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A Lesson in Private Education

After passage of the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (Barack Obama's first economic stimulus), which earmarked more than \$100 billion for public education, the White House website listed President Obama's goals for improving America's government schools. "Providing a high-quality education for all children," the site stated, "is critical to America's economic future." To accomplish this,

President Obama is committed to providing every child access to a complete and competitive education, from cradle through career. ... He will invest in innovative strategies to help teachers to improve student outcomes, and use rewards and incentives to keep talented teachers in the schools that need them the most. President Obama will invest in a national effort to prepare and reward outstanding teachers...¹

Is more money and expanded government "investment" the answer to America's educational woes? Is public education necessary, as many claim, for the poor to receive an adequate education to compete in today's global marketplace? Is education a human right? Should government even be involved in education? While few would argue about the importance of education, there is great disagreement over the answers to these questions.

Unfortunately, even some of the Founding Fathers were confused on this issue. Thomas Jefferson, for example, once proposed an amendment to the Constitution to provide public education. However, we can forgive Jefferson for his views on the subject. He did not have the benefit of witnessing the history of public education or the horrible condition of government schools today. But for us, the evidence should be clear. If the goal of government schools is a "high-quality education," those schools are an absolute failure. And they are a failure because they rely on government coercion to obtain both funding and "customers."

Today, education is a virtual monopoly of the government. While home schooling and private schools have grown in popularity in recent decades, government schools remain the dominant source of education for most American children. Indeed, approximately 85 percent of America's schoolchildren attend government schools, primarily because these schools are "free."² Of course, these schools are not free. Their costs are borne by you and other taxpayers, which includes parents and non-parents alike.

Because they are forced to financially support government schools, most parents cannot afford the expenses associated with private schools or home schooling. However, according to a survey conducted by the National Association of Independent Schools, only 39 percent of those polled

1. "Education," *The White House*, accessed June 5, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education>.

2. "Education in the United States," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 6, 2011, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_the_United_States#Elementary_and_secondary_education.

would send their children to public schools if cost and proximity were not factors.³ In other words, while the vast majority of parents send their children to government schools, those schools are not their preference. As we saw with mail delivery, when individuals have a choice, they overwhelmingly choose private companies. Unfortunately, the burden of taxation to support government schools effectively eliminates such a choice for many parents. In 2008-2009, taxpayers spent \$10,441 per student to fund government schools. If they were not forced to financially support public education, most parents would choose an alternative to government schools for the education of their children. And this is only one aspect of education in which parents cannot act according to their own judgment.

Public schools are controlled by state, local, and increasingly, federal government officials. Government control ultimately politicizes the process. Government involvement in education makes school boards a magnet for special interest groups seeking to influence the decisions of educational bureaucrats regarding textbooks, curriculum, and other policies. For example, in a controversy that has spanned decades, those who want evolution taught in government schools and those who want creationism included in the curriculum regularly battle over textbook selection for the public schools in Texas.⁴ Similar battles regularly rage in other states, on this and other issues, such as history and sex education. Unfortunately, appeasing those who make the most noise and have the most political connections is often more important than truth.

For example, in Tucson, Arizona, to pacify Mexican-American students, the government schools offer an ethnic studies course. The profanity-laced textbook⁵ for *third-graders* claims that “hard drugs and drug culture is an invention of the Gringo because he has no culture.” The textbook goes on to declare that “you have to destroy capitalism and we have to help five-sixths of the world to destroy capitalism in order to equal all people’s lives.”⁶ Tucson taxpayers—many of whom vehemently disagree with these ideas—are forced to pay for the teaching of such ideas.

