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## As American as Bavarian Cream Pie

BY NEAL McCLUSKEY

**Y**ou could be forgiven for thinking that first God created public schools, and then, seeing that they were good, let them create the United States.

The basic story is familiar: The pilgrims landed in the New World and set up schools to educate all children. Soon, everyone in America recognized the enlightenment of public schooling and erected their own systems, wiping out ignorance, teaching all children how to live in a free society, and giving even the poorest kids unprecedented upward mobility. Finally, as time went on and immigrants flooded in, the public schools not only taught all children the skills they needed for life success but gently melded disparate ethnic and religious groups into a unified, American whole.

That compelling narrative is used to explain the epic purpose of public schooling and demand continued fealty to it. It's also a myth that undergirds a fundamentally flawed—and un-American—institution, twists historical truth beyond recognition, and is rooted in the conviction that freedom can only be granted to adults if the state indoctrinates the children.

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NEAL McCLUSKEY is the associate director of Cato's Center for Educational Freedom and author of *Feds In The Classroom: How Big Government Corrupts, Cripples, and Compromises American Education*.



**Y**on Goicoechea, leader of the student movement that defeated President Hugo Chávez's authoritarian referendum, was awarded the 2008 Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty at a gala dinner at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York on May 15. Above, he meets the next morning with Rose D. Friedman, a member of the International Selection Committee for the Friedman Prize, who wears a T-shirt featuring the symbol of the student movement, a white hand for nonviolence. **PAGES 3-7**

“Highly decentralized, largely private colonial education worked very well.”

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## Getting the Facts Straight

Despite its falsehood, there is a good reason many Americans accept the assertion that government schooling is the foundation of national freedom and unity: it's what they've been taught. Until the 1960s, the story of American education was self-servingly written by professors of education for whom, as historian Bernard Bailyn explains: "History was not simply the study of the past. It was an arcane science that revealed the intimate relationship between their hitherto despised profession and the history of man."

To capture the reality of American public schooling and its role in shaping the nation, it's critical to understand two things: first, the facts concerning how education was actually delivered at different periods in the nation's history—especially its colonial, founding, and early national eras—and second, the motives that have driven many public-schooling champions.

So, is the history of American education really just a long series of public schooling victories over private ignorance? Hardly.

It is true, as public schooling advocates are quick to point out, that authorities in colonial Massachusetts passed laws requiring that all children be educated and that communities provide the means to teach them. In 1642, colonial leaders mandated that all families provide basic reading, religious, and civic education for their children, a statute that was ultimately mirrored in several other colonies. Five years later, Massachusetts enacted the "Old Deluder Satan" Act, which required that all towns with 50 to 99 families retain someone to teach children reading and writing and that all with 100 or more establish grammar schools.

Those acts certainly introduced compulsory education through government, but in at least two respects their requirements were very different from those of public schooling today. First, the education to be provided was not expected to be free; the Old Deluder Satan Act stipulated that

teachers could be paid "by the inhabitants in general" or by "the parents or masters" of children using the school services. Second, in Puritan Massachusetts education had an explicitly religious aim, whereas in modern public schools religious instruction is impermissible.

More important than the specific components of Massachusetts's early schooling measures were their actual effects. Although colonial authorities tried to force towns to maintain schools, publicly provided education simply could not compete with more basic priorities like shelter, food, and defense. Moreover, the classical curriculum that colonial leaders wanted children to learn was too impractical to sustain popular support. Still, formal education went on. While municipalities ignored grammar schooling requirements, a wave of private and public writing schools swept over the colony, and other private options with much more practical bents blossomed. With the arrival of the Revolutionary War, support for Massachusetts grammar schools dissolved entirely.

And of course, when we discuss the foundation of the United States, we are talking about much more than Massachusetts.

The middle colonies—New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware—were much more ethnically and religiously diverse than Massachusetts, featuring Dutch, German, English, French, Irish, and other often isolated, homogeneous communities. As a result, those colonies saw even greater educational variety. Communities often established their own, church-related schools. Colonists consumed a great deal of home and private schooling. And, perhaps in greatest contrast with the public schooling myth, the middle colonies saw the creation of numerous for-profit schools as towns became bigger and better able to sustain education markets.

In the South education was also highly varied, and highly private. Wealthier southerners would often send their children to England for education or have them tutored at home, while colonists of more modest means often had access to schools run by charitable organizations, "free schools" endowed by wealthy benefactors, and "old field schools" established by communities on fields exhausted by tobacco production.

In the end, highly decentralized, largely private colonial education worked very well, especially considering that America was essentially a wilderness and Americans pioneers. By the drafting of the Constitution, an estimated 65 percent of free America males were literate, a very high number by European standards.

