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The “Value” of Public Schooling

by Jacob G. Hornberger

There are two major values of public schooling, from the perspective of government officials. One, this institution provides the means by which government officials can slowly but surely, over a period of 12 years, mold the mindsets of children into one of conformity and obedience to authority. Second, public schooling enables government officials to fill children’s minds with officially approved political, historical, and economic doctrine.

Public schooling is much like the military. What is the first thing that the military does to new recruits? No, not teach them to fight or kill. That comes later. First comes boot camp, a seemingly nonsensical period of time in which soldiers are ordered to drop down for pushups at the whim of an officer. Soldiers learn to march together in unison, mastering such movements as right-face and left-face. They’re taught to respond without hesitation with “Yes, sir” and “No, sir” to an officer barking questions a few inches away from their face.

Why? Why does the military spend time teaching those things to new soldiers? After all, none of them comes in very handy once the actual fighting begins.

The reason is very simple: to mold each person’s mindset into one of strict conformity and obedience. That is, higher-ups in the military know that if they can compel a person to do something as ridiculous and nonsensical as a right-face and a left-face, then there is a greater likelihood that that person will obey other orders without question.

Or if a person can be taught to obey orders to march in unison within a group of people, all of whom are wearing the same uniform, there is a strong likelihood that such a person will lose his sense of individuality and instead simply consider himself part of the collective.

That is the real value of military boot camp — it very quickly eliminates all notions of individuality within the human being and makes him feel that conformity and obedience are the only acceptable states of mind.

In principle, the public-schooling system is no different, although government officials have a much longer period of time — 12 years — in which to accomplish the same task — produce mindsets of conformity and obedience.

That's not only what compulsory-attendance laws are all about but also the manner in which public schools are operated.

Compulsory-attendance laws are, in principle, no different from the compulsory draft that the military employs.

In the draft system, the government sends a notice to a citizen commanding him to appear at a military installation for compulsory service in the military. If the citizen refuses, he faces criminal indictment, prosecution, conviction, imprisonment, and fine.

In the public-school system, families are required to submit their children to a state-approved education. While this encompasses attendance at state-approved private schools and homeschooling, for most families compulsory-attendance laws mean sending their children into public schools in their neighborhood for education. Those families who refuse to submit their children to a state-approved education face the same things that draft resisters face: criminal indictment, prosecution, conviction, imprisonment, and fine.

Equally important, the operation of public schools tends to produce the same type of mindset that the military produces — one of conformity and obedience to state authority. Just as in the military, the student is taught to conform to what some people would ordinarily consider nonsensical rules and regulations that bear no relationship to a genuine love of learning.

For example, consider the rigid class schedules that are imposed in public schools. All students are required to attend a daily series of 50-minute classes addressing several different subjects. When the bell rings at the end of one class, the student is expected to immediately proceed to the next class. If he fails to arrive on time, he is punished. Never mind that he might not be interested in the subject matter of the next class or that he might want to stay and talk with other students or the teacher about a subject that he is genuinely interested in. That doesn't matter. What matters is that he respond to the bells and obey.

That rigidity, conformity, and obedience may be perfectly suitable for some types of people, just as the military way of life is perfectly suitable for some types of people. The problem, however, is that not everyone is suited to that way of life. For those who are more individualistic, more free-spirited, the public-school experience becomes a long, 12-year battle in which the military-like school system tends toward grinding away at the natural sense of individualism and independence that characterize those students, a process that such students naturally resist.

For example, suppose a student says to his public-school administrators, "I absolutely love playing the piano. I am totally uninterested in math, chemistry, and a foreign language. Therefore, I have made the decision to stay in music class six hours every day for the next three months and take no other classes."

How would the public-school administrator respond? He would laugh outloud at such an audacious statement. He would firmly tell the student to follow the class schedule that the school has provided him . . . or else. In earlier years, the student would have even faced a paddling with

a “board of education” if he insisted on skipping regularly scheduled, mandatory classes to play the piano.

One might respond that the student has the choice of dropping out of public school and receiving his state-approved education from a private school or through homeschooling. The problem, however, is that most private schools have the same rigid-type curriculum system that public schools have. After all, private schools must be approved by the state in order to meet the standard of a “state-approved” education. Moreover, many parents simply lack the competence or time to homeschool.

Under a free-market educational system, however, each family would be free to fashion the education that would fit each child in the family. If a child said, “I want to do nothing but play the piano for the next six months and study nothing else,” that would be up to the family, not the state. And before someone says, “It would be irresponsible for a family to educate the child in that way,” reflect on the fact that many students travel abroad each summer to study nothing but a foreign language and that they study that language for several hours every single day for several weeks at a time. No math or science classes. Just the foreign language.