If a parent objects to the public school curriculum, but cannot afford a private school or home schooling, he has no choice but to subject his children to ideas he finds wrong or immoral. And he is simultaneously forced to financially support the teaching of those ideas through his tax dollars. Indeed, this is true of all taxpayers, including non-parents. No matter one’s views on evolution, school prayer, sex education, history, or any other topic, to force an individual to pay for the teaching of ideas that he regards as false or immoral is a gross injustice. As Isabel Paterson wrote: “If this principle really is not understood, let any parent holding a positive religious faith consider how it would seem to him if his children were taken by force and taught an opposite creed. Would he not recognize tyranny naked?”⁷

Abolishing government schools eliminates this intellectual tyranny. Private schools offer the curriculum of their choosing, and parents are free to accept that curriculum or find a school with a curriculum that upholds their values. As Paterson explains, when “teaching is conducted by private schools, there will be a considerable variation in different schools; the parents must judge what they

3. “Public Knows Features That Make a Quality School”, *Council for American Private Education*, January 2000, accessed January 6, 2011, <http://www.capenet.org/Outlook/Out1-00.html>.

4. “Science standards challenging evolution debated in Texas”, *CNN*, March 25, 2009, accessed January 6, 2011, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/US/03/25/texas.evolution.teaching/>.

5. The textbook includes words such as shit, bullshit, and chingado, which is Spanish for fucking.

6. “Excerpts read aloud from third grade textbook in Tucson.flv,” *YouTube*, accessed July 3, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mcegwz17Zb0>.

7. Isabel Paterson, *The God of the Machine* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006), p. 255-256.

want their children taught, by the curriculum offered.”⁸

As an example of what is possible, consider the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP). Started in 1994, KIPP is a nationwide network of college-preparatory schools located primarily in lower-income neighborhoods. Because KIPP schools are charter schools, they are not subject to many of the political regulations and controls of traditional government schools. Even with this small amount of freedom, teachers and administrators are able to structure their curriculums to meet the needs of their students, rather than the dictates of politicians and bureaucrats. What are the results? A multi-year study found that, after three years at KIPP, “student gains are equivalent to 1.2 years of additional growth in mathematics and 0.9 years of extra growth in reading over three years.”⁹ These are substantial and meaningful gains, and they demonstrate what is possible when schools are freed, even partially, from the bureaucracy and politics of government schools. What would our schools be like if they were entirely free? What choices and opportunities would be available to students and parents?

While some suggest that KIPP should be expanded, the real lesson is that freedom works. Certainly, KIPP schools achieve better results than traditional public schools. The reason is that the administrators and teachers have fewer restrictions and controls placed upon them by politicians and bureaucrats. The solution to the problems plaguing our government schools is not the expansion of KIPP, but the expansion of educational freedom. The solution is to abolish government schools. Nobody—not educational bureaucrats nor other parents nor government—has a right to compel you to act contrary to your own judgment. Just as this is true in other areas of human life, such as mail delivery, parks, and libraries, it is also true regarding the education of your children.

Many—including the United Nations—believe that compulsion is a necessary component of education. Article 26 of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: “Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory.”¹⁰ And compulsory means just that—children will attend school or their parents are subject to fines or jail time. For example, a law enacted in California imposes fines up to \$2,000 for the parents of truant children. In Atlanta, more than three hundred parents have been arrested because their children did not attend school.¹¹

Many Americans agree that education is a right. Is it? And if it is, what does this mean? A right is a sanction to freedom of action in a social context. It means the freedom to act according to your own judgment without interference from others. A right is not a claim to an object, but the freedom to take the actions necessary to create or earn that object. (Consider the Bill of Rights. It imposes restrictions on the actions of government for the explicit purpose of leaving you free to act as you choose. The First Amendment, for example, guarantees the right of free speech. It does not require others to provide a printing press or a microphone.) To claim that an individual has a “right” to an education is to assert that others have an obligation to provide that education, regardless of their own choices and judgment. This means, if you do *not* pay for public education, you are violating the “rights” of children. In truth, the “right” to an education means that your actual rights—the freedom to spend your money as you choose—are violated. “Any alleged ‘right’ of one man,” wrote

8. *Ibid.*, p. 258.

9. “Overview,” *Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.*, accessed June 17, 2011, <http://www.kipp.org/files/dmfile/KIPP-mathematica-overview-June22-vFINAL.pdf>.

