class), my head got filled with content. Every forty minutes I was told to stop what I was doing, get up, and find the next classroom that I would be imprisoned in, with a few minutes of rest in between if I was lucky. By the end of the nine-period exertion, I was mentally and physically drained.

Take a look at my sophomore year schedule:

7:39–8:19 Period 1: Physical Education/Investment Decision Making (on alternate days)

8:24-9:07 Period 2: Math Theory Honors

9:12-9:52 Period 3: Chemistry Honors

9:57-10:37 Period 4: Chemistry Lab/Science Research

10:42-11:22 Period 5: English 10 Honors

11:27-12:07 Period 6: Orchestra

12:12–12:52 Period 7: Advanced Placement European History

12:57-1:37 Period 8: Lunch

1:41-2:21 Period 9: Spanish 3 Honors

In the entirety of a seven-hour day, I had one forty-minute lunch break and five-minute "breaks" between periods, which were spent bolting to my next class. With the way the building was laid out, classrooms were often very far apart from one another.

In high school, I played the game. I got mostly A's and a few B's to set myself up in case I eventually wanted to have a shot at getting accepted into a prestigious college. And so I tolerated the endless drudgery of my classes. Unpleasant memories of my chemistry class, in particular, are still fresh in my mind. Our teacher would just lecture at us for most of the period, and we, the students, were supposed to copy down notes mindlessly. There was little interaction or engagement. And the exams were heavily recall based. Honestly, I couldn't tell you what I learned in that class, because I have forgotten it all. When we did laboratory exercises, it felt like a mockery. The labs were scripted. We were told to follow the precise directions given to us. We were penalized if we didn't get the "correct answer." The whole charade went against the most fundamental tenets of science: experimentation and failure.

In my English classes, we often received a reading assignment to complete that evening, and the next day, we were quizzed on the material. Five-question quizzes with each question worth twenty points. Some of the questions revolved around very trivial details: What was a character wearing? What time of day was it? It's almost as if my teachers were involved in a plot to help us develop a fervent hatred for reading. When I was younger, I would spend my days absorbed in novels and short stories, and I sometimes came up with my own. Being forced to read these books and be subjected to these meaningless tests are why I don't enjoy reading fiction today. I love reading nonfiction books about current affairs, however. Not coincidentally, I can't recall reading more than two or three nonfiction books in class throughout my thirteen years of schooling. During writing assignments, I would get irritated when my teachers took points off my essays for the crime of not having the "proper five-paragraph format"—a lockstep approach to composition. After high school, I had no choice but to unlearn the silly rules and inflexible structures I was taught if I was ever going to become a skilled writer.

**IN ADDITION TO** the boredom and monotony of school, there was a hidden and unacknowledged mental health crisis that few teachers or administrators seemed to be aware of. Within a short time at the school, I couldn't help but notice what a wretched state my classmates were in.

I decided to conduct a little experiment. One morning, after I arrived at school, I stopped and observed hundreds of students walking into the building. I inspected their faces and postures. There wasn't a jubilant face to be found. (Well, duh. What human being would look forward to being caged in this hellhole for the next seven hours?) It appeared that some of them had gotten their only sleep on the ride to school (one study has found that nearly all American high school students are sleep deprived). Others were hunched over, stressed out, buried in a textbook, or traumatized by what the day would bring them, from tests to peer pressure to bullying. Almost all of them would rather be somewhere else. And this was an elite public high school.

Syosset High School is much like many other prestigious, wealthy public high schools. A dog-eat-dog culture prevails, and a student's health, well-being, and happiness are tossed to the side. For the students who anticipate acceptance to an elite college (and that was a good chunk of the student body), consistently earning high marks, taking as many Advanced Placement (AP) courses as possible, and landing leadership positions in extracurricular activities was of great import. Some students did not schedule a lunch period so

that they could squeeze in another AP class. But once the long grind of college applications came to a close in the middle of senior year, so did the students' effort to learn and excel. Because colleges wouldn't be closely examining their second-semester grades, they did as little work as possible in order to just scrape by in their classes.

I can't put it any better than education expert Alfie Kohn in his book *Feel-Bad Education*: "In some suburban schools, the curriculum is chock-full of rigorous Advanced Placement courses and the parking lot glitters with pricey SUVs, but one doesn't have to look hard to find students who are starving themselves, cutting themselves, or medicating themselves, as well as students who are taking out their frustrations on those who sit lower on the social food chain."

