
Was Horace Really the Mann? The Many Schools of “Public” Education

Matthew J. Brouillette

Matthew J. Brouillette, a former school teacher, is president of The Commonwealth Foundation, a non-partisan, non-profit, public policy research and educational institute located in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. For more information, visit www.CommonwealthFoundation.org.

Across the nation, the debate over school choice is over. While the old argument used to center around whether parents should be able to choose their children’s school, today much of the debate revolves around “how much” and “how” choice should be expanded. And last summer, the U.S. Supreme Court dispelled one more of the many obsolete myths promulgated by those opposed to parental choice in education.

The reality is that choice is here to stay and the days of the restrictive “assignment system,” forcing children into a particular school simply because of where they live are finally over. Empirical and anecdotal evidence from over 2,300 charter schools, 60,000 low-income children reaping

the intellectual benefits from privately funded scholarships to attend private and parochial schools, and another 12,000 students utilizing publicly funded vouchers, make the positive effects of school choice impossible to deny.

Revisiting Public Education

Yet despite the overwhelming success and increasing public demand for more school choice, many Americans remain skeptical. I’m not talking about the ardent opponents of school choice—moral arguments and empirical evidence will never convince them. I’m talking about the average citizen who fears that choice will somehow hurt rather than improve public education.

So, in order to better understand why school choice should be embraced instead of feared, we should consider both the history and purpose of public education.

First, however, let's define the concept of **public education**. Today, this concept has been completely turned on its head. What used to mean "the education of the public through diverse means" has become synonymous with the direct sponsorship, operation, and control of schooling by the government.

But, it hasn't always been this way.

For the first 150 years of America's settlement and the first fifty to seventy-five years of our nation's existence, public education was achieved through independent, church-related, philanthropic, and community-sponsored schools. These schools were in essence what we call private schools today.

Yet despite this extremely decentralized system of schools, the early American public was exceptionally literate and relatively well educated. Nearly every child—including the poor—had access to some level of schooling. (Of course, an important exception was those persons kept in the government-sanctioned and government-protected system of chattel slavery from the 1600s through the mid-1860s.)

Then—beginning in New England in the mid-1800s—a wave of change swept across the country. States began to abandon the original American model in favor of greater government involvement in schooling. It wasn't a

hostile takeover, but a persistent push for creating a government supported educational "safety net."

In 1841, Horace Mann, the leader of the government school movement in Massachusetts, made a bold promise. He said: "Let the common school be expanded to its capabilities, let it be worked with the efficiency of which it is susceptible, and nine-tenths of the crimes in the penal code would become obsolete; the long catalogue of human ills will be abridged."

As we continue to wait for government to usher in Horace Mann's Utopia, an honest look at the current school system should conclude that we have established a government institution that clashes with the political, economic, social, and cultural traditions of the United States to an extent unparalleled by any other in American history.

This fact once prompted the late Albert Shanker, former president of the American Federation of Teachers, to say: "It's time to admit that public education operates like a planned economy, a bureaucratic system in which everybody's role is spelled out in advance and there are few incentives for innovation and productivity. It's no surprise that our school system doesn't improve: it more resembles the communist economy than our own market economy."

Despite these stark contradictions, most Americans cling to the misconception that government must be involved in educating our children. Many more would argue further that

without government involvement in schooling, democracy itself would be threatened.

However, what few people realize is how sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Americans—without the help of government schooling—came to tame an unsettled continent and eventually establish the freest nation in history.

One School Does Not Fit All

The Founding Fathers were clearly educated men, and they certainly believed that to remain free, America must always have an educated citizenry. But the educated citizenry they envisioned, and what largely came to pass during their lifetimes, did not depend upon nor require that governments provide or operate schools.

Yet today, nearly 90 percent of American children attend government-run schools. In the majority of states, parents who desire a religious or non-government education for their children are financially penalized. They must pay taxes for schools they don't use and pay again for tuition at schools that are actually educating their children.

It is clear that the goal of an educated public has given way to the establishment and protection of a monolithic system of government schools. This is not to say that some or many public schools are not doing a fine job of teaching children to read, write, and figure.

But the facts are that children are falling through the cracks in even the best public schools. Despite our best intentions, no school can be all things

to all people. It's simply impossible.

Just as one-size-fits-all shoes do not properly fit all children's feet, neither do one-size-fits-all schools properly fit all children's learning needs. This is why we must return to the original concept of public education—the education of the public through diverse means.

Every child must have the option to choose a school that will best meet his or her needs—whether it is a traditional government school, or a charter, private, religious, or even a home school. The promise of public education will only be fulfilled when parents are once again empowered with the right, freedom, and flexibility to choose the school that best meets their children's academic, emotional, spiritual, and physical needs.

Once again, this is not just my opinion; my conclusion is based on experience and the historical record.

A Historical Recipe For Success

Researcher and author Andrew Coulson did us a great service a few years ago when he published ***Market Education: An Unknown History***. What Coulson did for those of us who had a rather myopic view of government-sponsored education is to demonstrate that “schooling” is not a new invention. In fact, through his exhaustive research, he uncovered a vast wealth of experience with schooling that goes back as far as 2,500 years.

