

BusinessWeek

OUTSIDE SHOT October 30, 2008, 5:00PM EST

Newt Gingrich: Let's End Adolescence

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich says young people need to shift more quickly from childhood to adulthood

It's time to declare the end of adolescence. As a social institution, it's been a failure. The proof is all around us: 19% of eighth graders, 36% of tenth graders, and 47% of twelfth graders say they have used illegal drugs, according to a study by the National Institute on Drug Abuse and the University of Michigan. One of every four girls has a sexually transmitted disease, suggests a recent study for the Centers for Disease Control. A methamphetamine epidemic among the young is destroying lives, families, and communities. And American students are learning at a frighteningly slower rate than Chinese and Indian students.

The solution is dramatic and unavoidable: We have to end adolescence as a social experiment. We tried it. It failed. It's time to move on. Returning to an earlier, more successful model of children rapidly assuming the roles and responsibilities of adults would yield enormous benefit to society.

Prior to the 19th century, it's fair to say that adolescence did not exist. Instead, there was virtually universal acceptance that puberty marked the transition from childhood to young adulthood. Whether with the Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah ceremony of the Jewish faith or confirmation in the Catholic Church or any hundreds of rites of passage in societies around the planet, it was understood you were either a child or a young adult.

In the U.S., this principle of direct transition from the world of childhood play to the world of adult work was clearly established at the time of the Revolutionary War. Benjamin Franklin was an example of this kind of young adulthood. At age 13, Franklin finished school in Boston, was apprenticed to his brother, a printer and publisher, and moved immediately into adulthood.

John Quincy Adams attended Leiden University in Holland at 13 and at 14 was employed as secretary and interpreter by the American Ambassador to Russia. At 16 he was secretary to the U.S. delegation during the negotiations with Britain that ended the Revolution.

Daniel Boone got his first rifle at 12, was an expert hunter at 13, and at 15 made a yearlong trek through the wilderness to begin his career as America's most famous explorer. The list goes on and on.

It is true that life expectancy was shorter in those days and the need to get on with being an adult could be argued. Nevertheless, early adulthood, early responsibility, and early achievement were the norm before the institution of adolescence emerged as a system for delaying adulthood and trapping young people into wasting years of their lives. To regain those benefits, we must develop accelerated learning systems that peg the rate of academic progress to the student's pace and ability to absorb the material, making education more efficient.

Adolescence was invented in the 19th century to enable middle-class families to keep their children out of sweatshops. But it has degenerated into a process of enforced boredom and age segregation that has produced one of the most destructive social arrangements in human history: consigning 13-year-old males to learning from 15-year-old males.

UNDERMINING COMMUNITIES

The costs of this social experiment have been horrendous. For the poor who most need to make money, learn seriously, and accumulate resources, adolescence has helped crush their future. By trapping poor people in bad

schools, with no work opportunities and no culture of responsibility, we have left them in poverty, in gangs, in drugs, and in irresponsible sexual activity. As a result, we have ruined several generations of poor people who might have made it if we had provided a different model of being young.

And for too many middle-class and wealthier young Americans, adolescence has been an excuse to delay work, family, and achievement—and thus contribute less to their own well-being and that of their communities.

It's time to change this—to shift to serious work, learning, and responsibility at age 13 instead of age 30. In other words, replace adolescence with young adulthood. But hastening that transition requires integrating learning into life and work. Fortunately, innovations in technology and in financial incentives to learn offer hope.

The Information Age makes it possible for young people to learn much faster than our current failed bureaucracies and obsolete curriculums permit. New systems such as Curriki, founded by Sun Microsystems ([JAVA](#)) and now an independent nonprofit, allow a community of teachers and learners to collaborate via the Internet to create quality educational materials for free—giving every American access to learning 24 hours a day.

And experiments such as the one my daughter, Jackie Cushman, is running in Atlanta—where poor children are paid the equivalent of working in a fast-food restaurant to study and do their homework—are examples of a more dynamic future.

In math and science learning, which are among the most important indicators of future prosperity and strength, America lags far behind such emerging powers as China and India. Studying to compete with Asian counterparts in the world market is going to keep U.S. teens busier than anyone ever imagined. This will require year-round learning, with mentors available online, rather than our traditional bureaucratic model of education. But we must go further, toward a dynamic, real-world blueprint for learning.

Indeed, going to school should be a money-making profession if you are good at it and work hard. That would revolutionize our poorest neighborhoods and boost our competitiveness.

The fact is, most young people want to be challenged and given real responsibility. They want to be treated like young men and women, not old children. So consider this simple proposal: High school students who can graduate a year early get the 12th year's cost of schooling as an automatic scholarship to any college or technical school they want to attend. If they graduate two years early, they get two years of scholarships. At no added cost to taxpayers, we would give students an incentive to study as hard as they can and maximize the speed at which they learn.

Once we decide to engage young people in real life, doing real work, earning real money, and thereby acquiring real responsibility, we can transform being young in America. And our nation will become more competitive in the process.

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich is founder of the Center for Health Transformation.

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