



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

The Separation of Education and State

by Jacob G. Hornberger

Americans, like most people around the world, have become so accustomed to the role that government plays in educating children that the idea of separating education from the state usually comes as a complete shock to them. While everyone is aware of the ever-growing problems associated with public schooling, the answer for most people is the standard one: “The system needs reform.” Yet decade after decade, as reforms are implemented, new bond issues passed, new schools built, and new schoolteachers hired, the problems remain, only to be addressed with the same answer: “The system needs reform.” And since most people attended public schools, the thought of bringing an end to the very system to which they attribute their own success is, well, shocking.

But why not reject all the reforms and instead raise our vision to a higher level? Why not end all government involvement in education, just as our American ancestors ended all government involvement in religion? Aren’t the arguments for separating church and state the same, in principle, for separating education and state?

What I am suggesting is amendments to the 50 state constitutions that would read, “No law shall be passed respecting the establishment of education or abridging the free exercise thereof.” (The same type of amendment could be added to the federal constitution, but this discussion will be limited to ending state government involvement in education.)

What would be the practical consequences of such an amendment? The same consequences that accompanied freedom of religion. Just as we don’t have federal subsidies of religion, or public (i.e., government) churching, or state-licensed private churches, or state-approved home-religious education, there would be no more public schooling, no more state-licensed private schools, and no more state-approved home education. Education, like religion, would be left entirely to the free market, where families would have the same sovereignty and independence with respect to the education of their children as they have with respect to religion.

Socialism and its consequences

Why has public schooling been riddled with so many problems? The answer is that public schooling is an absolutely perfect model of socialism and central planning. The entire system is based on the same top-down, command-and-control system on which the military is based, with political and bureaucratic committees planning the educational decisions of multitudes of children under their jurisdiction. Participation is mandated, with criminal penalties imposed on recalcitrant parents. Funding is also based on coercion, with taxes taking from everyone — even those who don't have children — to fund the schooling of those who are sent into the system.

Nearly everyone knows that socialism produces shoddy products and services. So why should anyone be surprised that public schooling does so as well?

Is the situation any different in private schools or home-schooling? It has to be, if for no other reason than that the child is not under the direct supervision and control of a government employee who is filling his mind with government-approved doctrines. But the situation is still far from ideal, given that the state, through licensing of schools and certification of home-schooling curricula and results, still wields ultimate control over the education of everyone's children.

What is amazing is that after so many years of government involvement in education, with all its dismal results, so few people ask basic and fundamental questions about the education of their children, such as: Why shouldn't families have the same sovereign and independent control over the education of their children as they have over religious matters? Given that the free market produces the best of everything and socialism produces the worst of everything, why are people willing to submit their children to a second-rate product in an area as important as education? Why should providing education to people be considered a legitimate function of government?

What is also fascinating is that most parents hardly pay any mind to the potential damage that educational socialism wreaks on the mind and life of a child, especially after 12 continuous years of mandatory participation in such a system. All that seems to matter is that parents have a "safe" state-run place to park their children every day for 12 years, a place in which they will supposedly be taught the basics of a good education. Some parents have even embraced the state's suggestion that resistance to such a system by their children reflects dysfunctional conduct that can be remedied only by state-administered drugs (e.g., Ritalin), ignoring the distinct possibility that such resistance is instead a very healthy and normal reaction to a dysfunctional socialist educational system.

Why are people so unwilling to look at such potential damage to the mental well-being of their children? Because they operate under the assumption that, despite its many problems, public schooling can be relied on to educate their children. After all, the argument goes, if it was good enough for parents, it's good enough for their children, ignoring the quite obvious point that

the state's position is that generation after generation of public-school graduates cannot be trusted with making educational decisions for their family because they lack the competence to do so.

The methodology of education

The teaching methodology that characterizes public schools (as well as many licensed private schools) is one that is based on cramming and memorizing. Education is viewed as a process by which information is fed into the minds of the students, who are then expected to memorize and regurgitate the information on tests that are given to judge whether the student has become "educated." Students are then judged by a grading system that informs them whether they are "A"-, "B"-, "C"-, or "D"-level students.

Permit me to share with you a bit of my personal life to show how different education and education methodology are in a free market. Like most adults, I have had occasion to take educational courses simply "for the fun of it." For example, I have taken ballroom dance classes as well as foreign-language classes here in the D.C. area. The difference between those classes and public schooling is night and day.

