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PRIVATE SCHOOLS:

The Solution To America's Educational Problem



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author of this pamphlet, Frank Chodorov, is a distinguished libertarian economist. A graduate of Columbia University, a former school teacher, he is now devoting his full time to the preservation of free enterprise.

His monthly news magazine, *Analysis*, is one of the most trenchant and most philosophical analyses of the current American scene. In addition, his articles have appeared frequently in *Plain Talk* and *Human Events*.

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PRIVATE SCHOOLS: THE SOLUTION TO AMERICA'S EDUCATIONAL PROBLEM

By FRANK CHODOROV

PERIODICALLY and with annoying persistence, the public school bobs up as a social problem. Nobody leaves it alone; it leaves nobody alone. Right now the most prominent point of contention about it is the matter of federal subsidization. While legislation toward that end was side-tracked by a minor issue—whether parochial schools should participate in government largesse—the political potential of subsidization will not let it die. The public school will be injected into the campaigns in the offing.

Teachers keep the public school in the headlines by their agitation for larger stipends. In this they are generally supported by parents, who are equally vehement in their opposition to the higher taxation that increased salaries call for. Lack of funds and opposition to taxation are also the points of debate over inadequate school facilities, over-crowded classrooms, lack of personnel.

Meanwhile, the curriculum is under attack. The infiltration of collectivist concepts into our text books is a matter of wide concern. Parents and even public officials are inquiring as to whether the schools are being used as an instrument of socialist indoctrination? How far has the teaching fraternity gone down the line? Loyalty tests come into conflict with the doctrine of academic freedom and the debate pro and con becomes acrimonious.

A pedagogical controversy rages over what is called "progressive education." Many, both professionals and lay students, maintain that this innovation is not education at all and point to its product with derision. There is much viewing-with-alarm.

Recently, an Illinois couple challenged the compulsory attendance law, and the Supreme Court of that state decided that parents who have the necessary qualifications may teach their children at home. To what extent will voluntary withdrawal from the school system go? It is a certainty that further deterioration of the schools will prompt many parents to give their personal attention to the three Rs.

Thus, the battle over the public school rages on all fronts. One never hears a solid, unequivocal defense of it, for even its loyal advocates are strong for some kind of reform; on the other hand, there are not a few who argue with considerable cogency that the public school is basically unsound and the only cure for it is abolition.

And yet, if one stands off a way from the heat of

the argument and calmly reflects on the problem of education as a whole, a compromise suggests itself that comes near to being a solution. There is nothing wrong with the public school that could not be cured by putting it into active competition with the private school. This is not to say that the private school is without fault, for no institution can possibly provide the capacity for learning that every mother ascribes to her offspring, and when the results fall below her expectations the institution will certainly be blamed. But, if parents could exercise a choice between private and public school, if they had the means to make the choice, the entire controversy over public schooling would collapse. For the responsibility would then be on the parent alone; he would have nobody to blame for a wrong selection.

The immediate reaction to this suggested solution is that it is economically impossible. Only the rich can afford private schooling, it will be said, and recourse to it means that the children of the poor will be deprived of this advantage. However, it must be remembered that public schooling must be paid for, it is not a gift from heaven; and since the poor are in the aggregate the largest contributors to the tax-fund, it is they who pay the largest share of the educational bill. It should be possible to devise a method by which they could pay for their schools directly, rather than through the taxing powers of the government. This can be done; but first, we must be convinced that our public school problem cannot be solved in any other way.

The Nature of Learning

Whatever else education is, whatever its ultimate purpose may be, in substance it is the transmission of ideas. In the case of children, the ideas must come from adults. Even if the child is not submitted to any formal education, his natural curiosity about the new experiences with which he is confronted leads to interrogation of those who presumably have had some acquaintance with the phenomena. That is in the nature of things. The child might be able to dig out the facts by laborious observation, but his instinct is to short-cut the process by asking questions.

It is in this very necessity of learning that the troubles of our school system begin. For, we who are called upon to transmit the knowledge we have acquired are in disagreement as to the validity of that knowledge. Even in matters on which no particular importance is put, like fishing, the uncle and the father may differ violently in their instruction. To religious parents the teaching of the catechism comes first in the curriculum; others would call this the transmission of error.

The teachers, the parents, find it most difficult

to free themselves from the values they put on the knowledge they are called upon to transmit. We might all agree, to take a simple example, that the child should learn to read, because reading is the prerequisite for further learning. But, should it learn to read from the classics, the newspapers, or the Bible? Will the boy profit more from an understanding of Milton or from a study of business letters? It is most important, say some parents and teachers, that the child confine his education to subjects that will aid him in the making of a living. They contend that effort in any other direction is wasteful, perhaps harmful. Other teachers and parents take the cultural point of view.

