

RECLAIMING “PUBLIC EDUCATION”

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SCHOOL CHOICE IS HERE TO STAY

Across the nation, the school choice debate is over. School choice is here to stay because we finally recognize that no child should be denied an opportunity to attend a safer or better school. The positive effects of school choice are too powerful to deny any longer.

While once we argued whether parents should be able to choose the best school for their children, today we debate “how much” and “how quickly” choice should be expanded.

Just over two decades ago, school choice discussions were little more than intellectual exercises. Today, they are informed by overwhelmingly positive evidence from children exercising choice in thousands upon thousands of charter schools, from hundreds of thousands of children using privately funded scholarships, and from thousands more using publicly funded vouchers and education savings accounts.

We will never return to the restrictive “assignment system”—whereby we force a child into a particular school because of where he or she lives. The moral and legal barriers constructed by those who would trap our children in underperforming schools continue to fall.

Yet, despite the demand for greater school choice, some remain skeptical. Not the knee-jerk opponents of school choice such as the labor unions—moral arguments and empirical evidence will never convince them—but the average citizen who fears more school choice will hurt, rather than improve, the local public schools.

WAITING FOR UTOPIA

While the debate is won, educational freedom hasn't been fully realized for many children.

The challenge remains to reclaim the concept of "public education" from those who have stolen it and upended its meaning. What once meant "the education of the public through diverse means" has become synonymous with the direct ownership, operation, and control of schooling by state and federal governments.

It hasn't always been this way.

For the first 150 years of America's settlement and the first 50 to 75 years of our nation's existence, public education was delivered through independent, church-related, philanthropic, and community-sponsored schools. These schools were essentially what we call private schools today. Despite a lack of government-controlled schooling, the early American public was exceptionally literate and relatively well-educated. Nearly every child—including the poor—had access to some level of schooling. The major exceptions, of course, were those kept in government-sanctioned and government-protected chattel slavery.

Beginning in New England in the 1800s—a wave of change swept across this young nation. States began to abandon the original American model of decentralized, independent schools in favor of greater state control. The takeover wasn't hostile, but rather a persistent push for ever-increasing government



involvement in schooling.

In 1841, Horace Mann, the leader of the government school movement in Massachusetts, made a bold promise:

"Let the common school be expanded to its capabilities, let it be worked with the efficiency of which it is susceptible, and nine tenths of the crimes in the penal code would become obsolete; the long catalogue of human ills will be abridged."

We are still waiting for government to usher in Mann's utopia. Meanwhile, our current school system clashes with the political, economic, social, and cultural traditions of the United States to an extent unparalleled by any other American institution.

Indeed, this prompted the late president of the American Federation of Teachers, Albert Shanker, to say:

"It's time to admit that public education operates like a planned economy, a bureaucratic system in which everybody's role is spelled out in advance and there are few incentives for innovation and productivity. It's no surprise that our school system doesn't improve: It more resembles the communist economy than our own market economy."

Still, most Americans cling to the misconception that government must be directly involved in our children's education. In fact, some argue that without government involvement in schooling, our nation itself would be threatened.

Few recognize, however, that Americans—without the help of government schooling—tamed an unsettled continent and established the freest, most prosperous nation in the history of the world.

Yet, the Founding Fathers clearly were educated men who believed that to remain free, America must have an educated citizenry. But this



educated citizenry—which largely came to pass during their lifetimes—did not depend upon or require government ownership or operation of schools.

Unfortunately, the goal of an educated public has given way to the establishment and protection of a monolithic system of government-run schools. This is not to say all these schools are failing to teach our children to read, write, and figure. But children are slipping through the cracks in even the best public schools. Despite our best intentions, no school—public, private, or religious—can be all things to all children. It's simply impossible.

Yet, this is precisely what the state expects. And it is precisely why we must reclaim the original concept of public education—that is, “the education of the public.”

FULFILLING THE PROMISE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

The promise of public education will be fulfilled only when we return to parents the right, freedom, and ability to choose the school that best meets their children's academic, emotional, spiritual, and physical needs—whether a traditional public, charter, private, religious, or even home school.

This is not just my opinion. Experience and historical record confirm it.

Many years ago, my good friend, Andrew Coulson, published *Market Education: An Unknown History*. Coulson demonstrated for those of us who had a rather myopic view of government-sponsored education that schooling is not a new invention. In fact, a vast wealth of experience with schooling dates back as far as two-and-a-half thousand years.

Coulson says we cannot just pick and choose one or a few historical



school systems that seem to have worked and claim they will necessarily work today. Instead, we should look for trends in the kinds of systems that worked well, or poorly, across many different cultural settings. By so doing, we can compare educational outcomes among similar and contemporary societies that adopted different education systems. We can also consider educational outcomes when a given society abandoned one system in favor of another.

Coulson's research led to a remarkable conclusion: Free education markets, in which parents choose their children's schools and schools compete with one another to attract and serve children, consistently outperform all other approaches to school governance.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS

Coulson found five essential elements in school systems that have consistently performed well under widely varying social conditions. Together, these factors create the incentive missing in the current system.

The five elements are:

- Choice for parents
- Direct financial responsibility for parents
- Freedom for educators
- Competition among schools
- Profit motive for schools

Controversial? Absolutely. In particular, direct parental financial responsibility and the profit motive beg for removal in the name of political appeal.

But no substitutes exist.

"Far from being a policy smorgasbord, from which individual elements can be casually selected or rejected based on personal taste or political expediency," Coulson warns, "education markets behave much more like fragile ecosystems. If any essential element is eliminated, the entire system begins to decline."

