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## **Separating School & State — W(h)ither Public Schools?** **by Sheldon Richman**

*The following is the first chapter from The Future of Freedom Foundation's most popular book, **Separating School & State** by Sheldon Richman. Now celebrating its tenth anniversary, **Separating School & State** has become one of the most popular books in home-schooling and libertarian circles. [Purchase](#) this book.*

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### Chapter 1 - W(h)ither Public Schools?

*The aim of public education is not to spread enlightenment at all; it is simply to reduce as many individuals as possible to the same safe level, to breed a standard citizenry, to put down dissent and originality.*

— H.L. Mencken

Is anyone happy with the public schools? It seems not. Those with no financial stake in the schools have translated their unhappiness into various reform proposals, such as charter schools or voucher plans. Those who do have a stake in the current system—the teachers' union, for example—point to the schools' bad condition as a reason for the government to appropriate more money. Whichever way they lean, people generally believe that the schools are not doing what they are supposed to be doing.

This book will come at the issues from a different angle. Maybe the schools *are* doing precisely what they were designed to do or at least what they cannot help but do. Maybe we just do not like that results now that we see them. Someone said that the ends pre-exist in the means. Is it possible that with the public schools, we have gotten exactly what we asked for? To substantiate that charge it will be necessary not only to look closely at schools but also to pull back to gain some perspective. We will have to look at both the forest and the trees. In the chapters that follow, we will step back and consider what government-sponsored schools are by

virtue of that sponsor-ship. We will revisit the founding of public schools to see what the architects had in mind. We will follow that with a description of the criticism leveled at public schooling, from the earliest to the most recent. We will also speculate on what things would be like if there were no public schools, if school and state were separate. At the same time, we will do something dangerous: entertain the possibility that the problem is not just the public school, but school per se. The Appendix will examine the schools empirically—the test scores, the strife, the other day-to-day indicators of failure.

### **Sacred schools**

The public schools, despite their widely recognized problems, have a mystique that prevents people from imagining life without them. You would think we have always had them. People get nervous hearing any criticism of the schools that sounds fundamental. You may find fault with the schools, of course, and you may propose to tinker with them. But if you even imply that the schools are irretrievably lost or should be changed in some really drastic way, you will stimulate a reflex response and vicious counterattack.

Consider the case of Washington, D.C., where the superintendent of schools proposed contracting out the management of the city's worst schools to a private firm, Education Alternatives, Inc. That has been done in Baltimore and elsewhere. The reform called "privatization," but that is misleading. Yes, the firm is private. However, a private monopoly has merely been substituted for a so-called public monopoly. Parents and children have no more choice than before. The schools are still financed by taxes. A government school board, subject to state and federal authorities, still run things. There may be a small element of market pressure in the sense that the school board can choose not to renew the contract; it may pick another company or go back to running the schools itself. Such "privatization" is not a radical solution to the schools' problems.

But to some people it sounds radical. They reacted to the proposal as if the sacred public school system were under a deadly threat. The superintendent (he is black) was called racist by some people. That's a code word for being concerned that the best students are being held back by the worst. The Washington Teachers Union led the charge. Undoubtedly, they propagandized the students, one of whom referred to the superintendent as "our slave seller [who is] selling out education to the highest-bidding rich white owner." In the end, the superintendent had to shelve the plan for lack of support.

The day after the plan was withdrawn, *Washington Post* columnist Dorothy Gilliam displayed the knee-jerk reflex that so many have about the public schools, no matter how decrepit they get. "District schools clearly need drastic improvement," wrote Gilliam, "but there simply are some places where capitalism should never tread. Public education is one." She continued: "The success of U.S. education in the 20th century was due largely to the fact that it was a

community enterprise, not a private-sector one. It is the American way for public schools to answer, through the democratic process, to the communities they serve. American leaders have long-recognized the importance public education plays in creating a learned citizenry capable of maintaining a democracy.” She quoted the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching: “The nation’s public schools collectively remain one of America’s most vital institutions, with the mission of sustaining a democratic nation as well as serving the individual.”

Who are Gilliam and the Carnegie Foundation kidding — besides themselves? Where is the evidence that the public schools are serving communities and “maintaining democracy”? In whose dreams are they accountable through the democratic process? By what stretch of the imagination can anyone claim that education has been a success in the 20th century? Literacy was higher before government schools existed. Government historically has been a hindrance to education. In the antebellum South, it was a crime to teach slaves to read. Historian E.G. West writes that in early 19th-century England, the government complained that people were too literate and were using their skill to read seditious material. Thomas Malthus in 1803 worried that “the circulation of [Thomas] Paine’s *Rights of Man*....has done great mischief among the lower and middle classes of this country.” Moreover, the public school system that is said to be so vital to America was modeled on the one designed for 19th-century Prussia, a paragon of authoritarianism, not freedom. It is hardly something Americans should be proud of. (More about that in Chapter 3.)

