

Interview with Renato C. Nicolai, author of *The Nightmare That is Public Education*

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is honored to speak with Renato C. Nicolai (Dr. Nick) about his new book “The Nightmare That is Public Education: An Expose of What Really Happens in Public Schools.”

A retired teacher and principal with thirty-eight years of experience in public education, Renato C. Nicolai, Ed.D., taught 6th through 12th grade and was both an elementary and middle school principal. In education circles, he was known as Dr. Nicolai, which eventually was shortened to Dr. Nick, and has stuck ever since.

Tyler: Thank you for joining me today, Dr. Nick. Obviously, the state of public education in the United States is of great concern to many people. To begin, will you tell us what you think is wrong with the public education system?

Dr. Nick: Wow! What an opportunity! Yes, I would be pleased to tell you what I think is wrong with the public education system. My thoughts aren't in any order of priority; I'm telling you about them as they come to mind.

What I think of first is what I wrote about as the main emphasis in my book. Teachers desperately need to improve the quality of their teaching, so, specifically, what's wrong is that too many teachers are either incompetent or mediocre instructors at best. Yes, if you had the opportunity to stand by my side in the hundreds of classrooms I've visited in my career, you would be both amazed and horrified at how much poor quality teaching there is in our public schools. If parents only knew how much more their children could be learning with instruction from superb teachers compared to what they are most likely learning now from incompetent teachers, they would be flabbergasted. That's how bad it really is. This indictment of teachers, however, is not a major problem at the elementary school, but is a serious and rampant problem for sure at the middle school, junior high school, and especially the high school level of education. Parents, you'll want to read about the eight essential qualities most teachers don't possess. I've listed and described them in the first chapter of my book.

Tenure is another critical problem. Once tenure is granted by a school district, an incompetent teacher is a teacher for life. It's extremely difficult to dismiss a teacher who has tenure. What's wrong with tenure is that it's achievable so soon in a teacher's career (after only three years in most cases), so final (once it's granted it's irrevocable), and so long lasting (the teacher keeps it for as long as he/she teaches). What happens is that some teachers work very hard during their first few years on the job, receive tenure, and then slack off in their performance because they know they can almost never lose their job. Instead of tenure, public education should promote a system of performance reviews that teachers are required to pass periodically in order to keep their teaching position for the next two or three years.

The way a teacher is evaluated is all wrong within the education system. It's basically a sham and a joke. Collective bargaining contracts and union involvement in teacher evaluations has watered down the process of teacher evaluations to the degree that practically nothing worthwhile results from the process. In my book, I have a chapter titled “What You Don't Know Won't Hurt You,” and the concept of teacher evaluation is discussed in that chapter. If parents and the public at large knew how ineffective and unproductive teacher evaluations are, they would demand a more efficient system. The system as it exists in most school districts today is a tactful process of saying the right words, doing what's anticipated, and not ruffling anyone's feelings. What it should do is help teachers improve the quality of their teaching to the degree that they help students learn better, but it doesn't do that at all.

The public education system is rooted in the false notion that all teachers are qualified educators who can be trusted to make good decisions, follow school district rules and regulations, work together in a spirit of collegiality, promote the welfare of students as a priority, and, generally, do what is just, moral, and professional. What's wrong is that this description is simply not true; yet, school districts throughout the United States allow teachers the

freedom to work unsupervised because they are assumed to be well-intentioned, professional persons who have the best interests of students at heart. Don't misunderstand me, please. Of course, there are many conscientious teachers who do work well with each other and do have the best interests of students at heart, but I believe that there are many more who take advantage of academic freedom, collegiality, and lack of supervision to do whatever they want within the four walls of their classrooms. This is actually a very serious problem that is covered up by the educational hierarchy.

Another very serious wrong is the way in which school districts manage the use of substitute teachers. Substitute teachers are rarely observed to determine their competence, frequently assigned to subject areas they have no qualifications to teach, and regularly subjected to unbelievable disrespect and insolence from students. When a substitute teacher is present in a middle school, junior high school, or high school classroom, little or no learning takes place. That class is a waste of instructional time, the students' time, and the substitute's time as well. The three most common activities that take place when a substitute takes over a regular teacher's class are the showing of videos or DVDs, the administration of tests, and the supervision of long, boring written or reading assignments left by the regular teacher. The lesson plans left by most regular teachers for substitute teachers to follow are generally a set of instructions on how to occupy the time students have in class. The entire substitute teacher system needs to be completely overhauled. Students must be taught to respect substitute teachers, to assist them with the lesson, and to be responsible for their own learning. Expectations that students will cooperate with substitute teachers, that regular teachers will conscientiously prepare quality lesson plans, that substitutes will teach, and that administrators will monitor substitutes are so miserably low, currently, that the education system simply accepts the status quo of chaos, lack of learning, and disgraceful substitute teacher academic and professional performance.