Indeed, as Coulson notes, direct parental financial responsibility has historically proven indispensable to an effective education marketplace. This makes perfect sense: What people pay for, they pay attention to. What they get for free, they become complacent about. Education is not exempt from this axiom—problematic though it may appear.

If good schools are dependent on parents paying some or all of the bill, how do we ensure all children—regardless of family income—have access to good schools?

Simply, through needs-based financial assistance to low-income citizens.

This could be done so all parents become full participants in the educational marketplace. Those who can afford to pay for their children's education would do so, while those needing varying degrees of financial help would receive it. This would preserve the benefits of direct financial responsibility for the vast majority of the population, since only a fraction of parents would need to have the entire cost of their children's education paid for by others.

Considerable debate surrounds the best way to provide such assistance. Some scholars favor an education voucher similar to those used in Milwaukee, Cleveland, or Florida. Others promote the spread of private scholarship organizations through tax credits, as Arizona has done since 1997 and Pennsylvania since 2001. As of 2015, scholarship tax credit programs have been introduced in 14 states.

Education savings accounts, adopted by five states and under

consideration in dozens more, provide parents flexible accounts to spend on a variety of educational services. With an education savings account, parents fully customize their child's education by spending funds on textbooks, tutoring services, online courses, standardized tests, educational therapies, and other approved items. Unused funds roll over from one year to the next and can ultimately be spent on post-secondary education.

Vouchers, tax credit scholarships, and education savings accounts are vehicles to match families with schools that will best serve each student's unique needs.

Perhaps a more challenging hurdle for the choice movement is the need for the profit motive in education. This notion usually invites a hailstorm of criticism from the education community—"Children are not widgets," they shout.

Indeed. But we know the profit incentive drives entrepreneurs to produce better products and superior services. The profit motive has provided Americans the highest quality of life the world has ever known.

Conversely, the absence of the profit motive has been the chief reason top teachers and best practices have not been replicated and disseminated.

While the for-profit K-12 schooling industry remains extremely small, for-profit tutoring companies such as Kumon and Sylvan Learning seem to be showing us the way. For-profit colleges, too, are among the fastest growing higher education providers in the country. Of course, not all for-profit endeavors are successful, but the good news for students is that schools that fail to deliver a quality product will eventually go out of business—unlike persistently failing government-run, taxpayer-financed public schools.

The growth of education management organizations—private firms that manage public charter schools—also underscores the societal benefits of profit-seeking actors. Philadelphia’s Mastery Charter Schools boast many of the highest performing schools in the district. New York City’s Success Academy Charter Schools receive five times as many applicants as available seats. And Charter Schools USA, which serves over 60,000 children in seven states, specializes in transforming chronically underperforming schools.

Still, opponents of choice remain skeptical of market-based education because of its perceived negative social effects.

While we want schools to teach children to read, write, and figure, we also want schools to foster strong and harmonious communities. A more civil society most certainly won’t be achieved if we focus merely on academic outcomes. Therefore, we must consider the overall societal impact of an education marketplace.

Fortunately, arguments that an education marketplace will only divide communities are red herrings. In fact, they are exactly backward. Coulson found that time and again, market-based education systems have allowed diverse groups to harmoniously pursue both their shared educational goals and their unique and varied traditions.

Coercion, not diversity, has set neighbor against neighbor. If parents had been allowed to choose their own schools rather than been forced to relocate if they wished to send their children elsewhere, much of the socioeconomic segregation of neighborhoods over the past several decades would never have taken place.

While defenders of the current system claim government-owned and -operated schools are the glue that keeps communities together, in fact they do just the opposite. Today’s public school system dissolves more bonds than it sustains.

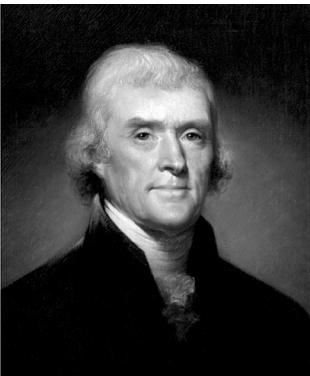
Think about the endless series of battles for control of public schooling. For example, a Pennsylvania school district made national news over the inclusion of the creation theory in science class. Regardless of one's position on these arguments, who really wins in these debates? But these are the inevitable and unfortunate side effects of creating a monolithic education establishment.

Our Founding Fathers wisely forbade Congress from establishing a single system of religion for all citizens. So, too, we must realize that any establishment of a single "official" system of education for all children inevitably leads to conflict within diverse communities. It has repeatedly done so throughout history.

Market-based education, by contrast, has consistently allowed heterogeneous peoples to more harmoniously pursue their educational needs and goals.

SCHOOL CHOICE = FREEDOM

Obviously, school choice reaches far beyond education policy. Ultimately, educational freedom is at the heart and is the foundation of all the freedoms we enjoy in America.



Thomas Jefferson said it best: "[I]f a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."

In other words, we cannot long continue our ignorance and hope to restore or even maintain the inherent and inalienable rights that have been taken from us.



RECLAIMING "PUBLIC EDUCATION"

That is why the battle for school choice is so critical. The fight for educational freedom is central to the defense and extension of all our liberties—economic, political, religious, or social.

It is time we, as parents and citizens, reclaim public education from the government bureaucracies and special interests that have stolen it from us. Only then will we be able to restore the founding values and principles that made America the freest and most prosperous nation the world has ever known.

