

# On Clarifying History: A Response to Nathan and Kohl

by Mary Anne Raywid

*Ms. Raywid attempts to resolve her differences with Messrs. Nathan and Kohl. Their greatest disagreement, she suspects, may lie in their differing approaches to history itself.*

Joe Nathan and Herb Kohl have made an excellent addition to the collection of articles on alternative schools in the April *Kappan*. Among other things, they have offered a good case for the importance of alternative schools to the survival of public education and the importance, in turn, of public education to a democratic society. We are in extensive agreement on these matters; I appreciate their forceful framing of the case.

The appreciation is a bit one-sided, however, since Nathan and Kohl evidently find that my article in the April *Kappan* contains inaccuracies, distortions, and dangerous, destructive misstatements. They accuse me of perpetuating three myths about alternative schools.

The first myth concerns the question of whether alternative school students generally retain a veto. My report is accurate, I think, but it needs clarifying. Most important, whatever "veto" alternative students hold pertains to curriculum and content, *not* to rules governing behavior. I did not intend to suggest that any alternative school student can personally veto any school regulation by doing what he or she pleases. I agree emphatically that a right to "civil disobedience" has not been a feature of public alternative schools. But as I suggested — obviously elliptically — Allen Graubard urged that youngsters retain what amounts to a veto over what each one shall study. Graubard described with approval various alternative school efforts to stimulate students to learn what adults believe important. But he would not resort to simply *imposing* content on the unwilling learner. In effect, he counsels against trying to proceed by duress.\* There seem at least two grounds for eschewing coercion. One is the fundamental respect for the person that many

\*See Allen Graubard, *Free the Children: Radical Reform and the Free School Movement* (New York: Vintage, 1972), Chap. 4, esp. pp. 222-28.

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of the earliest, humanistically inspired alternative schools emphasized. Kohl's writing, as well as Graubard's, manifests this responsive, respectful regard for students as sentient creatures with distinctive purposes and feelings. Thus, while we can try to *influence*, we ought to avoid coercion. Most of the alternative school people I know reflect this position, and I would be surprised if Joe Nathan does not.

John Dewey elaborated a slightly different case with regard to the effective veto. He argued that unless the learner's interest can be captured and his or her thinking brought to bear on selected content, then cognitive learnings will be minimal and/or distorted and attitudinal learnings will be largely negative. Thus, for Dewey as well, if the teacher can find no way to present content X in a form that engages the intelligence of the learner, then the learner's withholding of interest is an effective veto — and the teacher is well advised to look further instead of resorting to sheer power to impose this content.

The second myth Nathan and Kohl attribute to me is the claim that no evaluations of public alternative schools have been clearly positive. That is not my belief. Indeed, were that the case, all three of us might be hard pressed to defend our shared commitment to alternatives. There is indeed a substantial body of presumptive evidence of the effectiveness of public alternative schools. (The confusion here stemmed partly from an editorial change that I failed to spot and partly from a misreading by Nathan and Kohl: They equated my generalization about the government- and foundation-supported innovations of the Sixties with a claim about alternative schools. Actually, of course, by no means all of the innovations were alternatives.)

Third, Nathan and Kohl attribute to me the view that public alternative schools evolved solely from the counterculture. I do not believe that they did. In fact, when discussing the roots of the alternatives movement I emphasize the distinction between "free" and "freedom" school fore-

bears. Much of the "free" school ancestry is associated with the counter culture, but the "freedom" school roots grew out of the social change efforts of civil rights activists. But my article did not attempt to deal with the *roots* or *backgrounds* of the public school alternatives that grew in the Seventies; I was trying to describe that growth and chronicle that decade.

Nathan and Kohl object to my omission of ideological connections extending back to progressive education and beyond. I distrust that kind of ideological history because of the distortions it can create. Although some alternative schools call to mind characteristics of progressive education (more so in the case of the St. Paul Open School, with which Nathan was connected, than is generally true), I find such connections more misleading than illuminating without a closer look at similarities and differences.

I believe that Nathan, Kohl, and I are actually in substantial agreement, but our greatest difference may lie in the doing of history. The primary purpose of my article was to trace the events associated with the burgeoning of public school alternatives — that is, to provide an institutional history. I do not disparage ideological history or the history of ideas (in fact, I probably turn to these more readily than to institutional history). But both the more general nature of the *Kappan's* readership and the length specifications I was given recommended the focus on the more immediate causes of the events — and that is where I tried to stay.

I am pleased, however, that Nathan and Kohl have carried the discussion beyond my original confines. Obviously no author can be pleased at being misunderstood, but I *am* pleased with their concern about the nature of alternative schooling, and I am glad to have the opportunity to amend some statements that were evidently subject to misinterpretation. I agree with Joe Nathan and Herb Kohl that "alternative public schools provide a way . . . to revitalize our depressed public educational system." Finally, I share their conviction that efforts to that effect are well worth the struggle. □