I quickly picked up on the drug and alcohol culture entrenched in the high school. In the parking lot, students were habitually smoking cigarettes and marijuana in the morning before heading to first period. Students were also popping prescription drugs, such as Adderall and Ritalin, like mints to help them better concentrate in class and on tests. The pills were even sold on school grounds. (Talk about youth entrepreneurship.) There was one incident where a student was arrested for illegal possession of Xanax in school. On the weekends, underage drinking was common.

I admit that I had it much better than most children growing up in America. My school was well funded. I wasn't being taught by newly minted privileged college graduates who were looking for a "life-changing experience" before cashing in on a position in banking, consulting, or law. I had real, professionally trained teachers. I had access to librarians, nurses, and athletic trainers. There were more than adequate sports and extracurricular clubs. Indeed, the only tolerable and enjoyable parts of school for me were seeing my friends, running on the cross country and track teams, and competing in speech and debate.

But year after year, Syosset schools have been graduating classes of young people who are apathetic about humanity, conformists in their thinking, and hesitant to challenge the conventional wisdom. Students don't deserve the lion's share of blame—it isn't their fault that they were raised in a sanitized, privileged bubble of a community, shielded from poverty, mass incarceration, the war on drugs, police brutality, and environmental hazards.

When I raised my complaints about the school to my classmates, some agreed wholeheartedly, while others felt downright threatened by them: What right did I have, as a student, to question the holy education system? You are supposed to do as you are told. My classmates were "doing school," as Stanford Graduate School of Education senior lecturer Denise Pope has described it, where they were simply "going through the correct motions"—getting good grades solely to be admitted into a top college. Meanwhile, they were passive, obedient, petrified of risk taking, and unable to entertain any doubts about their schooling. They were perfect sheep under the spell of a herd mentality.

At my school, guidance counselors routinely shoved students into AP courses, even if they were not prepared or had no interest in the subject. At Syosset, students forfeit graduation credit for an AP course if they fail to sit for the May exam. This was designed to shore up the student's college application, but more importantly to boost the school's position on the infamous *Newsweek* rankings of the "best" high schools in the country. In 2014, Syosset High School was ranked eighty-fourth nationally and sixteenth in the state of New York. What's outrageous is that the community's property values are directly influenced by such rankings, so there is economic pressure put on school officials to maintain or lift the school's position. None of this has anything to do with actual learning.

**A HALF CENTURY** ago, University of California, Berkeley, free speech student activist Mario Savio stood on the steps of Sproul Hall and delivered his most famous speech: "There's a time when the operation of the

machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part. You can't even passively take part. And you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop. And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all."

During my sophomore year, I decided I wasn't going to be a lackey to the school machine any longer. I wasn't going to be like the rest of my classmates. I wasn't going to sit quietly and do nothing while injustices were unfolding before my eyes each day. I began thinking to myself that there must be a better way to educate children—a way that didn't entail killing a part of yourself to succeed, to paraphrase the Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti.

I started poring over countless books, articles, journals, and interviews on education reform. I reached out to teachers, students, parents, policymakers, and experts to glean their insights on the issue. I even skipped school to attend and speak at conferences and events. As someone who has been an autodidact—a self-directed learner—since I was very young, I followed Mark Twain's famous dictum: "I have never let my schooling interfere with my education."

In January 2013, I graduated from Syosset High School, six months early. I couldn't wait to be paroled. But don't ever call me a product of Syosset schools. I'm a bug in the system, a defect, a student who went terribly astray of the herd. I was supposed to complete my schooling without raising questions. I was supposed to knuckle under to authority. I was supposed to stay out of trouble. I've tried to become someone the founders of the American compulsory school system didn't ever want our schools to create—a freethinking human being.

Since my graduation, I've learned so much, traveled to amazing places, and met some remarkable people—I could never have dreamed of doing all this had I been in school for seven hours a day. When the month of September 2013 rolled around, it was the first time in thirteen years that I wasn't returning to school. I had never felt more free and in control of my life.

**ONE REASON I** wanted to write this book was that I became very disenchanted with how the mainstream media reports on education issues. What they've done is frame the discussion in a polarizing fashion: Are you for or against charter schools, testing, Common Core standards, and teachers unions—pitting one side against the other. That completely neglects the more important issue: the antidemocratic and cruel nature of contemporary schooling itself. It's the elephant in the room that very few bother to address head-on.

In my view, any education journalist serious about the subject should first learn the actual history of schooling in this country, experience authentic learning environments, speak to actual young people, students, and teachers, and visit some alternative models of education before writing about the subject. With certain exceptions, few have.