10. “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” United Nations, December 10, 1948, accessed January 6, 2011, http://www.hrea.org/index.php?base_id=104&language_id=1&erc_doc_id=445&category_id=24&category_type=3&group=.

11. Tristan Smith, “Parents of truant kids can face jail time,” CNN.com, October 24, 2008, accessed July 3, 2011, http://articles.cnn.com/2008-10-24/justice/truancy.arrests_1_anti-truancy-programs-parenting-classes-school-engagement?_s=PM:CRIME.

Ayn Rand, “which necessitates the violation of the rights of another, is not and cannot be a right.”¹²

Further, to declare that education is a right and that it “shall be compulsory” is a blatant contradiction. A right cannot be exercised under government compulsion. A right is the freedom to act according to your judgment; compulsion negates your judgment. If you are forced to send your children to school, you are not acting as you choose. You are forced to act according to the demands and dictates of government officials, which is precisely what rights prohibit. Isabel Paterson pointedly asks educational bureaucrats: “Do you think nobody would *willingly* entrust his children to you to pay you for teaching them? Why do you have to extort your fees and collect your pupils by compulsion?”¹³

So, what have these coercive measures given us? What have our tax dollars bought? Despite decades of government intervention and the expenditure of hundreds of billions of dollars each year on public education, America’s government schools remain an abysmal failure. And the solution, despite the claims of many, is not more money. Between 1962 and 2009 the amount spent per pupil increased from \$2,808 to \$10,441 in constant 2008-2009 dollars.¹⁴ The results of this massive increase in spending are alarming: An estimated forty-five million adult Americans are marginally illiterate (read at an eighth-grade level or lower) and twenty-one million cannot read at all.¹⁵ In other words, nearly 30 percent of adult Americans cannot read this book. Philosopher Andrew Bernstein notes that this is a trend that extends back for years:

Since 1983, 10 million Americans have reached twelfth grade without learning to read at the basic level. In 1986, the national test score average for eleventh graders taking the NAEP literature and history test was 54.5 percent correct on the history portion, and 51.8 percent correct on the literature portion. In 1995, a nationally administered history test found that only one student in ten was grade-level proficient in the subject; the majority failed to reach a basic level. In 1996, U.S. high school seniors scored near the bottom on an internationally administered math exam. According to a study published in 1999, a “nationwide assessment of math skills found that ‘only 14 percent of eighth graders scored at the seventh-grade level or above’” and “fewer than half of twelfth-graders can do seventh-grade work in mathematics.” In 2000, math students in America ranked below those in Malaysia, Bulgaria, and Latvia.¹⁶

And this trend has continued. In 2009, the Program for International Student Assessment was taken by students in sixty-five countries. American high school students ranked thirty-first in math and twenty-third in science, trailing Estonia and Slovenia in both categories.¹⁷ Further, a study released in 2009 found that only half of all American adults can name all three branches of government. Perhaps more distressing: 43 percent of those who have held elective office could not name the function of the Electoral College.¹⁸ (Some actually thought that the Electoral College is a school for training politicians!)

Poor test scores and ignorance of basic civics are only a part of the story. Nationally, about 30 percent of high school students do not graduate on time. A report released in 2008 found that, in

12. Rand, “Man’s Rights,” p. 96 (see Part 1, n. 1).

13. Paterson, *God of the Machine*, p. 261.

14. “Fast Facts”, *National Center for Educational Statistics*, accessed January 6, 2011, <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=66>.

15. Andrew Bernstein, “The Educational Bonanza in Privatizing Government Schools,” *The Objective Standard* 5, no. 4, (Winter 2010-11): p. 21.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

17. “Comparing Countries’ and Economies’ Performance,” *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*, accessed June 5, 2011, <http://www.pisa.oecd.org/dataoecd/54/12/46643496.pdf>.