Gilliam is like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, clicking her heels together, squeezing her eyes shut, and endlessly — fervently — saying to herself, trying to make herself believe it, “The public schools can work. The public schools can work.” But that will not make them work. Who suffers most? Not the rich and sophisticated, who always will find ways and wherewithal to get out. No, it is the poor and least knowledgeable about how to “game” the system who will be condemned to remain at the bottom. They will find no relief in the good intentions — if indeed that is what they are — of the administrators of and apologists for the public schools.

### **What is community?**

Note also Gilliam’s premise that the community and the private sector are at odds with each other. Schools, she said, are a community enterprise, not a private-sector one. There is no conflict, however. Private schools can be community enterprises. Home schoolers are routinely involved in community activities. Of those three kinds of educational efforts, the public schools — with their violence and failure — are the most estranged from the community. People have been so indoctrinated with the religion of state, thanks in part to the public schools, that they fail to understand that the community *is* the private sector. That term refers to all nongovernmental activities: profit-making enterprises, nonprofit organizations, voluntary efforts of all kinds, religious centers, homes, families and more.

Gilliam's column contained another fallacy widely held by apologists for the public schools. "Corporations deal in producing products," she wrote; "Schools deal in developing human beings. There's a big difference." Those few words are fraught with error. Many corporations deal in services, not products. Some can even be said to deal in "developing human beings." Holiday Spa is a large corporation that develops the physical side of human beings. Berlitz is a large corporation that develops language skills in human beings. Harvard University and Stanford University are private corporations. But perhaps more important, *schools do not — and should not — develop human beings*. It has long been popular to think of education that way. That, I believe, is wrong. *Human beings develop themselves — if they develop at all*. To grow, children need assistance; specifically, they need information and good examples from the adults. But they do not need adults or institutions to develop them into human beings. This is not just semantics. The common conception of education casts children in a fundamentally passive role. They are empty vessels that only adults with special skills — teachers — can fill. As we will see, the architects of the public schools consistently saw the mission of education as the development of human beings. They spoke of children as formless lumps of clay or dough, raw material requiring the able fingers of expert educators. Only such a vision could have yielded the schools our children labor in today.

### **A new vision**

If we are to see the current system for what it is, we must have a new vision of what education should be. Education should be seen as a way of encouraging the child's natural curiosity. That change in focus automatically makes the child the active party in the enterprise. (Various educational fads pay lip service to the child as active party, but they do not mean it.) Children come into the world thirsting for knowledge about their surroundings. The educational process needs only to abstain from killing that curiosity. Each child is unique. The last thing he or she needs is a procrustean school. The things that interest politicians and education professionals, such as national standards, are so many distractions.

Contrary to Gilliam, capitalism has a central role in education. Facilitating education involves the provision of products and services. If we have learned anything from the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, it is that nothing can outperform the private economy in the delivery of goods and services. Governments consistently fail in that endeavor because politicians and bureaucrats do not face the same incentives that private businesspeople face. Private enterprise is activity that must attract and please willing customers. Government is force. That difference explains much of what goes on in the world. The choice in education, as in so much else, is between a system that respects people and one that does not. The premise of this book is that people can, and have a right to, run their own lives. They have a right to raise their children. To deny that is folly. If they do not have that ability and right, how could they choose

leaders to do it for them? How could there be leaders to choose? Those leaders would suffer the same disabilities as everyone else. The denial of individual liberty and responsibility — and the free society that results from them — is self-refuting.

## **Culture wars**

The public schools have not been of concern only in the academic realm. In the realm of cultural values, they have also caused much turmoil. That is nothing new. Government schools have always been an instrument of political policy — which means they have long been used to deprive a segment of the population its culture or even its language. As Ludwig von Mises wrote, “The main tool of compulsory denationalization and assimilation is education....In linguistically mixed territories it turned into a dreadful weapon in the hands of governments determined to change the linguistic allegiance of their subjects.”

