



**Joseph Lancaster**

## **THE LANCASTER SYSTEM: AN ALTERNATIVE TO PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

by John Chodes

Public education has failed. It often produces illiterate, spiritless graduates who have neither the motivation nor the skills to find a good job or succeed. As a result, private sector schooling is growing by leaps and bounds. Unfortunately, these private schools are associated with small, localized efforts or elitism and high tuition.

There was however, a private enterprise system in the 19th century which taught millions of poor kids around the world for a few dollars a year. It was called "The Lancaster System". It encouraged children to develop personal initiative and responsibilities. Students worked at adult jobs within the schools and got paid for them. They learned to read and write in months instead of years.

The Lancaster System was also controversial and revolutionary because it caused considerable social upheaval by enabling the poor to break down traditional class and economic barriers with their new skills. The Lancaster idea may offer a clue to the way out of the mess we are in today.

Joseph Lancaster was born in the slums of London in 1778. As a young Quaker, he experienced the sting of religious discrimination. His family's faith barred him from attending the schools for the poor run by the Church of England. So his father taught him at home. Embittered by this painful memory, by age 18 he was instructing London urchins in his father's attic, for a penny a lesson.

He was soon deluged with hundreds of students. With so many pupils and limited resources, Lancaster had to devise radical methods to make ends meet. This is how the "monitorial" idea was born. It delegated to the students the responsibility for teaching and doing the paperwork. The better students taught the slower. When the slower developed, they became monitors. There was one teaching monitor for every 10 students. There were other monitorial positions that involved many of the students and spread prestige and responsibilities around.

One monitor would assign new students to a class. Another would keep track of absences. When a student made progress, a monitor would promote him. Another made or molded pens. Another was in charge of distributing writing slates. A "monitor-general" was in charge of all the others.

This kind of student interaction &ndash; teaching and learning from their peers - eliminated boredom. Lancaster wrote: "A school, governed by such order, exhibits a scene of wonder to visitors, and happiness among the children, which baffles the power of description."

Under this system, there was little for the adult headmaster to do except organize, reward, punish and inspire. Lancaster's schools did not need a harsh master, for they were governed almost automatically. "The master should be a silent bystander because the system and not the master's vague or uncertain judgement will be in practice," Lancaster said. "In a common school, the authority of the master is personal and the rod is his scepter. His absence brings riot and confusion. In his absence his assistants will rarely be minded. Under my plan, the master leaves and business goes on as usual because the authority is not personal."

His method was unique, fast and effective. "I continually made experiments," Lancaster later recalled. "1,000 children could be taught in one schoolroom under

the care of one master and a great proportion of them finish their education in 12 months. That education comprising the art of reading, writing and arithmetic." beyond the 3R's, his schools also emphasized geometry, algebra, trigonometry, religion and languages.

In seeking to motivate his students, Lancaster stumbled on to a method that brought out their entrepreneurial spirit and taught them how to deal with money. This was no small matter, since all this took place in the early stages of the industrial revolution. Most of the students and their parents had rarely dealt directly with cash.

Lancaster awarded "Merit Badges" for various accomplishments. These small paper tickets, much like Green Stamps in contemporary America. Like trading stamps, the merit badges were worth little individually but had considerable value when redeemed in bulk. They could purchase toys, children's books, pens, purses and clothing.

Merit badges were also used to borrow books from a library monitor. This job was a "concession." It was a bonanza for that monitor. Other students often bid to purchase the concession with their accumulated merit badges. Through this process they learned about the dynamics of buying and selling in a real marketplace.

Entrepreneurial themes dominated Lancaster's ideas. Adult teachers in Lancaster schools had part of their income created by class attendance. Thus a teacher became a salesman and promoter of the system to bring in more pupils. Anyone who could pay the few shillings a year was welcome, including girls. No other system at that time had accepted them on an equal basis with boys.

Lancaster's cost-cutting experiments brought the cost of education down to a fraction of what it cost competing church or private schools. For instance, students wrote on slate instead of paper. Paper was expensive, slate indestructible. To save money on books, one per subject per class was used.