My dance and language classes have been composed of people of all ages, including high-school students. In a beginner class, everyone pretty much starts out as a complete novice. Over an 8-week course, however, everything starts to change. Some people study harder than others. Some practice what they're learning while others just show up to class every week. Some people excel much more quickly than the others. Sometimes people skip class, returning the following week. No one is given mandatory homework but everyone seems to know that practice is key to getting better. Everyone has a very enjoyable time even though the sessions can be tiring. Whenever a teacher asks whether people mind if he goes over the allotted time, no one objects and most stay to take advantage of the "free" teaching.

At the end of the course, everyone is at a different skill level, but such a determination is entirely subjective because no test or final exam is given. The decision to move to the next level is entirely up to the student. Many decide to repeat the beginner level and others immediately move up to the next level of difficulty. No student is ever criticized or demeaned for having an insufficient skill level but usually figures out for himself that he might be in "over his head" at a higher level and voluntarily decides to stay at a lower level. No one is "graded."

The teachers treat everyone — even the worst dancers and linguists — courteously and considerately. In all the private classes I have taken, I have never heard an instructor insult or abuse a student for having poor dance skills or not speaking the foreign language well.

In this type of educational system, one of the big differences is that the customer is paying the school directly for his education, unlike the public-school system which relies on taxes from everyone, including people who don't even have children. Thus, like any business that strives to

survive and prosper, the private education company must be nice to its customers, especially because satisfied customers can bring in other customers.

I should also mention, however, that not all the dance and language courses are provided by for-profit companies. Some are provided by nonprofit educational foundations. In fact, one nonprofit dance studio offers students free lessons in return for helping with dance classes.

One of the crucial differences concerns the mindsets and attitudes among the students. In the private classes, students are engaged in a seeking process rather than being subjected to a cramming process. That is, they are there because they want to be, because they are interested in the subject, and because they want to learn that subject. They (or their parents) are paying for it directly. Therefore, they listen intently, soaking up every word the instructor speaks.

Most important, the course is fun for everyone, even those who clearly lack the skills of other students. Everyone enjoys himself primarily because he has chosen to be there to learn something that he wants to learn.

Did I mention that no one cares that everyone is of a different age in such classes, even though the ages range from the teens to the 70s?

That's how a free-market educational system works. The sovereignty is with the consumer, and businesses pop up in response to their wants and interests, serving them and, in the process, bettering their own economic lot in life.

While it is impossible to predict the marvels of a free-market educational system that would arise from the separation of education and state, these types of adult-education classes give us a hint of how a free market in education would work for children. No longer would children lose their natural sense of awe and wonder that the regimentation of state schooling slowly but inevitably grinds out of them. Instead, that sense of awe and wonder and love of learning that they have to age 6, when they enter the public-school system, would continue to be nurtured and cultivated as parents and children worked together to figure out which educational vehicles would be best suited for them at their different stages of growth. My hunch is that in a free-market educational system, children would continue to badger their parents with "Why? Why? Why?" throughout their entire pre-teen and teenage years.

Finally, let's examine the funding mechanism for public schooling — the taxation imposed on everyone to fund the schooling of those who have children. Where is the morality of such a system? That is, under what moral authority does the state take one person's money and give it to another person, even to fund the education of his children? We wouldn't do that to help a person attend a church, would we? To put it another way, why shouldn't people be free to keep their own income and decide what to do with it?

"But people wouldn't educate their children if they weren't forced to." Balderdash! But if that's true then what better argument to rid ourselves immediately of public schools, given that that's the type of parent that public schooling has produced? The fact is that the parent who

doesn't care about the education of his children is a rarity. The problem is that everyone has become so accustomed to the "one size fits all" public-schooling system, they have a difficult time accepting the idea that families should be free to fashion their own particular educational plans for each of their children. In other words, we need to develop the same degree of tolerance in education that we have developed in how people raise their families generally, including in religious matters.

One of the finest gifts that the American people could bequeath to their children and to the world would be a free-market educational system. Just as our ancestors benefited themselves and future generations by separating church and state, Americans today should follow that path of liberty by separating education and state.

Jacob Hornberger is founder and president of The Future of Freedom Foundation.

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