

FEATURES

“Education doesn’t begin with some isolated bureaucrat in Washington. It doesn’t even begin with state or local officials. Education begins in the home, where it is a parental right and responsibility.” — Ronald Reagan

WAS HORACE REALLY THE MANN? THE MANY SCHOOLS OF “PUBLIC” EDUCATION

BY MATTHEW J. BROUILLETTE

Across the nation, the debate over school choice is over. While the old argument used to center around whether parents should be able to choose their children’s school, today much of the debate revolves around “how much” and “how” choice should be expanded. And last summer, the U.S. Supreme Court dispelled one more of the many obsolete myths promulgated by those opposed to parental choice in education.

The reality is that choice is here to stay and the days of the restrictive “assignment system,” forcing children into a particular school simply because of where they live are finally over. Empirical and anecdotal evidence from over 2,300 charter schools, 60,000 low-income children reaping the intellectual benefits from privately funded scholarships to attend private and parochial schools, and another 12,000 students utilizing publicly funded vouchers, make the positive effects of school choice impossible to deny.

REVISITING PUBLIC EDUCATION

Yet despite the overwhelming success and increasing public demand for more school choice, many Americans remain skeptical. I’m not talking about the ardent opponents of school choice—moral arguments and empirical evidence will never convince them. I’m talking about the average citizen who fears that choice will somehow hurt, rather than improve, public education.

So, in order to better understand why school choice should be embraced instead of feared, we



should consider both the history and purpose of public education.

First, however, let’s define the concept of public education. Today, this concept has been completely turned on its head. What used to mean “the education of the public through diverse

means” has become synonymous with the direct sponsorship, operation, and control of schooling by the government.

But, it hasn’t always been this way.

For the first 150 years of America’s settlement and the first fifty to seventy-five years of our nation’s existence, public education was achieved through independent, church-related, philanthropic, and community-sponsored schools. These schools were in essence what we call private schools today.

Yet despite this extremely decentralized system of schools, the early American public was exceptionally literate and relatively well educated. Nearly every child—including the poor—had access to some level of schooling. (Of course, an important exception was those persons kept in the government-sanctioned and government-protected system of chattel slavery from the 1600s through the mid-1860s.)

Then—beginning in New England in the mid-1800s—a wave of change swept across the country. States began to abandon the original American model in favor of greater government involvement in schooling. It wasn’t a hostile takeover, but a persistent push for creating a government supported educational “safety net.”

In 1841, Horace Mann, the leader of the government school movement in Massachusetts,

tems that worked well or poorly across many different cultural settings.

Doing this, it is possible to compare educational outcomes between similar and contemporary societies that adopted different education systems. As a result, we can also correlate what happened to educational outcomes when a given society abandoned one system in favor of another.

What’s the best education system in world history? Remarkably, Coulson discovered that free markets in education—in which parents choose their children’s schools and schools freely compete to attract and serve those children—consistently out-perform all other approaches to school governance.

Time and again throughout history, individuals and groups created schools in response to public demand without the need for government intervention.

Coulson also found that effective education obviously doesn’t just happen; nor can it be achieved through political means. He found that school systems that have consistently performed well under widely varying social conditions have consisted of five essential elements.

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

The five elements Coulson uncovered are: 1) Parental choice; 2) Direct parental financial responsibility; 3) Freedom for educators; 4) Competition among schools; and 5) The profit motive for schools.

These five factors, taken together, create the incentives that are missing in the current system.

Are they controversial? Absolutely. No doubt that the appeal of an education marketplace would be broadened if we could eliminate or find substitutes for two elements in particular: direct parental financial responsibility and the profit motive.

Unfortunately, there are no such substitutes. Coulson found that having parents pay directly for their own children’s education has historically proven to be an indispensable component of effective education markets.

It makes perfect sense though: what people

pay for, they pay attention to, and what they get for free they become complacent about. Education is hardly exempt from this economic axiom. Nevertheless, it does pose a problem.

ONE EDUCATIONAL MARKETPLACE FOR ALL

So how can American citizens and policy makers ensure that all children—regardless of family income—have access to good schools, particularly if good schools are dependent on parents “footing” some or all of the bill?

This is actually a fairly low hurdle to get over. We offer needs-based financial assistance to low-income citizens for many products and services. Obviously this could be done so that all parents could become full participants in the educational marketplace. Those who could afford to pay for their own children’s education would do so, while those needing varying degrees of financial help would receive it.

Thus preserving the benefits of direct tuition payment by parents 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.

However, the best way to provide such assistance has also been a subject of considerable debate among scholars in recent years.

Some favor an education voucher similar to that used in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida, while others seek to promote the spread of private scholarship organizations through the use of tax credits, as Arizona has done since 1997 and Pennsylvania began in 2002.

One area that both sides do agree on is that existing programs currently serve far too few children.

The other difficult hurdle 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 will shout.

But once again, history proves the profit incentive is what drives entrepreneurs to produce better products and superior services. It is this very same profit motive that has provided Americans with the highest quality of life the world has ever known.

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