Tyler, the public education system in the United States is really in trouble. It's inundated with problems; there are many things wrong with it. I could have written about lack of student discipline, emphasis on sports over academics, permissiveness throughout the culture of public schools, reticence about the problems that exist, and much more. I believe that it has deteriorated so much over the last fifty years, that mediocrity and incompetence are the status quo. Parents don't even realize that the system is so bad. What they see and experience is what they think is how the system should be. They don't understand how much better it could be and how their children could be receiving a more superior educational experience.

Tyler: Dr. Nick, will you tell us a little bit about your background in education—where you taught and the subjects you taught, as well as your experience as a middle school principal. What personal experiences have led to your current viewpoints?

Dr. Nick: My first full time position in public schools was as a 9th and 11th grade teacher of English at El Camino High School in South San Francisco, California (a city separate from San Francisco). After teaching two years, my assignment changed to teaching English half the school day and counseling the other half. In my third year as a teacher at this school, I was elected president of the local teachers' union and the following year chairman of the School District Negotiating Council. In my fifth year, I was appointed Assistant Principal of Parkway Junior High School (7-9) in the same school district.

During the seven years I held this position as assistant principal, I enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of Southern California, and from 1969-1972 I achieved a Doctor of Education degree in Educational Administration and Secondary Curriculum. My dissertation, which researched the administrative behavior of superintendents of schools, was the first dissertation sponsored by the newly formed Association of California School Administrators (ACSA).

In 1974, I was selected Principal of Isaac Newton Graham Middle School (7-8) in Mountain View, California. You asked me to share my experience as a middle school principal, and I'm pleased to do so, but I want you to know that I could easily write another book about those experiences alone. So, I'll try to give you an encapsulated answer. I think I could best describe my experiences as a middle school principal as a continuing five year roller coaster ride because I never knew when my feelings, emotions, and experiences would be up or down. On the up side, I was thrilled to see many students learn to their potential as a result of the excellent teaching of some superb teachers. After all, helping young people learn is what education is all about. I also observed some outstanding teachers whose skills and methods motivated students to excel beyond their own personal expectations. That was extremely exciting. As the leader of a neighborhood school, I grew personally as an educator because I had the opportunity to influence curriculum, work for the educational benefits of students, and associate often with community leaders in various agencies (fire department, police department, recreation department, mayor's office, and so on). These experiences made me a better principal. On the down side, I learned quickly that many teachers should never have been allowed to enter a classroom to teach. They were not suited to interact with adolescents and teenagers; they

didn't have the skills needed to help young minds understand concepts and ideas; they failed to devote themselves to learning how to teach expertly; they didn't know how to control and manage a class of thirty students. I also realized what some of the problems were that I had to deal with (incompetent teachers, low quality curriculum, collective bargaining contracts to name a few) but that I didn't have the power to bring about effective change. That was frustrating to no end. Finally, the lowest possible experience for me was to meet so-called teachers who had literally given up; that is, they had decided to go through the motions of teaching only. They were no longer eager to teach, didn't look forward to meeting their classes, and did as little as possible to meet their professional responsibilities. I left out so much that I feel my answer is inadequate. I can see the joy on the faces of students who won academic and sports awards, the enthusiasm of both staff and student body at our annual soft ball game, the annual parent club barbecue, and so much more.

I remained at Graham for five years and then moved on to an opportunity in southern California as the Administrative Director (Superintendent/Principal) of Chatsworth Hills Academy, a private school in Chatsworth, California. I preferred serving in public education, so I returned to Graham as a 7th grade core teacher, teaching English and social studies (world history). In October of my second year back from southern California, I was asked by three Santa Clara County superintendents to head up a "joint powers" school named The Institute of Computer Technology as an on-loan school administrator. Along with an on-loan administrator from IBM (Ken Butler), I helped this new educational enterprise get its feet off the ground. It was exciting work and I enjoyed hiring teachers, meeting technology experts at Apple and IBM, developing curriculum, outfitting a school with security systems, working with school superintendents, learning how to protect valuable hardware and software, and a lot more. After doing what I was hired to do, I returned to Graham, teaching English, social studies, and geography to 7th and 8th graders, including the 8th Grade Honors English program. I remained at Graham for the next twenty years and retired in 2001.