I did what most education writers embarrassingly fail to do: I listened to the kids. I went directly to the people most affected by the education system. And because of my youth, I was able to connect with them on a level that someone older might not have been able to. Over the past three years, I've been traveling around the country and spending time in all types of schools and learning communities. The experiences opened my eyes to the astonishing potential of what a sea change in education might look like. I've traveled from Chicago to the Mission District of San Francisco to the neighborhoods of Brooklyn. I've had the tremendous honor of meeting and speaking with scores of brilliant young people, teachers, parents, and administrators. They have given me optimism that change is in the chutes.

You probably will not have heard of most of the schools profiled in this book. Because they don't fall on the

narrow spectrum of conventional education "reform," they have become invisible. Some observers consider these schools to be radical. Actually, what they're doing is normal. The students in these schools are learning in the same way human beings learned for thousands of years before compulsory schooling was invented—through play and self-directed learning. What traditional schools are doing is radical. Their students are learning (or trying or failing to learn) in environments that squelch talents and abilities and operate in a fashion opposed to the way the brain actually works.

My hope is that after reading, you will feel more outraged with the status quo than when you began and inspired to take action. The ultimate goal of this book is to shine light on the most extraordinary models of learning around the nation, offer stories of people who have bypassed formal institutions in favor of self-education, present evidence that schools are exhausting the gifts of creativity, curiosity, and zeal that we all come into the world with, and make the case for why there should be no difference between living and learning.

In the first part of the book, I examine the problems with formal schooling, the history of public education in America, and the corporate education reform movement. Then, I profile the Brightworks school, a cutting-edge progressive school in San Francisco, and show why human beings are natural learners and the importance of play and unstructured learning in our lives. Next, I analyze the free school movement from the fabled Summerhill School in England in the early twentieth century to some present-day schools like Sudbury schools, Brooklyn Free School, and Philly Free School. I touch upon some of the unconventional elements of these schools, like democratic meetings, the judicial process, and absence of grades, tests, and required classes. Later, I look to the maker movement, which is tapping into the power of learning by doing and is one of the most powerful crusades in education today. Next, I examine avant-garde models of higher education, critique the vogue for online courses, and offer lessons from autodidacts who have not been dependent on formal institutions for education. And finally, I make the case for why cities and communities can be catalysts for bringing about a learning revolution.

Some of the core questions that will be addressed throughout the book are: What are the origins of American schools? Why are schools breeding grounds for bullying and violence? How did the concept of unstructured, unsupervised play as a mode of learning disappear? How can parents raise a self-directed learner? What types of schools produce happy, curious, fulfilled, and passionate adults? Conversely, what types of adults are our traditional schools actually producing? How can we revive our cities and communities so that they are places of engagement, collaboration, and problem solving?

For some of you, this book could be a bumpy ride. You might be taken off guard while reading some of the chapters. You might disagree passionately with my beliefs. But that's the point. I want to make you feel uncomfortable. I want to challenge you. I want to help you reconsider your opinions and become skeptical about everything you once thought you knew about schooling, education, and learning.

I don't expect my writing to change the system. But what I do hope is that you will begin questioning some of your assumptions. If you are a parent, perhaps next time your child comes home from school stressed about tests to the point of tears, feeling like a failure, emotionally damaged from shame, bullying, or harassment from students or teachers, telling you about how much he or she hates learning, or just begging not to go back tomorrow, you won't think he or she is lazy or crazy. You will listen and take their opinions and thoughts seriously.

In this book, I draw upon the work of pioneering thinkers, including John Holt, Jonathan Kozol, Maria Montessori, Alexander Sutherland Neill, Ivan Illich, John Taylor Gatto, Peter Gray, George Dennison, Paul Goodman, and many others. Some of the proposals and ideas advanced in this book are not particularly new.

During the free school movement of the 1960s and '70s, they were widely endorsed, hashed out, and even implemented. The arguments presented are backed up by years of research and reporting. I don't have a hidden agenda. I try to be as direct and as forthright as possible.

As author and mental health counselor Laurie A. Couture argues in her book *Instead of Medicating and Punishing*, "Historically, children have been and are still the most oppressed, exploited and victimized group of human beings on the planet. Children remain the most voiceless and the most discriminated against group of people in our culture. While every adult group in the United States has won basic human rights, protections and freedoms, children remain the only group of human beings without the same rights to equality, respect, protection from bodily harm and freedom of speech." The perpetual education wars make this issue seem more complicated than it is. In reality, it boils down to understanding that children deserve to be treated like human beings, like any other member of society. That they should not be inappropriately controlled, managed, and measured but given freedom and treated with dignity and respect. That isn't too much to ask.

We have become obsessed with making tweaks and small dents to the system when what we genuinely need is a total overhaul, a transformation, a goddamn revolution. It's time to break free from the shackles of our oppressive school system.

#### **Users Review**

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