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Government Can't Run School Like Businesses

by Thomas L. Johnson

What this all boils down to is, are we trying to raise sheep — timid, docile, easily driven or led — or free men? If what we want is sheep, our schools are perfect as they are. If what we want is free men, we'd better start making some big changes.

— John Holt, *The Underachieving School*

Just after the Civil War ended in 1865, the public-school system, and governments at all levels, began to rapidly expand in America. And during the 139-year period leading up to today, there have been innumerable reforms attempted to try to correct the never-ending failures of this academic system.

But the public schools, along with big government, tragically continue to thrive and expand. This synchronous growth is not accidental, but inevitable.

One of the latest attempts at public school reform is part of [Virginia] Gov. Mark Warner's package of education initiatives that involves "turnaround specialists," who are supposed to apply business practices to failing public schools.

In an August 23 Associated Press article ("Principals get extra training to improve low-scoring schools"), Melissa Marshall, a "turnaround specialist" at Perrymont Middle School in Chesterfield County, is featured. (The program is also at Berkeley Elementary School in Spotsylvania.)

When commenting about the public-school system, Marshall said, "The product is education and the customers are students."

But she has it all wrong.

Education is not a product; it's supposed to be a learning experience. A properly educated student might be considered a good "product" of the system, but since that has seldom happened in the past, it became necessary to establish the Standards of Learning reform program in the futile attempt to end this acute public-education problem and embarrassment.

Also, students are definitely not customers, because customers are not forced by law to patronize businesses, but students are forced to attend school. Customers choose when, where, and how they will, or will not, deal with businesses. Public-school students rarely have these choices, unless politicians or school authorities grant them.

So it is useless to attempt to try to apply techniques that are used in the business world, where customers are free to come and go as they please; where customers are not required to obey a vast number of rules and regulations; where customers are not subjected to fear and force by authority figures; where customers do not have to deal with bullying, hazing, violence, mind-numbing boredom, and censorship.

Also, in the business world: customers do not have to please businesses, and are not tested and graded, and thus do not pass or fail; customers fearlessly judge businesses and their products or services; customers do not have official detailed records (except credit records) that are kept for many years and that might negatively impact them for the rest of their lives.

Yet Marshall, a “turnaround specialist” who absurdly calls students customers, has already separated Perrymont students by gender (sexism), and required them to wear uniforms (regimentation).

She has simply adopted ancient academic practices that have been tried innumerable times and failed, but which clearly reveal the authoritarian nature of the academic system. (Have you ever heard of customers being separated by gender, or having to wear uniforms?)

So if public schools are obviously not like free-market businesses, precisely what are they?

Public schools are government-established, politician- and bureaucrat-controlled, fully politicized, taxpayer-supported, authoritarian socialist institutions.

In fact, the public-school system is one of the purest examples of socialism existing in America.

And while politicians, such as George W. Bush, are praising the free market and advocating individual responsibility, these same politicians give their full support to public education that demands collective responsibility, which is an essential feature of socialism.

If freedom is to survive in America, it will be necessary to eliminate the psychologically crippling and mentally debilitating authoritarian socialist public-school system that inevitably inflicts upon all of its students a long and thorough indoctrination in authoritarianism and convinces them that government force is a valid and necessary means to achieve virtually any desired ends.

This must be replaced with a system involving freedom and democracy; that is, a system of individual choice known as free enterprise in which students would actually be genuine customers, patronizing genuine education businesses.

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