

December 24, 2007

If we remove schools from the culture wars, maybe we'll find better schools

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One reason why children don't know as much as they should may be that we expect public schools to do too much—or at least do things they aren't suited for.

We expect schools to teach science, math, and literature. But we also want them to promote social cohesion and national unity.

The [National Education Association](#) says “A pure voucher system would only encourage economic, racial, ethnic, and religious stratification in our society. America's success has been built on our ability to unify our diverse populations.” The group [People for the American Way](#) agrees, saying “public education is the cornerstone of a democratic society.”

Meanwhile, some conservative groups such as the [Eagle Forum](#) assert that public schools have lost their way by venturing into multiculturalism and undermining parental authority.

Regardless of their specific position on questions of the day, then, various groups of different stripes agree that promoting social unity is a key role of schools.

But Does it Work?

Do schools in fact serve a cultural as well as an academic purpose? The notion that our public schools are an essential factor in creating an essential unity in this country was challenged earlier this year by Neal McCluskey, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute (www.cato.org). McCluskey's report, "[Why We Fight: How Public Schools Cause Social Conflict](#)," offers a catalog of school-centered social conflicts that stretches back more than 160 years.

McCluskey's report has three main components. The first is a catalog of cultural disputes during the 2005-06 school year. The second reaches back to the American founding and moves toward the present to discuss reformers and controversies. The third section argues that economic and freedom, not public schools, has brought social integration.

McCluskey clustered the events of 2005-06 into eight “national flashpoints.” Intelligent design was the turning point for school board elections in Kansas and Ohio. Freedom of expression, or the perennial dispute between students’ desire to speak out on political issues and administrators’ interest in keeping social peace, was a second. The remaining flashpoints were race, book banning, multiculturalism, sex education, homosexuality, and religion.

The segment on American history shows that these controversies are timeless. A community is divided over whether schools should have bilingual education or practice immersion. Is this a scene from 2005? Could be, but it’s not. Actually, it’s from the 1880s, when ethnic Germans in Illinois and Wisconsin vigorously opposed a plan for compulsory education that would have mandated English-only instruction.

The desire to see religious views represented—or removed—from schools is nothing new, either. Violent confrontation wracked Philadelphia in 1844. The dispute? Should the Catholic Bible or the Protestant one be used to teach reading?

Government was instrumental in perpetuating slavery, and Jim Crow laws regarding education continued the legacy, until *Brown v. Board of Education* was decided in 1954. One response to the shameful legacy of slavery, the forced busing of children for racial purposes, has been met with grumbling among blacks and whites alike, if not worse. In the 1970s, the mayor of Boston compared the dispute over busing there to the atmosphere of Belfast, Ireland. So much for schools being a source of unity.

Government=Politics

The lesson behind these examples? When the schools are run by government—and that’s what we mean when we talk about “public schools,”—differences in opinion will inevitably be political. Government officials make the decisions about school speech, religion, and other subjects on behalf of students and the taxpayers who fund the schools. How can politics not be involved?

Politics means disagreements, and disagreements over education can get especially nasty. The political debate over education can heat up for several reasons, which might be summed up as “That’s my money;” and “This is my country,” and “That’s my child.”

“That’s my money” refers to the taxes that one pays to schools. Many people will oppose some decision of the school that they don’t like, and object to how the money is spent. That’s true of any unit of government.

“This is my country” refers to the desire to see one’s views on value questions reflected in public policy. As long as a unit of government is in the business of endorsing a particular view of sexuality, for example, people are going to pay attention to that unit of government. In this case, it’s the schools.

“That’s my child” is of course the most personal concern and provides the strongest of motivations. Opting out of a local school district can incur substantial costs, leaving plenty of motivation to fight.

McCluskey argues that school choice is the only solution to social disputes, and that the pursuit of commerce can promote social integration. I tend to agree with him. A one-size-fits-all system has not brought about social peace. Benjamin Rush, one of the founders of America, proposed that states aim to produce a “more homogenous” population through a system of government schools. That strikes me, and I suspect people of various political stripes, as a profoundly unattractive idea.

Voluntary associations such as churches and synagogues, neighborhood associations, business groups, trade unions and fraternal organizations, on the other hand, promote social bonds without the entanglements of government. McCluskey adds that commercial interchange among various groups promotes these other bonds.

If we abandon the idea that the political process is the best way to determine curriculums and run schools, perhaps we’ll have enough energy to make sure that Johnny can read after all.