The point is that in the compulsory state system, the military-like way of learning is imposed on everyone, even those who are not suited for that way of life. The result is an endless battle in which individualistic students come to hate school and learning in general.

In a noncoerced educational system — that is, one in which the state is not involved in any way — the family controls the educational environment of its children. Thus, if a child says, “I think I’ll just go fishing today and reflect on the ideas and philosophies I’ve been studying,” the parents are free to say, “That sounds like an exciting idea.” If the student tries that in the state system, he will be told, “Try it and you’ll find yourself in detention for the next three weeks.”

What happens to those public-school students who rebel against the military-like regimentation that characterizes public schools? Government administrators make them feel like something is wrong with them. Even worse, they convince their parents that something is wrong with them. The students are sent to school psychiatrists who diagnose mental disorders such as “attention deficit disorder.”

Think about how a new military recruit who announced “I’m going fishing today instead of learning how to march” would be treated. Would not everyone in his unit think he was crazy? That’s the same way school administrators would feel about the student who said the same thing. He’d be considered crazy — or at least distracted. Of course, in the mind of the state official, the malady is nothing that drugs, such as Ritalin, can’t cure. Given the right dosage of drugs, over time the mind of the recalcitrant, independent-minded student will be molded in the “proper” way, especially over the 12 long years that the state has control over him.

Indoctrination and textbooks

The other value of public schooling, from the standpoint of the state, is the ability of government officials to fill the minds of children with important, officially approved ideas, philosophies, and standpoints, especially with respect to politics, history, government, and economics.

After all, what textbooks are used in public schools? Those textbooks that have been carefully chosen by state officials. If a proposed textbook contains objectionable material or omits important officially approved material, what chance does it have to become the official textbook used in public schools across the state? Answer: No chance at all.

By the very nature of government schooling, the matter of what goes into school textbooks must necessarily be a political matter, to be decided by those in political power. And since the choice of textbooks customarily applies to public schools across the state, all children receive the same government-approved information.

Moreover, there is virtually no choice for the parents who cannot afford to send their children to private school or who are unable or unwilling to home-school. They must send their children to the public school in their neighborhood. That is, there is not a multitude of public schools from which to choose. And even if there were, they would most likely all be using the same textbooks.

Why is the textbook important? Because the teacher is expected to base his teaching on it. Sure, a teacher has some leeway to be flexible but imagine what would happen to a public-school teacher who announced to his classes, “What is written in these textbooks is claptrap, lies, and deceptions. I’m going to be teaching you the truth about the nature of the government, government schooling, free markets, individualism, and liberty.”

What would happen to that teacher? He would slowly (or perhaps quickly) be grinded down, to the point where he either got pushed out of the public-school system or be made to conform.

Here’s what would happen: A student would return home and report to his parents what the teacher was saying. A major political crisis would quickly erupt. His parents would call a member of the school board, which consists of elected officials, and complain. The school board, scared of the political consequences, would contact the principal, who would have a talk with the teacher. If the teacher refused to back down, the school board would call a public meeting, where the teacher would be given the opportunity to state his case to the board — and to the voters. Given the nature of politics, voter sentiment would play an important role in the school board’s ultimate decision.

Since the teacher’s teaching would be contrary to the official doctrines found in the textbook, he would have a heavy burden to overcome. Most likely, he would lose. The teacher

would be left with a choice: stand fast and lose his job or give in and teach the information contained in the textbook.

Libertarianism and public schooling

That's why it is extremely unlikely that one would ever find libertarianism taught as a philosophy in any public school. For one thing, libertarian principles would contradict most of the claptrap found in government textbooks. Do you have doubts? Well, imagine a public-school teacher openly announcing at the beginning of the semester that he would be teaching the following things in his government class:

1. The drug war is an immoral sham that has accomplished nothing more than enriching government officials and drug dealers. Drugs should be decriminalized.
2. Public schooling is nothing more than a system of socialism applied to education. It should be abolished, leaving education to the free market.
3. Abraham Lincoln waged war on the Confederacy for the purpose not of freeing the slaves but of preserving the Union.
4. U.S. intervention in World War I constituted a horrible waste of American life. It did not accomplish its purported goal of making the world safe for democracy and ending all future wars and actually contributed to the rise of N. Lenin and Adolf Hitler.
5. The federal government, not free enterprise, caused the 1929 stock-market crash and the Great Depression.
6. Franklin Roosevelt intentionally lied to the American people when he said that he was doing his best to keep America out of World War II.
7. U.S. officials during World War II intentionally delivered East Germany and Eastern Europe into the clutches of the Soviet communists.
8. Lyndon Johnson won his 1948 U.S. Senate race by stuffing the ballot box with fake ballots and later, as president, he intentionally lied about the supposed attack on U.S. forces in the Gulf of Tonkin.
9. The U.S. government's interventionist foreign policy in the Middle East gave rise to the 9/11 attacks.
10. Given that Iraq never attacked the United States, President Bush's war on Iraq constitutes a "war of aggression," a type of war that was punished as a war crime by the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal.
11. Minimum-wage laws hurt the poor and should be repealed.
12. Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid are immoral, socialist programs that should be abolished immediately, along with the taxes that fund them.

What do you think would happen to that teacher?

Public schooling and Cuba

I'm not suggesting, of course, that there are no libertarians teaching in the public schools. In fact, there are and they do a great job introducing libertarian principles to students. But they must be very careful about how they present their arguments. Usually they learn to carefully couch them in terms of improving the system.

In fact, that's also how things work in Cuba, where public schooling is one of Fidel Castro's proudest accomplishments (along with government-provided health care). It's illegal for any public-school teacher in Cuba to challenge the Cuban system. But as long as arguments are couched in terms of "improving the Revolution," teachers have some degree of flexibility.

As a matter of fact, a comparison of public schooling in Cuba and the United States will help to drive home the points I am making in this article. The systems in both countries are based on the same principles. Government officials are in charge of educating the children in the nation. Government-approved textbooks that contain government-approved doctrine are used. Government employees teach the students. The curriculum is set by the government.

So is there any difference? Yes, both in the mindsets that are produced and in the materials taught, which is why maintaining control over education is so important, both to U.S. officials and to Cuban officials.

For example, most Cubans know that public schooling and government-provided health care constitute socialism, and they are very proud of their educational and health-care systems. They would not want to see them abolished.

On the other hand, most Americans honestly believe that public schooling and Medicare and Medicaid constitute "free enterprise," and they are very proud of their educational and health-care systems. They too would not want to see them abolished.

The mindsets in both countries reflect the value of doctrines taught by government officials during the 12-year period when government officials had control over children.

Do you recall the big battle of Elián, the young boy whose mother died while trying to escape Cuba and make it to the United States? Everyone knew that whichever government school got ahold of him — and maintained a hold over him for 12 years — would ultimately win out in terms of his mindset.

Today, Elián praises Fidel Castro and the Cuban system. No doubt he thinks he's free, especially given that the Cuban system involves free education and free health care. If he had remained in America's public schools, he would very likely have felt differently about matters in Cuba but would have been nevertheless praising public schooling, Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid in the United States.

That's the power of public schooling.

Several years ago, I visited Cuba and was walking through a museum that detailed all the attempts that the CIA had made to assassinate Castro and effect "regime change" in Cuba,

including the invasion at the Bay of Pigs. I saw a class of primary-school students and their teacher taking a field trip through the museum.

To no one's surprise, the teacher was filling the students' minds with the Cuban government's officially approved doctrine. But it would not have been any different in principle if a class of public-school students from Miami had been taking a field trip through a CIA museum in the United States. The Cuban students would be taught that the U.S. government wrongfully interferes in the affairs of other countries, even making use of assassination. American students would be taught that their government spreads freedom and democracy around the globe and would probably not be told that their government uses assassination as one of its policy tools.

One amusing aspect of the comparison between the Cuban and U.S. educational systems appeared recently. A controversy arose in Miami because the library of some public school carried a book that praised public schooling in Cuba. There was an outcry because it's considered improper and unpatriotic to say good things about Castro or his system in American public schools.

A Cuban woman who had served in the Cuban public-school system and who was now living in Miami said that the whole controversy confirmed the advantages of democracy over tyranny. She explained that at least in the U.S. educational system, there are discussions and debates among government bureaucrats over what books should be permitted in public schools, while in Cuba, only one official — Fidel Castro — makes that decision.

The woman obviously is convinced that public schooling in the United States is “freedom” because education in this country is centrally planned by government bureaucracies, while in Cuba, education is “tyranny” because it is centrally planned by only one government official.

Government schooling has proven invaluable to government officials all over the world, especially since the mindset of conformity and obedience that is produced lasts long into adulthood. As in the military, such a mindset has historically been the best friend of government officials. The good news is that the malady is not incurable, as so many libertarians who are products of public schooling, including myself, can attest.

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