Coulson says that we cannot just pick and choose one or a few historical school systems that seemed to work

and claim that they would necessarily work for us today. Instead, he suggests that we look for trends in the kinds of systems that worked well or poorly across many different cultural settings.

By doing this, it is possible to compare educational outcomes between similar and contemporary societies that adopted different education systems. As a result, we can also correlate what happened to educational outcomes when a given society abandoned one system in favor of another.

What's the best education system in world history? Remarkably, Coulson discovered that free markets in education—in which parents choose their children's schools and schools freely compete to attract and serve those children—consistently out-perform all other approaches to school governance.

Time and again throughout history, individuals and groups created schools in response to public demand without the need for government intervention.

Coulson also found that effective education obviously doesn't just happen; nor can it be achieved through political means. He found that school systems that have consistently performed well under widely varying social conditions have consisted of five essential elements.

Coulson warns, however, that, "Far from being a policy smorgasbord from which individual elements can be casually selected or rejected based on personal taste or political expediency, education markets behave much more like fragile ecosystems. If any essential

element is eliminated, the entire system begins to decline."

The five elements Coulson uncovered are: 1) Parental choice; 2) Direct parental financial responsibility; 3) Freedom for educators; 4) Competition among schools; and 5) The profit motive for schools.

These five factors, taken together, create the incentives that are missing in the current system.

Are they controversial? Absolutely. No doubt that the appeal of an education marketplace would be broadened if we could eliminate or find substitutes for two elements in particular: direct parental financial responsibility and the profit motive.

Unfortunately, there are no such substitutes. Coulson found that having parents pay directly for their own children's education has historically proven to be an indispensable component of effective education markets.

It makes perfect sense though: what people pay for, they pay attention to, and what they get for free they become complacent about. Education is hardly exempt from this economic axiom. Nevertheless, it does pose a problem.

One Educational Marketplace for All

So how can American citizens and policy makers ensure that all children—regardless of family income—have access to good schools, particularly if good schools are dependent on parents "footing" some or all of the bill?

This is actually a fairly low hurdle

to get over. We offer needs-based financial assistance to low-income citizens for many products and services. Obviously this could be done so that all parents could become full participants in the educational marketplace. Those who could afford to pay for their own children's education would do so, while those needing varying degrees of financial help would receive it.

Thus preserving the benefits of direct tuition payment by parents for the vast majority of the population, since only a fraction of parents would need to have the entire cost of their children's education paid for by others.

However, the best way to provide such assistance has also been a subject of considerable debate among scholars in recent years.

Some favor an education voucher similar to that used in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida, while others seek to promote the spread of private scholarship organizations through the use of tax credits, as Arizona has done since 1997 and Pennsylvania began in 2002.

One area that both sides do agree on is that existing programs currently serve far too few children.

The other difficult hurdle is the need for the profit motive in education. This notion usually invites a hailstorm of criticism from the education community. "Children are not widgets," they will shout.

But once again, history proves the profit incentive is what drives entrepreneurs to produce better products and superior services. It is this very same profit motive that has provided

Americans with the highest quality of life the world has ever known.

It is also the absence of the profit motive that has been the chief reason that America's top teachers are underpaid and the best teaching methods have been extremely limited in their replication and dissemination.

Although many people accept the need for parents to take direct financial responsibility for their children's education and the need for at least some schools to be spurred to excellence by the profit motive, many more people remain skeptical of market-based education because of the perceived negative social effects.

Of course while we want schools to teach children to read, write, and figure, we also want schools to foster strong and harmonious communities. A more civil society most certainly won't be achieved if we merely focus on academic outcomes. Therefore, we must consider the overall societal impact of an education marketplace.

Fortunately, backward arguments against an education marketplace in the first place are nothing more than red herrings. History reveals that time and again, it has been free education markets that have allowed diverse groups to harmoniously pursue both their shared educational goals and their unique and varied traditions.

It has not been diversity that has set neighbor against neighbor, but coercion. If parents had been allowed to choose their own schools rather than being forced to relocate in order to send their children elsewhere, much of the segregation of neighborhoods over

the past several decades by socioeconomic level would have never taken place.

So while public school apologists claim that public education is the glue that keeps communities together, it is in fact the solvent that is pulling them apart. Just consider the endless series of battles for control of public schooling. Just one example is a local school district near my home that has been battling over the inclusion of the creation theory in science class. Who really wins in these debates? Yet these are the inevitable and unfortunate side effects of creating an establishment of education.

Our Founding Fathers wisely forbade Congress from establishing a single system of religion for all citizens. So, too, we must realize that any establishment of a single “official” system of education for all children invariably leads to conflict within diverse communities. It has repeatedly done so throughout history. Free-market education, by contrast, has consistently allowed heterogeneous peoples to more

harmoniously pursue their educational needs and goals.

Future decisions about public education—that is, the education of public—reach far beyond simple education policy. Ultimately they lie at the heart of all our freedoms—what it truly means to be an American.

Thomas Jefferson said: “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.” In other words, we cannot long continue our ignorance and at the same time hope to maintain and restore our liberties.

Clearly, bringing more freedom to the means by which our children and our children’s are educated means less government interference. Our Founding Fathers knew this well and it is this fundamental lesson from our nation’s past that taxpayers, educators and policymakers at all levels of government must heed if we ever wish to truly ensure that “no child is left behind” in the future. ■