

Are Public Schools Hazardous to Public Education?

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For a diverse nation, we share a remarkable consensus with respect to educating children. As reflected in polls and focus groups, Americans are nearly unanimous in their commitment to certain fundamental ideals: that all children have access to a quality education regardless of family income; that they be prepared for happy and productive lives; that they be taught the rights and duties of citizenship; and that the schools help to foster strong and cohesive communities. These are the ideals of public education.

One hundred and fifty years ago, a band of dedicated reformers declared that progress toward those ideals was too slow and proposed that a new institution be created to more effectively promote them. Led by Bostonian Horace Mann, the reformers campaigned for a greater state role in education. They argued that a universal, centrally planned system of tax-funded schools would be superior in every respect to the seemingly disorganized market of independent schools that existed at the time. Shifting the reins of educational power from private to public hands would, they promised, yield better teaching methods and materials, greater efficiency, superior service to the poor, and a stronger, more cohesive nation. Mann even ventured the prediction that if public schooling were widely adopted and given enough time to work, "nine-tenths of the crimes in the penal code would become obsolete," and "the long catalogue of human ills would be abridged."

Though Horace Mann's promised nirvana has clearly failed to materialize, there is one respect in which he and his fellow reformers were completely successful: They forged an unbreakable link in people's minds between the institution of public schooling and the ideals of public education. As generation after generation has attended public schools and sent its children to public schools, it has become more and more difficult to see the distinction between the institution itself and the principles it is meant to uphold. "If you believe in our shared ideals of public education," goes the mantra, "then you must support the public schools."

This seemingly innocuous failure to distinguish between means and ends has had two disastrous consequences. First, it has meant that any criticism of the public school system could be — and often has been — misconstrued as an attack on the ideals of public education. As a result, individuals who agree on the ultimate goals of education but who differ as to the most effective way of achieving those goals are repeatedly and unnecessarily thrown into conflict. Where cooperation and mutual respect could flourish, endless bickering and antagonism are the norm.

The second consequence has been an extreme narrowing of vision. Scholars and policymakers who have equated public education solely with public schooling have contented themselves with

reform efforts that merely tinker around the edges of our current system. They have consistently failed to consider the vast wealth of evidence that exists on alternative approaches to schooling, thereby reducing their chances of identifying the most effective practices.

We have suffered under the weight of these consequences for too long. Despite decades of heroic efforts to improve public schools, the institution continues to fall short of our expectations. Over the past 50 years, we have cut the pupil-teacher ratio in half, quadrupled per-student spending, and tested innumerable reform programs. In desperation, we have ascribed blame for the system's ills to every level of public school employee from teachers and principals to administrators and superintendents. Nevertheless, the ills persist.

The most fundamental skill of all, literacy, has actually been in decline in this country for at least 30 years. According to the most sophisticated national and international literacy studies, nearly a quarter of American 16- to 25-year-olds have only the most meager grasp of reading and writing. Pedagogical methods and teacher training, which were promised to make great strides under the guidance of government experts, have languished. Some instructional techniques have been sidelined by the public schools for decades despite their proven effectiveness. And, most poignantly, the public schools have failed to fulfill one of our most important and universally held ideals of public education — providing a decent education to all low-income children.

We cannot afford to continue squandering our time and our children's futures on heated rhetoric and unthinking devotion to the status quo. While public schooling has become deeply entrenched in our nation's tradition, we must realize that it is only one among many possible approaches to education. We must not let the force of habit stand in the way of our ultimate aims. Instead, we must consider a broad range of school systems to determine which is best suited to advancing those aims.

Since most developed nations adopted state-run school systems during the 19th century, it might not be immediately obvious where to find examples of alternative approaches to schooling. The answer has been right behind us all along: the 2,500-year history of education. Our ancestors have tried more and different ways of educating their children than most people would imagine, yet we continue to ignore their experiences at our society's peril.

While it doesn't make sense to point to any one historical education system and try to copy it (there are a number of factors that could cause a system to work well in one culture and not in another), it does make sense to compare educational approaches from a variety of times and places, and to identify common elements of the most successful systems. Any approach to schooling that consistently produced good results across many different cultures, regardless of the prevailing social, political, and economic conditions, might have some interesting lessons to teach us.

Five years ago, I began just such a study, comparing school systems from all over the world, from ancient times to the present, in an attempt to discover which systems met the needs of citizens, which did not, and why. From classical Greece through the medieval Islamic empire, from the young American republic up to the present, a recurrent theme emerged from the hum of the centuries: Competitive educational markets have consistently done a better job of serving the

public than state-run educational systems. The reason lies in the fact that state school systems lack four key factors that history tells us are essential to educational excellence: choice and financial responsibility for parents, and freedom and market incentives for educators. School systems that have enjoyed these characteristics have consistently done the best job of meeting both our private educational demands and our shared educational ideals.

Though it is widely thought that government intervention was necessary to bring schooling and literacy to the masses, both England and the United States achieved those milestones before state-run education systems were firmly established in either nation. It is also ironic that, while one of the chief aims of public education was to foster peaceful, harmonious communities, public schools have actually caused great divisiveness.

Because public schools constitute the official government organ of education, everyone wants them to reflect their own views. In a pluralistic society, that is impossible. When one group forces its views on the public schools, it does so at the expense of all others, creating inevitable turmoil. Battles over such things as evolution vs. creation, book selection and censorship, and sex education are endemic to state-run schooling. Free-market school systems, by contrast, have allowed people to pursue both their own unique educational needs and their shared educational goals without coming into conflict with each other.

One of the great promises of public schools was that they would end social inequities, providing a quality education to all students regardless of income. Today, market-oriented education reforms such as vouchers and tuition tax credits are often opposed on the grounds that they would break that promise. However, those who worry about low-income families falling through the cracks in an educational market cannot ignore the reality that the public school system is currently dumping countless children into a yawning educational chasm. The bulk of evidence, both historical and modern, points to the superiority of markets (supplemented with a mechanism for subsidizing the education of low-income children) over state school systems in their ability to serve the poor. Throughout history, low-income parents have consistently made better educational decisions for their own children than government experts have made for them, no matter how well-intentioned those experts have been. Poor parents, indeed all parents, need to be empowered to once again take control of their children's education.

To many, the concept of an open market for education will seem preposterous. After all, we have been led to believe that education is different — that it does not benefit from market forces in the way that other enterprises do. In light of the historical evidence, we have clearly been misled. While most fields of human endeavor have seen astonishing growth and improvement over the course of the past century — while whole new industries have been created and general intelligence has steadily increased — educational achievement alone has stagnated, a fossilized legacy of central planning and good intentions gone awry.

If the lessons of history can be distilled to a single observation, it is that the institution of public schooling is not, after all, the best system for advancing our ideals of public education. After 150 years of experimentation and decades of disappointment, is it not time that we consider alternatives to the public school system?