During my career, I've been a presenter at various conferences, in-service sessions, and conventions. My presentation topics were usually in the areas of teaching methods, literature-based instruction, discipline, and classroom management. I've also been a master teacher, chairman or member of numerous curriculum committees, and an adjunct professor in the teacher training program at National University.

My current viewpoints and attitudes toward public education developed throughout my career based upon my personal experiences as a teacher and principal, what I saw other educators do and heard them say, what I read, what I learned best helped young people reach their learning potential, what political reforms failed, and what I learned about how young minds gain knowledge. For instance, there was a time when I opposed vouchers; I'm adamantly in favor of them now. The more choices parents have in the education of their children, the better. I was a staunch supporter of tenure at the beginning of my career until I witnessed how many deficient teachers hide their incompetence under the protection of this law. Tenure should be abolished. I'm sure you get the idea. I hold the views, attitudes, and feelings that I do about education as a result of a life-long career in schools. You know, children aren't the only ones who learn while at school.

Tyler: You mention that many teachers are not competent? What is the reason for this, and why does the school system allow them to remain in the classroom?

Dr. Nick: Why are many teachers incompetent? Here are some reasons to contemplate:

1. Because they don't possess the personality needed to interact well with young people. If a person doesn't like kids, doesn't enjoy being with them all day long, doesn't look forward to teaching them, doesn't accept their immaturity and want to help them become more mature, can't stand constantly answering questions, can't accept individual differences (race, ethnicity, gender, religion, etc), can't cope with special needs (hyperactivity, behavior problems, and so on), then that person will never be a competent teacher.
2. Because they don't possess, exhibit, use, and treasure enthusiasm, and, so, they are truly boring to most of their students. Ask any kid at a middle school, junior high school, or high school in your community what they dislike the most about their teachers, and, I guarantee you the answer will overwhelmingly be that they are boring. And you know something, Tyler; the kids are right. Most teachers are insufferably boring in how they teach. Enthusiasm is a sine qua non for all competent teachers.
3. Because they don't know how to get concepts and ideas across clearly to their students. They don't possess the knowledge and skills needed to help students learn. They just don't know what to do and end up quite often being frustrated and saying something like, "Oh, those kids just can't learn this stuff." That's an expression equivalent to defeatism and incompetence. If the learning material is age appropriate and part of the accepted curriculum, of course a normal, healthy student can learn it. It isn't the student who is at fault;

- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
7. it's the teacher who doesn't have the competence to design lessons, activities, and programs to help students learn. The reason for this is that many teachers tell students but don't show and teach.
8. Because they can't manage and control student behavior. Teachers daily face challenging disciplinary and behavior problems. If a teacher can't effectively handle these problems, that teacher will never be a competent instructor—never! In this case, the incompetence is in not knowing what to do when a disciplinary or behavior problem presents itself because the teacher hasn't thought out a personal Educational Philosophy for Control of Student Behavior. Every teacher needs to do this to harmonize his/her personality with methods of discipline. I explain this in detail in my book.
9. Because many teachers don't manage classroom time efficiently. I devote an entire chapter to this topic: "Wasted Time - Inept Instruction (Euphemism: Teaching Mistakes). How can anyone consider a teacher competent when that teacher tries to teach over the noise of unruly students, doesn't know how to quell effectively unnecessary noise at the change of a classroom activity, and allows students to talk whenever they want. This inability to control noise leads to as much as 25% of each class period being wasted. Many teachers can't even control the time at the end of class when students get ready to leave and waste the ten or fifteen minutes left.
10. Because many teachers can't effectively control group learning. One of the most effective ways for students to learn is to interact with each other, allowing students to help each other learn in groups. Sometimes, students have just the right words and explanations to help a fellow student understand a lesson. However, most teachers don't control student groups effectively and so waste tremendous amounts of instructional time.
11. Because many teachers don't have high enough academic and behavioral expectations and standards. In other words, many teachers don't challenge their students enough academically and don't expect them to learn to the level of their potential. Teachers must project an attitude of high expectations to motivate their charges adequately. Most teachers don't even understand this concept and need to learn it themselves. Not putting it into effect in classrooms is indicative of ignorance and incompetence. In Chapter Three, I wrote a seven-page description of the most important strategies used by teachers who truly understand how to teach high academic and behavioral standards. Teachers, you've never seen anything come close to this practical list of how to teach standards.
12. Because some teachers don't have a sufficient knowledge of the subjects they teach. They don't! They are assigned to teach a subject they don't know adequately or they don't even like. Many teachers are teaching subjects and they don't have either a major in that field or a valid certificate to teach it.