Through roughly the 1830s the structure of education remained basically unchanged, even as Americans fought a revolution, drafted and ratified the Constitution, and forged a new nation. True, there were proposals for significant government provision of schooling in those years, but they were neither the norm nor successful. The Land Ordinance of 1785 did set aside acreage in western territories "for the maintenance of public schools," and Thomas Jefferson proposed a public schooling system for Virginia and even some federal education involvement. But the Land Ordinance's dicta were largely ignored, and neither Jefferson's Virginia public schooling nor federal education plans were enacted.

At least one likely reason there was little change was that American education continued to work. By 1840 about 90 percent of white adults were estimated to be literate, and Americans were consuming education at high rates.

It was not until Horace Mann became the first secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education in 1837—more than six decades after the establishment of an independent nation—that significant efforts to collectivize American education gained traction, a reality that alone dispels the notion that public schooling, as politi-

“After Mann’s crusade, public schooling’s indoctrination mission became even more central.”

cal scientist Benjamin Barber has put it, is the “foundation of our democracy.” Moreover, even after Mann began his crusade, movement toward centralized, compulsory education was slow.

In the beginning, centralization consisted primarily of putting small, neighborhood-based districts under municipality-level boards of education. The first compulsory attendance law was not passed until 1852 in Massachusetts, but with most children already going to school it was largely symbolic. And compulsory education did not become the national norm for several more decades: In 1890 the union had 44 states but only 27 with compulsory attendance laws, and it was not until 1918 that every state had joined in.

Despite the lagged completion of compulsory attendance, the administrative structure of modern public schooling had been cemented by roughly 1900, with top-down, bureaucratic control widespread. Even using that date instead of 1918 as the final nail in the coffin of decentralized, entrepreneurial education, however, it is clear that the country was not built on public schooling.

## Public Schooling’s Un-American Ideals

But historical fact is really just half the story. When one looks at the motives of many pivotal public-schooling proponents, they are almost diametrically opposed to the nation’s truly fundamental ideal: the primacy of individual freedom as set forth in the Declaration of Independence and defended in the Constitution. The greatest proponents of public schooling were all too often driven by the patently un-American conviction that for adults to safely have freedom, the state has to indoctrinate them as children.

One of the earliest proponents of this view was former surgeon general of the Continental Army Benjamin Rush, who campaigned for public schooling in his home state of Pennsylvania. “Our schools of learning, by producing one general and uniform system of education, will render

the mass of the people more homogeneous and thereby fit them more easily for uniform and peaceable government,” Rush wrote in 1786. His sentiment was echoed by co-winners of a late-1790s American Philosophical Society essay contest on education. “It is the duty of a nation to superintend and even coerce the education of children,” wrote Samuel Harrison Smith, one of the winners.

Neither Rush nor Smith saw public schooling gain much traction in their day, but Mann’s crusade included their basic themes. Mann essentially promised that the common schools would transform the poor and immigrants from ignorant brutes into proper citizens. “In order that men may be prepared for self-government, their apprenticeship must commence in childhood,” Mann declared in his ninth annual report to the Massachusetts Board of Education.

As industrialization grew during and after Mann’s crusade, and as poor Irish Catholic and later southern and eastern European immigrants poured onto America’s shores, public schooling’s indoctrination mission became even more central. As Ellwood Cubberly, arguably the foremost voice in American education in the early 20th century, asserted, public schooling’s paramount mission was “to assimilate and amalgamate these people as a part of our American race, and to implant in their children, so far as can be done, the Anglo-Saxon conception of righteousness, law and order, and popular government.”

Cubberly’s insistence on assimilating and amalgamating, importantly, was not driven by some enlightened notion of public schooling as a ladder of opportunity. No, public schools existed to prepare poor children for what he saw as their preordained station in life. “We should give up the exceedingly democratic idea that all are equal and that our society is devoid of class-

es,” Cubberly wrote. “The employee tends to remain an employee; the wage earner . . . a wage earner.”

To these ends, public schooling advocates labored to take schooling control away from “lay” people by imposing “scientific,” bureaucratic control over schools. They also waged war on private schooling. In the late 1880s proposed legislation in Massachusetts would have required that local school committees inspect and approve all private schools, a scheme that portended doom for parochial schools set up to help Roman Catholics escape de facto Protestant institutions. At the same time, heavily German—and German-speaking—Wisconsin and Illinois passed laws requiring all students in private schools to be taught in English. Finally, in 1922 Oregon passed a law requiring all children to attend public schools, a law that the U.S. Supreme Court overturned in *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* on the seemingly forgotten grounds that “the fundamental theory of liberty upon which all governments in this Union repose excludes any general power of the state to standardize its children by forcing them to accept instruction from public teachers only.”

Today, public schooling continues to be defended on forced-unity grounds. Paul D. Houston, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, has argued: “If common schools go, then we are no longer America. The original critical mission of the common schools was . . . to be places where the ideals of civic virtue were passed down to the next generation. They were to prepare citizens for our democracy. They were to be places where the children of our democracy would learn to live together.” Similarly, the Center on Education Policy has stated that public schooling must go on because of its “collective missions aimed at promoting the common good. These include, among others, preparing youth to become responsible citizens, forging a common culture from a nation of immigrants, and reducing inequalities in American society.”