Each page was separated, placed on a stand, then the class was broken up into

groups of 10. Each group gathered around one stand and studied that one page as a lesson. The groups would then rotate so that each one had access to all the lessons.

Lancaster even designed prefabricated buildings that could be assembled in days. This was truly mass-produced education. Soon the system was self-sustaining by charging as little as 4 shillings a year.

Joseph Lancaster was a zealot, which was both a source of strength and weakness. He believed his system would revolutionize society by eradicating illiteracy, therefore ending poverty. To propagate his ideas, he wrote a book, "The Lancastrian System of Education," and printed several thousand copies. He lectured all over the world, giving away copies to anyone who professed an interest in starting a school based on his plan.

During 1808 to 1810, in an era of slow carriages and slower boats, Lancaster made 16 missionary journeys, traveling 6,837 miles, delivering 141 lectures and established 95 schools for 25,000 children.

Lancaster was a great salesman but terrible at business. Although he earned huge lecture fees, he gave much of it away to sincere or not-so-sincere audience members who said they needed seed money to implement his plan. He also liked to live well, which was at odds with his pious Quaker background. Robert Dale Owen, the famed social reformer wrote that Lancaster was "a strange mixture of honest self-sacrificing zeal and imprudent self-indulgent ostentation." Later in his life this trait would come back to haunt him.

His major break toward national fame came when the aristocrat, Lord Somerville, attended a class and quickly became a backer in 1803. Somerville told others what he had seen and soon "foreign princes, ambassadors, peers, commoners, ladies of distinction, bishops and archbishops, Jews and Turks, all visited the schools with wonder-waiting eyes."

This ferment reached King George III, who granted an audience to Lancaster. "I have sent for you to give me an account of your system of education. You say one master teaches 500 children at the same time? How do you keep them in order,

Lancaster?" the King asked. Lancaster described the monitorial system. The King was amazed. "I highly approve of your system, and it is my wish that every poor child in my dominions should be taught to read....I will do anything you wish to promote this object." King George promised 100 pounds annually, from his own funds, not the state's.

This modest patronage transformed a growing private business into a national institution. But in the end it proved fatal, since it aroused defenders of the Church of England to active opposition. To his critics, Lancaster was a dangerous radical intent on creating a social revolution. Teaching the "unwashed masses" to read and write and self-reliance made it possible for them to crack the traditional class barriers.

His most severe critic was the well-known writer, Sarah Trimmer. She warned that Lancaster's emphasis on merit, not class, might lead to the day when children "accustomed to consider themselves nobles of a school, may, in their future lives, from a conceit of their own trivial merits...aspire to be nobles of the land, and to take the place of the hereditary nobility."

Lancaster's opponents soon turned to championing a rival educational method, the "Madras" system of a Scottish clergyman, Andrew Bell. This system, while it relied on monitors, taught neither self-reliance or entrepreneurship. Bell had discovered his variation of the monitorial idea while on duty as an army chaplain in colonial Madras, India. He was in charge of an orphanage of Untouchable children. No adult would dare to teach these social outcasts. Bell, out of necessity, taught them to teach themselves.

But Bell's method reinforced all the neatives of the class barriers. "In utopian schemes for the universal diffusion of general knowledge," Bell said, "there is a risk of elevating those who are doomed to the drudgery of daily labor above their station, and rendering them unhappy and discontented in their lot."

The Church of England, in promoting the Madras system to eliminate Lancaster's schools, used the same tactics that many modern retailers or fast-food chains use against one another. Wherever Lancaster opened a school, the church opened one

of its own directly across the street. Backed by huge construction funds from Parliament, the tactic succeeded. Gradually the Church of England split Lancaster's market and, step-by-step, pirated all his students.

In 1805 the Lancaster System reached the United States. Eventually there would be more monitorial schools here than in England. Yet, for enthusiasts of private schooling, the story of Lancaster's rise and fall in America is more depressing than its demise across the ocean. Particularly in New York State, government involvement via subsidies marred the system almost from the beginning.