There are other reasons as well, but the few I mentioned are really significant ones, aren't they? Now, what are the reasons for these incompetencies and why do school systems allow these incompetent teachers to remain in the classroom? Well, the first part of the question can be answered easily. Students learning how to teach are not being prepared adequately by schools of education. You know who should teach prospective teachers how to teach? Not education professors! No! Excellent, experienced, current and retired teachers who know what a classroom is all about and who have a love for kids and teaching in their hearts should teach candidates for teaching. Give me proven experts at teaching young people, a group of twenty teacher candidates for a year, and I know we could do a much better job of teaching them how to be good teachers than any school of education in the country.

Answering the second part of the question leaves me with a heavy heart. The reason is that most school districts don't effectively monitor and evaluate the progress, competence, and teaching skills of new teachers. The procedures to do this are woefully inadequate and rarely result in new teachers being dismissed if they are incompetent. Teachers new to the profession learn more about teaching from their own personal experiences the first three years on the job and from other, experienced teachers than they do from any program presented by the school district they work for. School districts don't really know if a new teacher is mediocre or, worse yet, incompetent so they grant tenure because they need a body in the classroom. There is a tremendous shortage of teachers throughout our country today. Once tenure is granted, it is virtually impossible to dismiss a teacher on the basis of incompetence.

Tyler: Dr. Nick, will you explain a little more about tenure. Why was the tenure system created in schools and why has it survived? Also, as unlikely as it is, what would be the process to dismiss a tenured teacher from employment due to incompetence?

Dr. Nick: Interestingly enough, I remember writing a research paper on the topic of teacher tenure many years ago. I recall that the protection of tenure was needed in public schools as well as in colleges and universities because of two major abuses. School officials were requiring teachers to perform unreasonable duties and to

behave according to their preconceived notions of morality. For example, in some schools, teachers were expected to clean chimneys, wash horses, and chop wood. They were also compelled to attend church services, refrain from smoking, and seek permission to date. If teachers didn't perform the required duties or live according to the prescribed morality mandated by the school officials, they could be summarily fired, and they were in large numbers.

Tenure rules were enacted into law to prevent these abuses. Of course, these kinds of abuses no longer exist, but tenure itself does. The reason is that teachers' unions have lobbied for its continuance for years. Tenure has become the sacred cow of public school education "benefits." California Governor Schwarzenegger found that out, when, a couple of years ago, he challenged tenure in a referendum that failed miserably. The process a school district must implement to dismiss a tenured teacher for incompetence is established via collective bargaining and then made an integral part of the contract between the local teachers' union and the school district. Each school district has a different version of the dismissal process but all of them are extremely protective of teachers' rights and very burdensome for school administrators to implement. Proving incompetence under the provisions of these contractual rules is almost impossible. The provisions of the New York City Schools dismissal procedure, for example, are so complicated, onerous, and convoluted that only two teachers have been dismissed in over ten years, and I seem to remember that neither one of them was let go as a result of incompetence.

Tyler: Dr. Nick, we always hear about problems in the inner city and urban schools. Do you think the problem in education is limited to certain areas and economic regions, or is it widespread from the schools in Beverly Hills to the slums?

Dr. Nick: My opinion is that the problems that plague public schools are widespread but not exactly the same problems everywhere. The schools in the inner city, urban areas, affluent communities, and slums all have their problems, but they aren't necessarily the same problems at all. I'm not going to attempt to list the problems because they are so voluminous and different that it would be an impossible task. The point is that all public schools regardless of where they are situated have problems that need to be corrected and solved.