At this particular time, many of us are disturbed over the emphasis in education on social rather than on individual values. In teaching American history, for instance, one can lay stress on the doctrine of natural rights or one can dismiss it as an eighteenth century fairy tale. There is a tendency in professional pedagogy to take the latter point of view, or to twist the doctrine into a meaning it never had before. Civics can be taught as the art of public management, or as a demonstration of the necessity of submerging one's individuality for the common good. Even biology can be channeled ideologically; the teacher can point out that just as the organs of the living body are inter-related and inter-dependent, so the individual is not an integer in himself, but only a necessary part of the body politic. Not only the text books for grade schools and high schools, but even the comic strips to which the tots are exposed lend themselves to the transmission of "social values."

One of the factors that makes the educational problem so difficult is this disparity in the values we put on ideas. For example, one mother is an aesthete, the father is of a practical turn, and the professional teacher harbors a "social conscience." What set of values shall be put before the pupil? Shall we first agree on a common set? But that, if it were possible, is undesirable. The striving for a better life, the search for truth, is a matter of selection, and selection presupposes freedom of judgment. That which we call progress results from man's capacity to weigh evidence and make decisions. When that capacity is stultified by repression, civilization declines; when one cannot choose one cannot aspire. The animal, as far as we know, is incapable of making evaluations and his world is, therefore, delimited. A uniform and rigid set of values would make education a simple process, but the education would be extremely simple.

Well, if the child must learn from adults, and if

the adults are not in agreement on what ought to be taught, or how, the public school must resort to the political expediency of compromise. It is odd how, in discussing the public school, we are wont to overlook its inherent political character, the fact that it is tax-supported and subject to political considerations. There is no way of ridding politics of politics. The best the public school can do as a transmitter of values is to favor those that are held by the most numerous, the most aggressive, or the most dominant element in the community. That is not only a necessity, but it is also in accordance with the democratic process.

While we are on this topic of political schooling, we might consider, parenthetically, the probable effect of federal subsidization. Certainly nothing inimical to the interest of the party in power would pass as sound education, while the historical doctrines of home rule and states' rights would have to be re-interpreted. Would the subsidized teacher, if he were so convinced, stress the undesirability of other forms of federal subsidization? The values taught would emanate either by direction, suggestion or tacit understanding, from Washington. It could not be otherwise.

However, the political principle of majority rule does not work well in educational matters, simply because of our great concern with the welfare of our children. In this country we have not yet come around to relieving ourselves of the obligations of parenthood; our children are still ours, not the State's. We feel this obligation keenly, and are as determined to protect their minds from hurt as we are to protect their bodies from harm. If the public schools are inculcating ideas we consider wrong, or even if we think the education inadequate, we do not blithely submit to majority rule, as we do in matters that concern adults only. We may accept the decision of the ballot box, or the directives of officialdom, because we are helpless, but we nevertheless resent the plight of our children. That is why controversy over public education takes on a peculiar bitterness.

The only way out of this impasse is to throw the responsibility for the education of their children on the parents. Those who find the public school inadequate must be permitted a choice. The teaching of the children at home is one choice. But that way presents difficulties. There is the probable incompetence of the parents as teachers, the compulsory education laws in many states, and, most important, the effect on the child of withdrawing him from the companionship of his friends. That leaves us with a second alternative, that of the private school,

the school that offers for a price the kind of education the parent wants; and it leaves us with a problem of meeting the price.

The Price of Learning

There is no such thing as free schooling; it must be paid for and, taking the school system as a whole, its cost is defrayed by the toil of those who are under the delusion of "free" education. In the cities, where the schools are most numerous, the budget is met primarily by levies on real estate. If the dwellings are owned by the occupants, most of whom are merchants and artisans, it is they who pay the bill; if they are occupied by tenants, the taxes are incorporated into the monthly rent. The "rich"—a word of no definite meaning—pay their share as consumers, but their consumption as a class is infinitesimal compared to that of the rest of the population, and their share is correspondingly small.

Whatever kind of education the children get is paid for by the parents. If the parents do not like what they are involuntarily buying, the only thing for them to do is demand that their share of the bill be remitted to them so that they can patronize schools to their liking. They should be permitted to make a choice.

Most of the cost of public schools is met by local taxes—state, county, city or school district. If all the parents were property owners the problem of remission for school tuition would be simple; but a great difficulty arises where the taxation is indirect, as in the case of the tenant, or where sales taxes are imposed. The obstacle could probably be overcome, but it would require a study of the various fiscal systems in the states and political sub-divisions. Those states that levy on the incomes of their citizens could readily solve the problem of allowing a deduction for tuition fees paid to private schools; thus, they would not only right a basic wrong, but would also relieve the state and local budgets of the perennial and troublesome school problem.

However, since federal income taxation is the largest single direct burden put upon the household, and since comparatively few of us are now free of it, the simplest way of solving our school problem is by a federal exemption for tuition. This proposal should commend itself particularly to the present administration, which has expressed interest in the improvement of our educational establishment. Instead of subsidization, with a consequent increase in taxation, it could more easily improve our school system by putting it on a competitive basis. Incidentally, the federal government would thus remove the widely held suspicion that its interest is not in the better-

ment of the child's mind through education but in the control of it through indoctrination.

