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## **Education: Free and Noncompulsory**

**by Scott McPherson**

“The transfer, by the parents, of so much of their own authority and responsibility to the schools is in most ways a cowardly and contemptible business.” — John Holt, *What Do I Do Monday?*

Several times in the last few years, after I’ve written some criticism of the public-school system and called for a complete separation of school and state, a friend of mine has said, “Okay, the government system isn’t working. But what would a libertarian education system actually *look* like? How would *it* work?” I have never really answered that question, mostly because I reject its premise: those of us who want to see public schools meet the business end of a bulldozer lickety-split are not inclined to support *any* “system.” Prior to the government’s takeover of American education and replacement of it with mass compulsory *schooling* (this distinction is most important), there was no system. There was a mishmash of different educational *alternatives*.

From the landing at Jamestown in 1607 until the 1850s, there was no such thing as “compulsory schooling” in America. Villages and towns provided schools, typically funded by a combination of local taxes and tuition payments from parents. And there were private schools, church schools, and home schools. But there was no *requirement* that anyone attend any school at all. As a result, the average child spent nowhere near the amount of time (months of the year and years of his life) in school that we take for granted today. George Washington and Ben Franklin, for example, both had a total of about two years of formal schooling (Franklin flunked out). Abraham Lincoln taught himself math by the firelight; lacking paper or pencil, he used a knife to carve equations on a piece of wood.

Unschooling as most people were, they were not uneducated. Between a mix of occasional formal schooling, homeschooling, apprenticeships, and self-motivation, average Americans were more generally educated and industrious than any other people in the world. This was consistently noticed by European travelers in the early 19th century. Newspapers and books were abundant and widely read (general literacy in 17th-century Massachusetts was higher than it is

today). Agriculture and cottage industries were the main source of employment. People learned what they needed without any pedagogues, supervisors, guidance counselors, administrators, and other bureaucrats, or meddling politicians. Parents knew the importance of pushing their children to become productive members of society.

And it worked. Simply put, the ideal of America's proletariat as an educated, resourceful, independent, innovative, and no-nonsense people was realized, not in the modern age of factory schooling, but during two and a half centuries when school played, at most, a very small role in anyone's upbringing. While today the chattering classes wring their hands over how best to manage the failed schooling behemoth, early Americans hacked civilization out of a ruthless and unforgiving continent, established thriving communities, found and created gainful employment and economies, fought a successful revolution against a powerful empire, and built a nation that would become the envy of the world. And all without any *system* of education. (For a detailed account of how and why Americans got the nightmare we have today, see John Taylor Gatto's excellent book, [\*The Underground History of American Education\*](#).)

Still the question persists: what would free education look like? We can talk all day about the abstract notion and value of an "unschooled" society, but it will not go very far in helping the as-yet-unconvinced to embrace our point of view. More concrete examples must be provided.

My kids have never been to any school or daycare. They are subject to what is best described as a "child-directed" curriculum. My wife and I observe our kids' interests and seek out opportunities for them to explore those interests and perhaps discover others along the way. We have endeavored to show them through word and deed that at no time will they be compelled to learn or know anything; like Thomas Jefferson, we oppose any tyranny over the mind.

Both learned (or rather taught themselves) to read quite young; their general knowledge of literature, math, grammar, science, and history are easily on a par with that of other kids their age (if not better), thanks to workbooks purchased at Barnes & Noble and the local pharmacy; magazines such as *Kids Discover*, *National Geographic Kids*, *Ranger Rick*, and *Zoobooks*; doing "funny fill-ins"; reading the *Magic Tree House* book series; playing with Cuisenaire rods; talking with their parents and other adults; Internet research and games; and a lot of free time for their own projects and pursuits (both real and imaginary).

Practical skills are learned around the house as they help with do-it-yourself projects, cooking (my daughter has taken to occasionally cooking breakfast for the family on her own), simple vehicle maintenance, cleaning up, or the few jobs they do for pay (at their own request), like cleaning the bathroom, walking the dog, washing the dishes, or setting the table for dinner.