18. “Study: Americans Don’t Know Much About History,” *NBC Los Angeles*, accessed June 5, 2011, <http://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/Study-Americans-Dont-Know-About-Much-About-History.html>.

seventeen of the nation's fifty largest cities, the graduation rate is below 50 percent. In Detroit, less than 25 percent of students graduated in 2003-2004.¹⁹ Apparently, many high school students see no benefit to attending government schools. And, given the poor quality of the education provided by those schools, it is little wonder.

Clearly, America's public education system is not producing the results that have been promised. If a "high-quality education" is the goal of government education, it has been a resounding failure. While educational bureaucrats continue to demand more money for their latest "reform," they refuse to identify why America's educational system is producing illiterates. They refuse to acknowledge that the problem is government control of education. However, it hasn't always been that way. There was a time when most education in America was provided by the private sector.

Prior to the Civil War (which children should be taught began in 1861), public schools were virtually non-existent. As educator Robert Peterson writes, most young children were taught at home: "Home education was so common in America that most children knew how to read before they entered school."²⁰ Compare that to the literacy rate achieved by our government schools. It wasn't necessary for public officials to dictate the curriculum, compel school attendance, or force citizens to pay for government schools. Parents recognized their responsibility for educating their children and acted accordingly. For those who desired additional education, private schoolmasters offered an abundance of choices. Peterson writes:

Historical records, which are by no means complete, reveal that over one hundred and twenty-five private schoolmasters advertised their services in Philadelphia newspapers between 1740 and 1776. Instruction was offered in Latin, Greek, mathematics, surveying, navigation, accounting, bookkeeping, science, English, and contemporary foreign languages. Incompetent and inefficient teachers were soon eliminated, since they were not subsidized by the State or protected by a guild or union. Teachers who satisfied their customers by providing good services prospered. One schoolmaster, Andrew Porter, a mathematics teacher, had over one hundred students enrolled in 1776. The fees the students paid enabled him to provide for a family of seven.²¹

These schools allowed colonial Americans to receive the education they desired without government intervention. The pursuit of profit motivated educators to provide the types of classes and the content that their customers wanted, not that demanded by public officials or pressure groups. The freedom of students permitted them to choose the schools that offered the courses they wanted, not those dictated by politicians and bureaucrats.

Even the poor, blacks, women, and immigrants had an abundance of educational opportunities. Peterson writes: "In 1767, there were at least sixteen evening schools, catering mostly to the needs of Philadelphia's hard-working German population.... There were also schools for women, blacks, and the poor. Anthony Benezet, a leader in colonial educational thought, pioneered in the education for women and Negroes."²² In short, if an individual—any individual—in colonial America desired an education, he or she had many options from which to choose. What happened? Why do government schools now dominate the educational system?

19. "High School Graduation Rates Plummet Below 50 Percent in Some U.S. Cities," *Fox News*, April 1, 2008, accessed June 5, 2011, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,344190,00.html>.

20. Robert A Peterson., "Education in Colonial America", *The Freeman* 33, no. 9 (September 1983), accessed August 21, 2011, <http://www.thefreemanonline.org/columns/education-in-colonial-america/>.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

Despite the success of these private educational services, in the mid-nineteenth century many intellectuals began to demand government schools. Educational reformers, such as Henry Brown, argued for compulsory, state controlled education:

No one at all familiar with the deficient household arrangements and deranged machinery of domestic life, of the extreme poor, and ignorant, to say nothing of the intemperate—of the examples of rude manners, impure and profane language, and all the vicious habits of low bred idleness—can doubt, that it is better for children to be removed as early and as long as possible from such scenes and examples.²³

Brown did not approve of the lifestyle and parenting skills of some individuals and sought to use the coercive power of government to impose his views upon the poor and their children. Poor parents may have been uneducated. They may have been rude and used profane language. But, to take their children from them by force and deliver them to arrogant educators who think they know best is far more obscene and immoral than any words those parents might utter. This paternalistic attitude continues to this day: A common argument for the continuation of government schools is that the poor need them. That is, without public schools the children of the poor would not be properly educated, and thereby trapped in a cycle of poverty and ignorance. (Ironically, and sadly, that is precisely what government schools are doing today.)