There are not enough private schools in the country to take care of the influx of pupils which would result from such exemption. Even now, the private schools in New York City find it difficult to accommodate all the applicants for admission; it is interesting to note, by the way, that many of their pupils are children of public school teachers. The increased demand resulting from such exemption as here proposed would bring into being an untold number of these selective schools. Every pedagogue who takes pride in his profession would be tempted to start on his own, to ply his skill free from institutional restrictions. Every school of thought would offer its wares to the public. Every pedagogical theory would have a chance of proving itself. Every denomination would expand its parochial activities. There would be, so to speak, a private school on every city block.

Better Learning

The public school would then be forced to offer a product of competitive value. It should be in a better position to do so. If only a quarter of the present public school attendance should be lost, the school could do an infinitely better job. The overcrowded classroom would disappear and the teacher might show her skill as such, rather than waste her energy in mob discipline. The lure of the private school would certainly draw off many of the more competent in the profession, but the public budget would be relieved of its present strain and the authorities could pay for and demand higher standards. Ancient, unsanitary and dangerous structures now pressed into service could be abandoned and the land returned to the tax-roll. The cost of transportation would be considerably reduced, for one of the competitive features of the private school would undoubtedly be nearness to the home. There would be important collateral savings, such as less equipment, text books and lunches to provide.

The spur to education would be phenomenal. A single teacher could maintain herself with an enrollment of a dozen children, giving each of them the personal attention that is often the difference between successful education and failure. A high school staff of four good instructors could do wonders with a hundred boys and girls. Every teacher would bend his efforts toward building up a reputation for efficiency, not only to attract enrollment but also to justify higher fees. Pride in the profession would replace its present status as a unionized trade.

There would be, to be sure, schools in which socialistic ideology permeated the curriculum, but these

would be supported by parents of that persuasion, just as denominational schools would draw upon their members for patronage. The taxpayer would not be forced, as he is now, to maintain objectionable schools or teachers. He could take the pride of his life right out of that environment and march him across the street to one more conducive to a proper upbringing. He would always be able to find just what he wants, for competition would see to it. There would be schools in which music or art play the leading part; others would stress the classics or mathematics or history or manual training; or various combinations. One can imagine young mothers discussing with experienced matrons the relative merits of this or that school, this or that pedagogue, all in the interest of Junior.

Morals and Freedom

The improvement in educational methods and standards following from the proposed competitive system is secondary to the moral consequences we can expect. The sense of responsibility for the welfare of the child they brought into the world would be returned to the parents. They could no longer shift their personal obligation to an amorphous thing called society; that is, they could not do so without losing the respect of their offspring. The teacher would likewise attain a position of esteem by the necessity of properly discharging her duties. She would be a teacher, not a political time-server. Her first concern would be with the children in her charge, not with the terms of tenure; no law, no union could cover up incompetence or negligence.

Secondly, the proposed reform would remove the injustice of compelling payment for unwanted and unused facilities. The argument of the Catholics on this point is well worth considering; it applies equally to every parent who pays a tuition bill. They complain that they are subjected to "double taxation"—once for the schools they use and again for those they do not. The injustice is obvious. The rejoinder that the public school is at their disposal is silly; they do not consider it satisfactory, and who is endowed with the right to compel a contrary opinion? Is the majority favored with omniscience? But, the unfairness is not righted by making a return to the Catholics of some slight service for their tax-money, like furnishing transportation for children attending parochial schools; that is patch-work. The moral thing to do is to remove the imposition.

Finally, the exemption proposal should help restore to America the concept of freedom on which it was founded and built. The public school has been pictured as the guarantee of an informed citizenry,

which in turn is the necessary condition for a free society. This plausibility has obscured the fact that the public school is a political institution, and as such can be used for ends quite the opposite of freedom. For example, Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin did not abolish the public school, but rather favored it as a necessary integral of their regimes; and the word "freedom" was not erased from their text books. Does the word carry the same weight in present usage that it had before the first World War? At that time, as an instance, freedom and conscription were opposite ideas; are they now? Freedom in those days implied an obligation of the citizen to his government, while today it has acquired quite the opposite connotation; one is free only in proportion to the amount of social security, unemployment doles, subsidies and parity supports the tax-fund can furnish him. The public school has not been the entire cause of this perversion, but it has helped greatly. The high school graduate today, even if he has heard of them, has little understanding of the theory of checks-and-balances or of the doctrine of states' rights; to him the idea that a weak and divided government is a condition of freedom would be rather strange.

To be sure, the private school will not automatically restore to the concept of freedom the values of self-reliance and responsibility. There are too many influences working the other way. But, those parents who hold to the philosophy of individualism will most certainly patronize the schools that teach it, and the teachers who lean that way will cherish the opportunity to stress it. Thus an influence will be fostered that will counteract the trend in thought; an intelligent opposition to the indoctrination by the public school must eventually make itself felt. Indeed, if the proposed tuition-exemption should reach the legislative stage, who would oppose it but those who are hell-bent for a regime of socialism?

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