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## **Democracy and Government Schools** **by Sheldon Richman**

Let's be frank. We advocates of a completely free market in education are making little progress. I think I know why. Before I get to that, let's look at where we are.

Roughly 90 percent of American children attend government schools. That share has not changed substantially in the last 20 years, during which those schools have been under a constant barrage from a variety of critics. Despite growth in home-schooling and presumably attendance at religious schools, there has been no prominent exodus from the government's system.

Charter schools have made inroads in various states, but I wouldn't count them as part of an eroding of state education. While charter schools are relieved of some bureaucratic burdens, ultimately they are accountable to the chartering authority: the state. True, parents have the power to desert a charter school, but government has the power to revoke a charter in defiance of the parents' wishes. Of course, the schools are financed by the taxpayers. Charter schools are one of those seductive ad hoc "creative solutions" that distract attention from the real task, delegitimizing the government's role in education, which is to say, the raising of children.

Likewise vouchers. While this idea has been slow to catch on in a big way, voucher programs have been enacted for low-income students in various places. That parents who are offered vouchers respond favorably is a testament to their accurate perception of the government's schools. Still, voucher schools are ultimately under the control of government. Financed out of the taxpayers' money, these schools can't operate freely as market schools. The idea is another distracting "creative solution."

A free market in education requires liberty on both the supply side and the demand side. Entrepreneurs have to be free to offer any education service, subject only to the verdict of parents, who in turn must be free to spend their own (not the taxpayers') money as they wish. Only under these circumstances are schools really accountable to the parents.

## **Measuring success and failure**

Why is the free-market movement not making progress in education? The reason is that the strategy is flawed. We have operated on the assumption that demonstrating the technical superiority of private schools would win the day. There are a few problems with this premise. For one thing, demonstrating superiority in education is not like demonstrating the superiority of one widget factory over another. Given the right machinery, appropriate materials, and quality control, acceptable and virtually indistinguishable widgets will emerge from a factory.

But schools are not factories — despite what the pioneers of the “common school” thought. Those early advocates of state schools saw children as plastic to be shaped according to their “scientifically” derived model of the Good Citizen. If the inputs were to specification, then the output would be to specification. Science was to be harnessed in the service of producing ... Americans. This was the country’s first attempt at central planning.

But children, many need reminding, are *persons*, and persons are by nature complex, characterized by sometimes conflicting assumptions, preferences, intentions, expectations, and so on. Individuals may conduct themselves differently under what appear to be identical conditions. Preferences and expectations can’t be predicted scientifically. Mathematical models are out of place here. Statistics are summations of the past, and averages are, well, averages. Persons have free will that is not reducible to the kinds of things scientists can manipulate, such as neurochemistry. (Of course they try, with Ritalin and other sanctioned chemicals.)

Moreover, statistical claims made about schools can be manipulated. A rise in standardized test scores can mean many things. Students can be taught to be good test takers without learning much else. Scores can be doctored. The expected low-score kids can be told to stay home. All these things happen, maybe routinely.

In light of these facts, the usual measures of education are inherently deficient. For every study showing the superiority of private schools, there is one showing the opposite. My point is not that we can’t know which kind of school is likely to be better. Rather, it’s that such studies are not likely to change people’s minds. Most observers will tend to believe the study that already lines up with their political and cultural convictions.

## **The religion of democracy**

But there’s a deeper reason why empirical considerations won’t change many minds. No matter how good private schools are, they can never live up to the government’s schools in one crucial respect: they aren’t *government* schools. Of course, to libertarians this is good thing. But to many people it is a fatal flaw.

In the United States the variant of statism known as democracy isn’t seen as simply one of a variety of ways to accomplish a goal. It is a secular religion. Its test is not how well it does things, but whether it, in some theoretical way, acts in the name of The People. Thus, to

demonstrate that another way of doing things — privatization, say — can accomplish a given goal better misses the point.

The democratic religion pervades society. Professional intellectuals function as preachers in the “church,” constantly reminding the flock of the virtues of democracy and insisting on the observance of its rituals. We’ve just gone through another election season during which the “right to vote” was heralded as the most sacred right one can exercise.

Writing in the *Washington Post* recently, Jennifer Booher-Jennings provides a good application of the democratic religion to education. She writes,

Public education [is] an institution charged with disbursing equality of opportunity for all children.... In our loftiest moments, we see public education as one place where we dispense with the blunt, utilitarian logic of triage [rationing of resources] and seek equal treatment for all.

She is not likely to be convinced that private education could ever be as good as government education, because for her “good” contains democratic considerations such as “equal treatment.” Remember, the public schools were originally known as “common schools.” The system’s virtue lay in its aspiration to provide a common experience to all children. This meant, in the words of the father of the American common-school movement, Horace Mann,

a common foundation of literacy, morality, and patriotism, regardless of [citizens’] origins, through free public schools supported by taxes, with compulsory school attendance and supervision at the state level.

I suspect some parents feel a conflict between their wish to give their kids the best education possible and their democratic convictions, and many who overcome the latter and give in to the former may feel some guilt about doing so. Pulling your children out of public school can bring accusations of betrayal and elitism. This shows how strong the religious aspect of democracy can be.

### **Democracy and charter schools**

Another statement of the religious nature of the schools was pronounced in an Ohio supreme court case upholding charter schools. The lawsuit, filed by public-school officials, teachers, and some parents, claimed in part that charter schools violate the state constitution’s requirement that

the General Assembly shall make such provisions, by taxation, or otherwise, as ... will secure a thorough and efficient *system* of common schools throughout the state.

The majority on the court did not agree and ruled that the so-called Thorough and Efficient Clause was not violated by charter schools. But one justice, Alice Robie Resnick, dissented because the charter-school program

produces a hodgepodge of uncommon schools financed by the state. Rather than “add[ing] to the traditional school system,” or “providing for community schools within that system” of common schools, as the majority postulates, [the program] effects a schismatic educational program under which an assemblage of divergent and deregulated privately owned and managed community schools competes against public schools for public funds.

In support of her dissent, Justice Resnick quoted Molly O’Brien and Amanda Woodrum, two authors who unwittingly emphasize the religious nature of democratically based schools:

For the framers of the Ohio Constitution’s education clauses, the only education worthy of public support was a “common” education, not in the sense that it was provided for the common folks, but in the sense that it would bring diverse people together. They chose the common school concept to promote social harmony, create a sense of national identity, and develop affinity. Moreover, in choosing to mandate the creation of a system of common schools, the constitutional framers rejected the idea of simply subsidizing the existing diverse, parent-initiated and tuition-based schooling arrangements in favor of creating state organization and oversight. They viewed the diversity of the existing arrangements as an impediment to educational progress. The constitutional framers rejected the proliferation of diverse schools in favor of a single system.

Justice Resnick seems appalled that the charter schools

are exempt from the provisions ... which require public schools to ensure that “the principles of democracy and ethics are emphasized and discussed wherever appropriate in all parts of the curriculum” and to encourage all employees to be aware of their roles “in instilling ethical principles and democratic ideals in all district pupils.”

In other words, the state is the preferred educator because only the state embodies the democratic spirit. By definition, no private school could ever be satisfactory. In this view, while private schools and home-schooling may have to be tolerated, they must not be encouraged or allowed to compete with the state for tax money.

This last part is true, but not in the way the justice means it. As noted, charter schools and vouchers are objectionable because the taxpayers are forced to support them. The proper solution

is to end government schooling, repeal school taxes, and let parents spend their money on education as they see fit. No schools should receive tax money.

But that day will come only when people give up their implicit secular statist-democratic religion and their concomitant belief that government represents their true interests in education.

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