



Education: From Status Quo to Dramatic Reform (Part III)

by José Stelle

Education for a Free Society Must Be Compatible with Liberty

Part I of this trilogy suggested that, as governments are poor managers of economic resources, educational administration of the public schools should be transferred to private initiatives. Part II stressed that vouchers are an essential tool of education reform. This concluding article explains that, though they passed through the historical American process, public schools fail the free-society test and should therefore be abandoned. How is any public-school system ultimately contrary to the interest of a free society? Consider the following.

First, like most things bureaucratic, a public-school system violates the basic principle of the free society — freedom of choice.¹ Though in theory it serves the public, in reality it cannot do so because it rests on compulsion. Being an enforced monopoly strangely operating in the terrain of liberty, it has by law what no business is allowed to have in a free society: mandated, captive markets (“boundaries”), which families can escape only by moving to another school that may not be satisfactorily better than the abandoned one. As might be expected, such an undisciplined, uneconomic system is not backed by consumer preference (buying, abstention from buying, product substitution), but by taxes. Standardization, rather than variety and competition, is its mode of operation. Starting out as an unexamined and naïve experiment,² it has become a kind of company store at which the “consumers” of its “products” are forced to shop.

Second, a public-school system violates the private-property principle, the foundation of any free society. In spite of its distant electoral basis, it is in essence an authoritarian, command system, striking at the heart of the free society. Parents, who pay for it and should have a proprietary interest in it, are deprived not only of the right to determine which school their children can attend, but also of having a meaningful say in its curriculum or management. True, the system was established by elected representatives (who distantly tend to its administration and, in concert with their supporters within and without the district bureaucracy, eagerly manipulate it to ensure their reelection). But this electoral base means less than might be assumed and speaks more against the system than for it, as the nature of a thing is not determined by its origin but by its attributes. And the fundamentals of the system are mostly negative.

Because education (from *educere*, to lead forth, “to make the inmost the outmost”) belongs to the individual sphere, the relative compulsion that underlies the case for the education of children, who cannot choose for themselves, is not related to the monopoly on coercion that has been historically recognized as necessary to “serve and protect” physical well-being in the areas of justice and defense. Except insofar as parents owe their children an education (and if they through circumstances beyond their control cannot at present provide it, the public interest may be served by supplementing private charity with public funds), the development of human minds has no link to the coercive principle, on which public authority ultimately rests. In sum, education does not belong to the proper sphere of governmental administration.

Finally, because public (that is, everybody’s) property is nobody’s property, the public-school system has become a no-man’s land, amenable to manipulations unconnected with its function. So it has to a

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noticeable degree come to serve not so much the needs of the many who pay for it, but of politicians, administrators, and teacher's unions, and eventually also the needs of the ideological and political groups that dominate it.³ As John Stuart Mill put it:

A general State education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another: and the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government . . . in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body.

Efficiency and success are not usually associated with public schools, except perhaps in the narrow "political" sense perceptible in totalitarian systems, which can carry out the inherent promise of public education to its fullest extent by enforcing rigid methods and points of view. But it is precisely because the public-school concept bears an uncomfortable link to that of authoritarian societies that one must see it in terms of its potential for becoming an incubator of intolerance, not for what its defenders pretend it to be. Whatever flexibility the system does have at present in normative and instrumental terms is not due to its nature, but rather to the political instincts of its caretakers and to a still somewhat resilient American culture that makes itself felt through those who seek to attenuate the rigors of the system they must contend with.

The illiberality of a public-education system can be understood also by remembering that rules determine structure and outcome.⁴ Every structure is an expression of the thoughts (hence of the rules) that govern it. Thus, in the same way that "by their deeds ye shall know them," one can determine the nature of a system by identifying the thought or thoughts that animate it. The nature of the public school has an element of disrespect and violence about it and so is not in tune with the free society. Deficient results reflect deficient thoughts. Thus, a better system of education cannot be achieved by modifying the defective structure; the structure and its underlying thought must be replaced. (See Parts 1 and 2.)

But the case for private, and against public, education is not only or ultimately practical. It is moral and must be fought on that ground. Children should not operate in a free system because this will make them better readers and problem solvers at the instrumental level, but rather because the development of the individuality that comes from self-discovery is essential to the life of the mind, to the psychological, moral, and spiritual life of them as persons and as free citizens, and to the life of the free nation as a whole. Therefore, in the same way that in America church and state are separate, education and state should also be separate. If the American people are to remain free, and America a more decent and lasting example "for the nations," it must develop the moral and political courage to take the "public" out of education.

Endnotes:

¹ It also violates the freedom of association through the "mainstreaming" of disruptive or violent students. However, this practice is linked more to egalitarianism, not to the public-school concept itself, and the resulting problems could be solved by alternative or reform schools, which would guarantee the "right" to an education, but not at the expense of dedicated and well-behaved students.

² F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1959, p. 377.

³ Predictably, the strongest defenders of government-controlled schools are the revolutionary parties.

⁴ F.A. Hayek, *Rules and Order*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1973.

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