Tyler: What should be done to ensure teachers are actually teaching students?

Dr. Nick: Isn't it sad that you felt a need to ask this question? That's no reflection on you, Tyler, but it is, in my opinion, an indictment of the public schools because it implies that teachers are not teaching students. And you know what? Many teachers don't really teach a large percentage of the time, and other teachers can't teach because the students are so unruly and disruptive. What should be done? Well, how about restructuring the entire public school system to ensure that every student receives an education from teachers who are allowed to teach. This would necessitate some seemingly impossible changes such as no teacher union involvement, strict teacher contracts, and, perhaps, some limitation of student rights:

1. Monitor and evaluate teachers in their classrooms more frequently and more strictly to ensure they are teaching the curriculum and subject matter they are responsible to teach.
2. Promulgate and enforce much stricter rules of behavior and discipline in schools with effective consequences for students who don't cooperate.
3. Teach teachers how to manage and control student behavior. If they can't learn or won't, fire them.
4. Teach teachers how to control wasted instructional time.
5. Require teachers to plan lessons and implement them in an organized and efficient way.
6. Require teachers to sign contracts that oblige them to implement the curriculum established by the school board and dismiss those who fail to do so.

What's needed is strict, rigorous policies and procedures to monitor, observe, and evaluate teachers regularly. Personnel who are responsible for evaluating teacher performance and competence and are expert at it should be employed by school districts and specialize in daily assessing the quality of a teacher's work. The stakes are much too high to assume that all teachers are competent and trustworthy and will work according to a high personal standard of professionalism.

Tyler: In your book, you mention that you think the relaxed attitude in schools is toward a relaxed, liberal, anything-goes attitude. What do you see as examples of this relaxed attitude and what do you think should instead be the attitudes?

Dr. Nick: Yes, indeed, public schools are generally filled with relaxed, liberal, anything-goes attitudes.

1. Students are allowed to chew gum on school grounds and in classrooms. Prohibit chewing gum at school. Chewing gum is a learning distraction, unseemly when talking to another person, and a maintenance nightmare.
2. Students are allowed to use electronic devices such as iPods, cell phones, blackberries, PDAs, and MP3s. None of these devices would be allowed in classrooms. They distract from learning.
3. While in class students are allowed to take off their shoes, sit on desktops, wrap themselves in blankets, and sit on floors. None of these behaviors would be allowed. They are counterproductive toward good learning.
4. Students are allowed to eat and drink in class while a lesson is being presented. No food or drink, except for water, would be allowed in classrooms. Eating and drinking in class during a lesson distract from learning.
5. Students are allowed to groom themselves while in class: combing hair, putting on make up, primping, and checking appearance in mirrors. None of this would be allowed. All of these activities are detrimental to the learning process and have no place in a classroom.
6. Fraternalization and intimate activity such as petting and kissing are allowed on school grounds. These displays would not be allowed. They do not contribute to an atmosphere of good learning.

Many other behaviors such as getting out of a desk chair without permission, throwing objects, talking out loud, sending e-mails, making irritating noises, mimicking other students or the teacher, screaming expressions like “shut up,” “cool it,” and “stop it—all of these would not be allowed. The reason is obvious!

Tyler, do you know what’s really going on when these kinds of behaviors are allowed in our public school classrooms? The schools and the people responsible for managing them (teachers, administrators, superintendents, and school boards) are saying to our national society and to the entire world that learning is not the most important function of our schools, that teaching students the rudiments of acceptable behavior is not an American value, and that education is not a national priority. Whatever we do at our schools should be determined by the answer to this question: “Does what we allow or want to do contribute to learning and help students reach their learning potential?”

Tyler: In using the word “liberal” are you saying that the situation is a political as well as an educational one? Are you promoting conservatism? What place do politics and the government have in education?

Dr. Nick: The situation education finds itself in today is definitely political as well as educational; it always has been right from the start. The moment the federal and state governments made laws controlling various aspects of education (attendance, curriculum, health and safety, transportation, finances to name a few), politics and political ideology were involved. Yes, I’m most definitely promoting conservatism because I believe many of our schools are currently permissive, secular-progressive, nearly out-of-control, anything-goes examples of liberal thinking. They have been for years and look at what we have to show for it: violence, sex, drugs, low test scores, high dropout rates, lack of respect, vandalism, truancy.