I don't offer this information as proof of the superiority of our particular educational philosophy, or even to promote it, or to suggest that my kids are infallible geniuses. My kids are very independent learners and thinkers who expect a lot from people and resources. Anyone who spends any amount of time around them soon finds that they are sharp, confident, and

knowledgeable (one of the highlights of my life was watching my eight-year-old daughter debate religion with Jacob Hornberger), and I have found this to be true of almost every homeschooled child I've ever met — regardless of the particular approach to education embraced by his parents. And that is precisely my point: *they are very much as I imagine most Americans were in the days before government took over and defined “education.”*

### **Enchanted learning**

When faced with an interest of theirs that we can't facilitate or that demands more formal instruction, my wife and I seek out a competent teacher who meets with their approval. In the past, they have taken classes on sewing, art and art history, drama, jewelry making, science and nature, Spanish, history, cooking, judo, music, and crafts. That's why I am happy to have found [The Enchanted Learning Center](#) on Main Street in nearby Amesbury, Massachusetts, a lovely small town on the New Hampshire border, just 30 minutes from our house. Established by Courtney Nguyen, a home-schooler herself, the aim of ELC is to provide “a new and innovative approach to children's enrichment.” Though I can't recall exactly how I came in contact with Courtney and ELC, one of the courses appealed to my kids so I signed them up. It was obvious from the start that they enjoyed both her teaching style and the subject matter.

Initially I dropped them off at ELC and went for a coffee, but when they asked to return for another course, this time on Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, I decided to sit in and get a closer look at the goings-on. First of all, there was no resentment or hesitance over a parent's wanting to observe the class and teacher. Contrast that with public schools' security measures and regular attempts to mollify parents with a “conference.” It was a small class, maybe 8 or 10 kids in all. Isn't class size a big issue with public schoolteachers and parents, “requiring” more funding to address?

Then I noticed the wide disparity of ages. The youngest child in the class was 6, and the oldest 11! It reminded me of the old-fashioned one-room schoolhouse. In a government school, these kids would be divided into six separate “grades,” ranked according to “ability,” and taught how not to associate with one another. Then I realized there were no desks! Kids were standing, or sitting, or lying on the floor with a pillow. One kid was playing with a paper airplane — not disrupting, just calmly tossing the thing around the room while he listened. The teacher didn't chastise anyone for such informal behavior. Nor did she allow disruption. They even called her by her first name.

And all the kids could read, and read well! They each got a script for the play and were expected to read their own parts. When they needed help, someone, the teacher or another student, helped them. More was happening than just memorizing lines for a play. They discussed the lines and what they meant, and talked a lot about the use of language. They made their own props and costumes. After one class, the kids were all sent home with a piece of paper listing out

numerous 16th-century insults and compliments. For days afterwards my kids walked around the house calling each other “purple clay-brained canker blossom” or “peevisish hedge pig” or some such thing.

After about eight weeks there was a very relaxed production. Most of the kids hadn’t memorized their lines, but no one cared. It was fun to watch, and they got to take their costumes home. When I discussed this class with my father-in-law — a very left-wing Englishman — he conceded that these kids were getting more Shakespeare and a better introduction to him than public-school students. Coming from a socialist, that’s saying a lot.

It was no surprise, then, that when ELC offered a course on poetry my daughter jumped at the opportunity. She is spending the next eight weeks, for 90 minutes each week, learning about different poets and different styles of poetry, and writing her own poems. When I picked her up from the first class, several of the kids read out their poems for the parents; none was forced to. I noticed a few spelling errors in the kids’ (mine included) poems, but there was none of the usual embarrassing and condescending correction that kids must endure in formal schooling. Like John Taylor Gatto, I have found that such mistakes are usually self-correcting and do not require intervention. Courtney seems to agree.

Initially my son said he did not want to take the poetry course, but when his enthusiastic sister told him about her morning he changed his mind. He’ll be joining the class next week. This winter they’ll be taking a course through ELC on science experiments.

Try to imagine a world where parents and kids, and not bureaucrats and politicians, define education. Millions of kids receive more than adequate “schooling” in their homes, from their parents, or with the help of competent and interested teachers who volunteer their time or strive for the patronage of paying customers, rather than coerced extractions from taxpayers. If ELC should fail, it probably won’t be because of dissatisfied customers. A story in the *Newburyport Daily News*, Amesbury’s local paper, recently reported that Amesbury residents and businesses pay the highest taxes in the area. Parents voluntarily pay for great service at ELC, and a large portion of the proceeds are siphoned away to prop up the local public schools. Many other parents will never use ELC because they don’t wish to “pay twice,” having already been heavily taxed to support the government’s school system. If you’re wondering why there aren’t more businesses around like ELC, look no further for a reason.

The Enchanted Learning Center is simply one of many, many such examples. The fees are reasonable, the lessons interesting and informative, the environment safe and caring. Advocates of mass compulsory schooling would have us believe that parents simply can’t be trusted to make that judgment for themselves. They have created a prison-like hell on earth for 40 million kids and a massive tax burden for property owners. ELC and the many other learning options available to homeschoolers provide a glimpse of how a truly free “system” of education once worked and what it looked like — and can again.

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**This article was originally published in the February 2008 edition of *Freedom Daily*.**