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Public Schools Have Flunked Out

by James Erwin Norwood

Public schools are brain dead and on life support; so let's pull the plug on them, give them a decent funeral, and let better alternatives take root and flourish.

Education is what we must save and regenerate, not an obsolete proven flop that has been in a persistent counterproductive condition for decades. The time has come to slaughter a sacred cow.

Public schools are failing and will continue to fail, for the following reasons:

Central planners of public schools cannot get adequate information to make plans that fit students.

No one owns public schools. No one has any capital at risk in them or a brand name to protect; so no one running them has an incentive to cut costs to avoid losses and to increase revenues by maximizing customer satisfaction.

Public schools have stayed in business, in spite of their bad results. Their failures have not been punished by bankruptcy or loss of jobs. Their failures have been rewarded with more money, which has operated as a perverse incentive to fail again and again.

Public schools can ignore parents, since parents do not directly fund them. Educrats cannot ignore legislatures, judges, school boards, or pressure groups and their political agenda. So politics rules the roost, not parents; and politics has destroyed public schools.

Force-feeding children the state's prescription for education is more about creating jobs for teachers than about educating students. In any event, no one can be forced to learn anything.

Compulsory-attendance laws, which aim at enlarging demand for administrators and staff and at keeping students out of the labor market, generate resistance and disruption by captive students, who are not interested in ordering from the state's menu. Such students should be free to find other ways to learn how to fend for themselves, including going to work. The prisoners should be released.

Putting more money into a bad plan that won't work will not make it work. That will only produce more of the same bad results. We have doubled, tripled, and quadrupled funds per student and have gotten increasingly worse results for our money.

Many good teachers in state schools are being frustrated by an unrealistic system that is based on false premises that make it inherently unsound.

A free market in education

We should close the public day jails and go to a free market in educational goods and services. Owners of schools would produce results that please customers or would go out of business. Competitors would scramble to produce the best results at the least cost for the most customers.

With volume up and unit costs down, tuition for private education would drop sharply to affordable ranges, which would create a mass market. Private scholarships would expand to help students who really want to learn but who cannot afford even reduced prices. Nonprofits could carry the ball.

With state monopolies that block innovations out of the way, educational entrepreneurs would innovate and produce good education. For example, commercial outfits that are now producing K–8 reading and math programs might expand to produce full K–12 curricula, and would adjust programs and content to meet demand. Entrepreneurs would organize instruction and interactive computer programs to enhance learning. New educational enterprises would emerge to compete with existing programs and entrepreneurs for the dollars of customers.

Who knows what would develop, as the market worked its magic? Perhaps some low-cost Internet schools with high volume would arise. They would put courses by the best educators on computer discs; and customer service would connect students who have questions on particular points, to home-based teachers across the land. Maybe a discount chain of All Smart schools would spread across the country. Franchises of McEd schools could develop.

Just as the telephone monopoly prevented creation of cheaper and more-efficient alternatives and diversity in telecommunications, so the public-school monopoly has prevented creation of cheaper and more-efficient alternatives and diversity in education. One brand cannot serve all. So let's clear the way for entrepreneurs to meet the educational needs of students with all sorts of talents and ambitions.

In the free market, people of all races, creeds, political stripes, ideological stances, and ethnicities would get along, as they independently contract for and use a variety of educational goods and services; and they would not have to fight each other, join the PTA, petition, form pressure groups, vote, file lawsuits, or run for political office to get what they want. Educators would be accountable to cash customers, who would get what they want for their children or shop elsewhere.

Vouchers and subsidies for private schools should be avoided like the plague, since they would put politicians in a position to wipe out private schools. When the god-state funds any kind of education (lower, higher, or religious), politicians, judges, and bureaucrats control or strongly influence what is taught, who teaches what, methods and times of instruction, who studies with whom and where, and other conditions of eligibility for subsidies. Education is always lost in the shuffle to stuff ballot boxes.

Also, vouchers could be milked by fraudulent operators, as cash cows.

We have been paying two, three, and four prices for “education” and have been getting political battlegrounds and bureaucracies that have precluded education. If we want education, the public school system must be junked and replaced with private schools, many of which would be nonprofits that would be tax-exempt and that would attract tax-deductible contributions.

Even were public schools (and colleges) adequately teaching communications, calculations, and science, they would still reduce us to third-world conditions by selling another generation of students socialist swamplands that consume capital and thus induce mass poverty. Such pink propaganda mills are destroying civilization.

What is needed to regenerate education is complete separation of school and state. Nothing else will result in optimum education. We should kick the states and the federal government out of education and let parents gain control of education with the power of their own money.

Educational accountability

Several wheels that are missing from the public school junker are indicated below.

Customers of private schools can fire managers and teachers, by withdrawing their children and taking them and their money elsewhere. So managers and teachers in private schools are immediately accountable to parents and have incentives to produce.

The alleged accountability reports by public schools are largely irrelevant whitewash to divert attention from and to make excuses for incompetence and failure. Without executive power to fire incompetent teachers and without the parents having power to withdraw their children, there is no accountability in public schools. Also, when public schools fail, the people who are running them do not suffer the loss. Such personnel are therefore inherently unaccountable.

Heavy school taxes keep the victims trapped in public schools, so that few students can afford to escape to private schools. Also, private schools are backed into charging high tuition, because they are precluded by school taxes from developing a mass market and thereby reducing unit costs.

Another problem with politically managed schools is in various “education” plans that arise from state judiciaries, legislatures, and bureaucracies and from the federal judiciary, the White House, Congress, and federal bureaucracies. The dreamers who grind such sausage to get

ballots in the box and to project their egalitarian mirages into practice cannot fit their delusions to the educational needs of children. Their captive “customers” are forced to pay for their fantastic designs that won’t fly; and school administrators, teachers, and students without parachutes are compelled to wear regulatory straitjackets to the inevitable crash. Teachers would have the opportunity to fly in the free market.

How would private educational businesses in a free market (without the subsidized public-school monopoly’s blocking access) work? The only way that private businesses in a free market can legitimately get money from customers into their cash registers is to fit their goods and services to the needs and demands of sovereign consumers. Private businesses must cut their costs and keep their prices as low as possible without losing money, to meet competition and to generate a mass market and high volume. Customers win in a free market.

If we want optimum education at the least cost, we must close public schools and go to a free market in educational goods and services. Parents would rule the roost, with each customer’s money guiding production by entrepreneurs. Resources would be organized by entrepreneurs to meet the educational needs of students, just as resources are organized in the rest of the market to meet the needs of billions of people for automobiles, computers, recreation, locomotives, appliances, shelter, information, furniture, food, clothing, wristwatches, aircraft, firearms, tractors, training, and whatever else there is sufficient demand for to cover costs of production.

The public-school monopoly is a dead drag on education, is blocking progress in education, and should be shut down now.

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