Tyler: Dr. Nick, you mention one issue many may not think a serious one—relaxed dress codes? I find this one amusing because when I was in high school in the mid-80s it was a major issue whether students could wear shorts to school. The principal would send home students who dressed in shorts, but eventually, I think the school system relaxed on that issue. Dressing up has overall declined in American society. Does a dress code really make any difference in one achieving a quality education?

Dr. Nick: Let me answer with a question of my own. Why is it that so many public as well as private schools and so many educators in both private and public schools promote the idea of students wearing a uniform? The answer is that they firmly believe that the quality of the students’ education is improved as a result of eliminating the competition among students to dress in a certain way. The uniform levels the educational playing field, results in less student stress, and treats everyone equally.

Tyler: Dr. Nick, what is your reaction to all the alternative schools that have started up in recent years?

Dr. Nick: The more alternative schools, the better! Public schools need competition. If alternative schools such as magnet schools, charter schools, home schools, private schools, parochial or religious schools, private learning centers, school choice options, and vouchers result in fewer and fewer students attending regular public schools, then, maybe, the public education systems throughout the United States might just get the message that they had better improve. When the number of students attending alternative schools reaches the level that results in public schools hiring fewer teachers and receiving less funding, public schools will hopefully see the light and start to look at how they can attract students to their schools. If I were much younger and had the resources to do so, I would consider starting a system of neighborhood private schools to give parents an alternative in the same neighborhood where they send their children to public schools.

Tyler: In “The Nightmare That is Public Education,” what do you advocate that parents do to ensure their children receive a quality education?

Dr. Nick: Parents must be involved in their children’s education from preschool right through high school and, perhaps, even into college. The tendency is for parents to step back from involvement when their teenagers start high school. This is a serious mistake. Parental involvement is critical during high school because the high schooler is under tremendous pressure from peers mainly to experiment in many different areas: drugs, alcohol, sex, ideology, cults, etc. That involvement should take the form of proactive participation, diligent observation, and ardent questioning. I recommend that parents do the following to ensure that their children receive a quality education:

Parents must communicate regularly in person, over the phone, and via e-mail with the teacher throughout the school year about every aspect of their child’s learning by asking questions and seeking information about these and other important aspects of schooling:

1. homework
2. math skills
3. language arts skills (reading, spelling, grammar, writing)
4. testing
5. behavior
6. grades
7. listening skills
8. attitude
9. participation and cooperation

Parents must frequently monitor the progress of their child’s learning at home and act as the most important teacher in their child’s life.

Parents should observe their child’s teacher(s) to assess the teacher’s quality of instruction. My book is filled with tips for parents to do just that. It also contains lists of questions for parents to ask and what to look for in a classroom to determine if a classroom’s physical environment is organized as a valuable learning tool.

Parents should participate in the life of the school, if possible:

1. join the PTA or parent club and participate in its activities and governance
2. volunteer as an aide at school
3. offer to assist the teacher with paperwork

Parents must attend school functions: Back-to-School Night, Open House, music programs, special events, sports contests, fund raisers.

Parents must meet with the teacher at parent conferences and ask questions about their child’s educational progress.

Parents should introduce themselves to the principal and other persons in key positions at the school to know who they are and to make sure these school personnel know who the parents are.

Parents should communicate their ideas and opinions to their elected school board members, and, on occasion, attend a school board meeting.

Parents must be sure their child is equipped to do the best possible work at school by providing:

1. necessary school supplies
2. a nutritious and balanced diet
3. enough sleep and rest
4. a positive attitude toward school and teachers
5. a distraction-free place for homework

Tyler: Does the concern over public education have a place outside the school system? What about people who do not have children? Why should they care about things like millage elections, or want to pay more taxes, or support the school system?

Dr. Nick: Yes, concern over public education does have a place outside the school system. Most people who don't have children, are retired and have no contact with children, or whose children are now adults pay taxes and generally want a school system that produces an educated person. These people are automatically invested in the public school system as a result of their taxpayer status and expect to receive good value for their tax money. I know I do because 62% of my annual property taxes (nearly \$3,800) goes to public schools in the community where I live.

Tyler: Students often do not value the education they receive until years later. As a former college English professor, I taught many lazy students, and I was constantly in dismay that so many of them were even admitted to college when they could not write a complete sentence. I frequently wondered what they had done for thirteen years in the public schools? Do you think the college system is in any way responsible for the decline of public education in the elementary and high schools? Should entrance requirements into colleges be raised?