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## Real Unity Isn't Coerced

As unlibertarian as forced assimilation is, can one at least say that public schooling has succeeded in taking diverse peoples and making them into a unified society?

As far as some parents may have wanted their children assimilated in precisely the way political leaders prescribed it, one could make that argument. But that isn't very far, and when parents haven't welcomed indoctrination—when they have wanted their children to learn about cherished values, traditions, and identities frowned on by elites—public schooling has regularly fostered conflict, not concord.

In 1844 Philadelphia, widespread violence left an estimated 58 people dead and hundreds wounded as Roman Catholics and Protestants fought over whose version of the Bible would be read in the public schools. In the 1880s, after Republican legislative majorities in Wisconsin and Illinois passed laws prohibiting school instruction in any language other than English, the GOP was turned out of office by angry German-speaking citizens. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, federal orders forcing racial integration sparked violence in places like Denver; Boston; and Pontiac, Michigan.

Today, following decades of district consolidation, the imposition of statewide curricula, and threats of national standards, all religious, ideological, and ethnic groups are forced to fight, unable to escape even into the relative peace of truly local districts. The result is seemingly constant warfare over issues such as intelligent design, abstinence education, multiculturalism, school prayer, offensive library books, and so on. When diverse people are forced to support a single system of public schools, they don't come together, they fight to make theirs the values that are taught.

## Freedom Is the Answer

The tragedy of proclaiming state-run schooling crucial to unity is that it has the opposite effect. Recognizing this, however, makes the real key to unity obvious: end public schooling and return to public education, just as we had for centuries. Ensure that the poor can access education, but let parents decide how and where their chil-

dren will be educated.

Social capital theory makes clear that enabling people to freely choose with whom they associate is vital to both educational success and domestic tranquility. Sociologist James Coleman found that Catholic schools typically have much higher graduation rates than public schools, even after adjusting for students' socioeconomic status. Why? Because Catholic school parents, administrators, and students form cohesive communities with shared goals, norms, responsibilities, and trust—social capital—which enables them to focus efficiently and effectively on teaching kids and getting them to graduation. Public schools, in contrast, force disparate groups together, yielding bickering and lowest-common-denominator compromises, and replacing trust with efficiency-killing rules and regulations.

Data from sociologist Robert Putnam reveal a strong correlation between diversity, social capital, and academic outcomes. In his book *Bowling Alone*, Putnam reports a high correlation between states' standardized-test scores and social capital as measured by voluntarism, voting, social trust, and other variables. In a subsequent paper, Putnam finds a negative correlation between numerous communities' ethnic diversity and social capital. Finally, when one compares state diversity to social capital it also reveals a negative relationship, suggesting that diversity hurts unity and, at least under our current educational arrangement, academic outcomes.

So are we doomed to either war or separation? Not at all.

The way to achieve unity without war is to let people voluntarily come together in pursuit of their own self-interest. This is called "freedom," and it has been unifying people from America's earliest days.

Educational freedom can help it along. In the middle colonies, schools that respected group differences helped to integrate communities. In our own time, research suggests that school choice provides more meaningful integration than the forced togetherness of public schooling. In 2002, former Milwaukee school superintendent Howard Fuller reported that private schools participating in Milwaukee's

school choice program were more integrated than the city's public schools, and religious schools were the most integrated of all. In 1998 researchers Jay Greene and Nicole Mellow studied integration in randomly selected public and private school lunchrooms—where students choose with whom they sit—and found that nearly 64 percent of private school students sat in groups where at least one out of every five students immediately around them was from a different racial group, compared to only 50 percent in public schools.

It turns out that when they can choose, parents find schools—and other parents—that share their educational desires and values, and those shared interests often transcend things like race. Simply forcing people into the same building, in contrast, furnishes no ties that bind.

Of course, some may object that private schools cannot be trusted to form good citizens even if they are superior unifiers. But private schools do a better job of teaching civic values than public schools. Last year University of Arkansas professor Patrick Wolf reviewed 21 quantitative studies examining the effects of school choice on seven civic values and found that students in private schools displayed greater political tolerance, voluntarism, political participation, and other desired traits than their public school peers.

## State Schooling: What Could Be Less American?

We are told that state schooling is critical to American unity and freedom. Nothing could be further from the truth. Voluntary, largely private education was the norm as the American colonies grew into a free, strong nation. When public schooling did grow, it sowed conflict wherever there was not already unity. Perhaps worst of all, its greatest champions have been driven by the patently un-American conviction that for adults to be free, they must be indoctrinated as children.

Thankfully, the most truly American value—individual liberty—reveals the way forward. We must have educational freedom today, or we'll have neither unity nor freedom tomorrow. ■