In the United States, the schools first insulted the Catholics. Later, religionists fought secularists over evolution, a fight that still has not gone away, although the outs are now in and vice versa. Today, advocates of sex education and condom distribution battle with the advocates of abstinence. Those who would pray in school fight with atheists. So-called liberals want *Huckleberry Finn* removed from school libraries, while some fundamentalist Christians are uneasy with *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Diary of Anne Frank*. How can these disputes be resolved without someone’s values being shoved down someone else’s throat? They cannot. Public schools make those disputes insoluble.

Americans do not appreciate it, but the nations of Europe once had a similar battle over the state church. Horrible sectarian wars were fought between people who felt that unless they imposed their religion on others, the others would impose theirs on them. Then, when civil strife had reached its peak, someone got a great idea: the separation of church and state. Let people choose and finance their own religion and leave government — that is, force — out of it. That idea culminated in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. That doctrine, as much as anything, was responsible for the unprecedented civil harmony that existed in the United States for much of its history.

Today, almost no one in the United States wants a national religion. Yet most people are firmly committed to a national education. Conservatives and statist-liberals, Republicans and Democrats alike, favor uniform national standards for every public school in the nation. What most people do not realize is that national religion and national education involve similar issues and the same threat that someone’s ideas will be imposed on others. Auberon Herbert, a libertarian in 19th century England, saw this clearly when he wrote:

Whoever fairly faces the question must admit that the same set of arguments which condemns a national religion also condemns a national system of education. It is hard to pronounce sentence on

the one and absolve the other. Does a national church compel some to support system to which they are opposed? So does a national system of education. Does the one exalt the principle of majorities over the individual conscience? So does the other. Does a national church imply a distrust of the people, of their willingness to make sacrifices, of their capacity to manage their own affairs? So does a national system of education. Does the one chill and the repress higher meanings and produce formalism? So does the other.

In America, state education is as much out of place as state religion. America's revolution was dedicated to freedom of conscience as well economic liberty. The limits on government power brought dramatic prosperity. The separation of church and state was a key expression of that limitation. But because of several contradictions in theory and practice, that libertarian revolution was not complete. We need to call a truce in the education wars used to separate school and state so that we may complete the stunted authentic liberal revolution and enjoy its material and spiritual fruits.

### **The family as educator**

If the state does not look after education, who will? Some cannot even imagine an alternative, although we have not always had government schools. As Auberon Herbert noted, "If government half a century ago had provided us all with dinners and breakfasts, it would be the practice of our orators today to assume the impossibility of providing for ourselves." When people are free, there has been and will be only one answer to the question of who will look after education: the family. The institution of family is an outgrowth of individualism and freedom. A man and a woman freely choose to build a life together and raise children. The idea of family without primary responsibility for education is ludicrous. As will be discussed later, the public school has been an insidious assault on the integrity of the family. It did not appear that way at first. School districts were small, and schools were local. The schools claimed to value the family. The slow process of centralization and bureaucratization, however, has long removed whatever control families once had over education of their children. To those who say families cannot be trusted with the education of children, the proper answer is: then why do you wish to leave democratic decision making regarding schools to the heads of those families? Surely it is more feasible for parents to make decisions about their own children's education than it is for them to make such decisions for everyone's children.

### **A matter of semantics**

Throughout the book, the terms "public education," "state education," "national education," "public schools," "state schools," and "government schools" are used interchangeably. Of those terms, "public schools" is the oddest. A private school is open to the

public. It is supported by that part of the public that attends. So why don't we call it a public school? Just as Dorothy Gilliam (see above) assumed that the community and the private sector are in opposition, so do people oppose the public and private sectors. My home, of course is a private place. But what about a restaurant? Clearly, it is a public place — but not in the way that a public school is. What is the difference? The difference is that the restaurant relies on the consent of its customers; the school does not need the consent of its students or those who finance it. “Public” and “private” are therefore misleading labels. We would advance the cause of clear thinking immensely if, instead, we called them the coercive and consensual sectors. The “public” in “public schools” is an Orwellian euphemism for *coercive*. Their money and their students are procured by force. That is not a pretty thought. No wonder the school administrators prefer the word “public.” Nevertheless, the term “public school” is established, and this book will use it in the usual way.

A final note: for various reasons, this book will not discuss higher education, although there are many “public” colleges, and government has much to say about the private ones. Suffice it to say that the increase in federal funding and control over the past several decades present a threat to colleges and universities similar to the one it presents to primary and secondary schools. The lessons from the latter are fully applicable to the former.

There are important differences, however. Attendance at college is not compulsory, of course. Moreover, the young people in primary and secondary schools are much more impressionable than those in the institutions of higher education. That is why the matter with respect to public schools is so urgent. Our children's lives are at stake.

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