Dr. Nick: I don't blame our college system in any way at all for the decline of public education in the elementary and high schools. State colleges and universities, community colleges, private and religious colleges and universities—all provide opportunities for students who are qualified to pursue them. It's the responsibility of the elementary and secondary schools to prepare students to take advantage of those opportunities and meet those qualifications. I do think these colleges and universities should regularly evaluate their entrance requirements, as I'm sure they do, to ensure that they maintain high standards of academic expectations.

These colleges and universities have a responsibility to graduate well-educated and highly competent young people. Watering down the entrance requirements to fill classrooms would be a disgrace and morally reprehensible. Not all high school students should be expected to attend a four-year college, although that's what many high school counselors and administrators tell them is possible. I do blame some schools of education, however, for the poorly prepared teachers they seem to turn out by the thousands each year. School of education reforms in recent years in teacher training programs, curriculum standards, course content, and subject matter proficiency have not produced quality teachers. If they had, our elementary and secondary school students would be exceptionally successful learners and you would not have asked this question. After all, teachers are supposed to help students learn to their capacity.

Tyler: Dr. Nick, how long do you think the public school system has been declining? Do you believe it has affected the American job force and economy?

Dr. Nick: The American public school system has been declining over the last fifty to sixty years. All you have to do is look at the statistics to see that the reforms attempted during the past half century have not resulted in significant changes in learning, test scores, and student achievement. In fact, in most curricular areas, there has been little or no change at all, and in math and English there has been decline.

Perhaps your readers would be interested in an excellent article published in the September 2007 edition of Harper's magazine. It's titled "Schoolhouse Crock (Fifty years of blaming America's educational system for our stupidity) and presents an excellent analysis of educational reform over the past fifty years.

This decline continues to affect the American job force, businesses, and our national economy as well. Many businesses and corporations have instituted their own systems of internal education to train their work force properly to do the work expected of them because they can't rely on the public schools.

Tyler: The ones who suffer the most in this situation are the children, yet as children, students are unlikely to know what they are not learning and how it will be detrimental for them. Furthermore, they may be too intimidated by teachers to complain when they are given more free time or fruitless assignments or actual lessons. What if anything, can students do to improve the quality of their own education?

Dr. Nick: At the elementary school, middle school, and junior high school levels of education, there is probably very little if anything the young people who attend these schools can do to improve the quality of their own education. They are too young, inexperienced, and immature. At the high school, however, some students are mature and serious enough about their own schooling to do something. I might add, though, that there are most likely very few who would actually challenge the powers that be (teachers, principals, superintendents, boards of education) for a variety of reasons. The two most significant ones, in my opinion, would be peer pressure and fear of retribution or retaliation on the part of teachers or administrators. Nonetheless, here are some actions mature, serious, intelligent, concerned high school students could do:

1. Go to your principal and complain about the poor quality teaching you're experiencing. Nothing will happen the first time, so go a second and third time. Bring other concerned students with you.
2. Be polite but assertive, telling your principal that you have a right to quality instruction but aren't receiving it. Clearly state your areas of complaint: too much classroom noise, inadequate instruction, lack of teacher interest, and so on.
3. Make an appointment with the superintendent to voice your concerns. Present a plan of how your grievances can be redressed. Bring other concerned students with you. Request permission to speak at a board meeting and present your complaints to these elected officials.
4. Phone and/or e-mail board members.
5. Form a committee of concerned students who weekly report to the principal about what is going on in your classrooms that should be improved or changed in the best interest of your education.

Tyler: Thank you for joining me today, Dr. Nick. Before we go, will you tell us a little bit about your website and what additional information can be found there about "The Nightmare That is Public Education"?

Dr. Nick: My website, www.drnickweb.com, is currently being updated. However, there is information about my book that your readers will enjoy, I'm sure, but I'm working on including much more. For example, in the near future, this is the kind of additional information you will find:

1. Excerpts from key chapters of my book
2. A complete biography of my educational career
3. A summary of my book's contents
4. Book reviews on my book
5. An opportunity to blog

Tyler: Thank you, Dr. Nick. I hope you have many parents and educators visiting your website and reading "The Nightmare That is Public Education."