In 1805 the prominent philanthropists, Thomas Eddy and John Murray formed "The Society for Establishing a Free School in the City of New York." Its purpose was to educate poor children who were ineligible for instruction by the various church-sponsored schools. Benjamin Perkins, the group's Secretary, knew Lancaster and had seen his operation in England, and recommended it. Within a year the Free School Society (FSS) was incorporated and the first classes were held in Manhattan, with monitors as teachers.

One of the Lancaster system's most powerful American friends was DeWitt Clinton. He was one of the most important political figures of the era, being a ten-time mayor of New York City and also the governor of the state.

Clinton was an early member of the Free School Society. Upon his request, the New York State legislature granted the FSS a \$4,000 subsidy to construct a building and another ~1,000 for expenses. The money came from a tiny liquor and tavern tax, so the general public was not yet affected.

By 1818, three schools, teaching thousands of New York's poor, were in operation. DeWitt Clinton was now Governor. State-funded construction of five more schools was planned, which called for a wider tax. This one was imposed on real estate.

That same year Joseph Lancaster was invited to New York and Washington D.C. The mayor and DeWitt Clinton officially received him. He was treated like royalty when he visited the U.S. House of Representatives, which created a resolution honoring Lancaster as a "friend of learning and of man."

Soon New York State moved from subsidizing the Free School Society to managing it by legislating a general education tax which gave it the revenue to build new schools and to admit children of all economic levels. By the 1840's 98 schools taught 25,000 pupils annually under the Lancaster plan.

Then came the coup-de-grace for the ESS as a private system. As a closed corporation subsidized by the state, it came under fire. John Spencer, the Secretary of New York State, charged that the FSS had "acquired control of the system of public education; and the taxpayers, who contribute to this fund, have no voice in the selection of those who administer the system."

Spencer quickly extended the state's authority by creating the now-famous Board of Education to control the FSS. By 1852 it was completely absorbed by this bureaucracy, the cost of schooling quadrupled, taxes rose dramatically and the quality of education declined as the government now had a monopoly on education. Joseph Lancaster's great private system was dead but before it expired, 700,000 students in New York City had been taught by monitors.

Fortunately for Lancaster, he did not live to see its end. After coming to America he settled with his fellow Quakers in Philadelphia. But rumors about his profligate life-style and huge debts followed him from England, so that the pious Quakers shunned him. He was forced to wander from city to city, then Canada, and South America, briefly staying with friends before drifting on.

In October 1838, while in New York City to give a lecture, Joseph Lancaster was run over by a horse-drawn beer wagon, just a block away from one of his schools. He died. He was 59 years old.

Shortly before his death he bitterly wrote: "Politicians have purposely interfered in what was originally a work of pure benevolence; and though they could neither corrupt or command the fountain, they have contaminated the stream."

John Chodes is a free-lance writer who specializes in the subject of education. His articles on this subject have appeared in The New York Times, Reason, The Freeman, Chronicles and many other publications as well as TV and radio editorial

replies.

From the author:

SKOLE

The Journal of Alternative Education

Mary Leue, Editor

72 Philip Street

Albany, NY 12202-1729

Dear Ms. Leue:

I believe the enclosed article, "The Lancaster System: An Alternative to Public Schools', would be of value to your publication. The appropriate information is on the back of each illustration. My credentials are at the end of the essay.

411 East 10th Street #22-G

New York, NY 10009

212-677-4917

Social Security No:103-32-6471

First Serial Rights

No. of words: 2,100

Picture shows a monitor teaching a group of his peers. They stand in a semi-circle about him. One page of a textbook is placed on a stand before them. When the students have completed studying that page, they move to another semi-circle where they study another page.



Students showing their writing slates to a monitor. Slates were used because they



were indestructible, while paper was expensive.



Ground plan of a Lancaster school, demonstrating how 1,000 students could be taught in one room at one time. Each dot represents a student. Some are seated at the long benches at the center, writing. The rest are divided into small groups along the semi-circles, reciting.



[Back](#) to Educational Articles page