According to altruism, the needs of poor children constitute a claim on you and other taxpayers. But are the poor really helpless? Do they really need government usurping their parental responsibilities?

In practice, the poor can and do have ways to educate their children without government assistance or coercion. In colonial America, for example, education was a favorite form of philanthropy for Quakers, and “the poor, both Quaker and non-Quaker, were allowed to attend without paying fees.”²⁴ Such educational philanthropy is not limited to colonial times: Oprah Winfrey has donated \$1.5 million to the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta²⁵ and \$1 million to Providence St. Mel in Chicago.²⁶ Both schools serve poor, inner-city children. Winfrey also established the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa. The academy’s mission is to “provide a nurturing educational environment for academically gifted girls who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.”²⁷ Further, thousands of businesses, trade associations, foundations, and other organizations offer scholarships for students. Such examples demonstrate that those who are concerned about education for the poor can simply provide voluntary financial support. In a free society, each individual can act according to his own judgment and values, and he must respect the mutual rights of others to do the same.

A study by James Tooley, a professor of education policy at the University of Newcastle in England, provides an even more compelling example of education for the poor. Tooley conducted a two-year study of education among the poor in Nigeria, Kenya, China, Ghana, and India. His study

23. Robert P. Murphy, “The Origins of the Public School,” *The Freeman* 48, no. 7 (July 1998), accessed August 21, 2011, <http://www.thefreemanonline.org/featured/the-origins-of-the-public-school/>.

24. Peterson, “Education in Colonial America.”

25. “Oprah gives \$1.5 million to Ron Clark Academy,” Access Atlanta, December 2009, accessed January 6, 2011, http://blogs.ajc.com/the-buzz/2009/12/17/oprah-gives-1-5-million-to-ron-clark-academy/?cxntlid=thbz_hm.

26. “Inner-City School Founder: No Miracle, Just Teaching,” NPR.com, December 2009, accessed January 6, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=113683847&ft=1&f=1013>.

27. “Mission,” Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls, accessed June 5, 2011, <http://www.owl.co.za/mission.htm>.

focused on differences between public and private schools in the poorest areas of his selected cities—areas that lacked indoor plumbing, running water, electricity, and paved roads. What he found was remarkable.

For example, in Hyderabad, India, 76 percent of all school children attend private schools. Despite the fact that public education is available, most of the city's poorest parents choose to send their children to private schools, even when they have to pay tuition. Even by Indian standards, the students come from poor households: The students in private schools in Hyderabad have a monthly income of less than \$30 per working household member; this is one-third the average income of \$46 per month in Hyderabad. Tooley reported similar findings in the other cities and concluded: “[I]he poor have found remarkably innovative ways of helping themselves, educationally, and in some of the most destitute places on Earth have managed to nurture a large and growing industry of private schools for themselves.”²⁸ Tooley's findings dispel the myth that the poor need paternalistic government assistance in order to educate their children.

As we have seen in regard to mail delivery, parks, libraries, and now education, coercive government programs and policies are impractical and immoral. As we have also seen, freedom is practical, because freedom is moral. Freedom delivers “the goods,” whether it is mail delivery, libraries, or education. Freedom provides the social context in which you can live your life as you deem best. And *that* is a lesson well-worth learning.

In each of the public institutions we have examined so far, private alternatives are relatively well-known. For example, we are familiar with UPS, FedEx, Disney World, and private schools. We can see, often on a daily basis, the practical benefits of the free market. But what about an area of life that has fewer and less evident examples? What about infrastructure, such as roads and sanitation? Can these be supplied by private businesses? It is to these questions that we will now turn our attention.

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28. James Tooley, “Private Schools for the Poor,” *Catholic Education Resource Center*, accessed January 6, 2011, <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/education/ed0319.htm>.