

Bring Back Neighborhood Schools

Proponents of school choice and charter schools believe that parents are—or should be—the customers of public education. It is a false belief. Parents are properly on the *vendor* side of the public education “value proposition.” The *customers* of public education are taxpayers, who are buying a knowledgeable and mentally capable population. *Parents*, along with teachers and school administrators, are responsible for ensuring that taxpayers get some bang for their educational buck. The crisis in education today is largely a function of too *much* parental power, not too little.

Here in California, education funding is subject to the tyranny of the ADA (average daily attendance). The allocation a school receives from the state is contingent upon the number of kids who actually attend that school. So far, so good, except that it gives parents the opportunity to pit school against school within a district. Since the schools are competing for their “business,” the tyranny of ADA forces professional educators—school administrators and the teachers themselves—to sacrifice vital educational priorities to the marketing effort to attract and retain families.

Competition between public schools may seem like a healthy and constructive thing, but the leverage it provides parents is actually destructive. Charter schools, to say nothing of school vouchers, only exacerbate the problem. Although it makes conceptual sense that schools would be incentivized to achieve higher levels of academic excellence through internal competition, the practical reality is that the capabilities required to make a school attractive are not necessarily the capabilities needed to educate children. As long as parents cannot tell the difference, educators skilled in hustling and flimflam own a competitive advantage over educators who merely have the ability to transmit knowledge. Beneath the glittering rhetoric, this is the reality of charter and school choice.

A rethinking of the parental role is needed. The truth of academic education is that parents are—or should be—partners of professional educators. Knowledge is not simply what some parent—or the market—says that it is. Knowledge has an objective basis, is the product of untold centuries of human trial-and-error, and is only obtained through hard work. The encroachment of subjective preferences into the field of education reflects a civil society which has lost its moorings. Our Jeffersonian republic should be big enough to accommodate walks of life without subordinating itself culture in all its variations. Respecting diversity is one thing; celebrating it is another.

If, as an alternative, the families availing themselves of public education were compelled to attend the school in their neighborhood, then all hands—parents and educators alike—would have every incentive to make that school as competitive as possible. The fate of their children would rise or fall on strength of the school which they themselves would be expected to strengthen.

There is a long history of families getting screwed by second-rate neighborhood schools. The busing scheme of fifty years ago to integrate public schools was a response to that problem. But times change! People are much more sensitive today to the inequities arising from shoddy neighborhood schools. Here in California, there is widespread agreement that public school funding levels should be equal, regardless of the economic fundamentals of a neighborhood. Everyone recognizes that the state has a

compelling interest to ensure that second-rate neighborhood schools are continually monitored and improved. But today, *that* problem is secondary to the problem of parental sloth.

There is tremendous pressure for educational reform among oligarchic wealth. When one thinks about it, there should be no surprise that plutocrats would identify public education as the reason for the eroding middle-class. In the decades since the Reagan years, economic policies have been oriented towards keeping oligarchs—or “job creators”—happy. One whole party and half of the other have transformed policymaking to a matter of coddling oligarchs, mainly by reducing their tax load and regulatory burdens. The thinking has been that if the path is made easier for oligarchic wealth, then prosperity and growth will trickle-down to the rest of us. In the face of diminishing middle-class jobs and income, people have begun challenging trickle-down assumptions with renewed vigor. It is not surprising, then, that oligarchs of all stripes, from left to right, would attack public schools with renewed vigor as well. It is merely a form of self-defense, an alternative explanation to what ails the American economy beyond the fact that the capital/income ratio is too high.

The time has come for Americans to get real about public education. *We* are the problem, because we have failed to bring parents, the beneficiary of taxpayer largesse, to heel. Getting real means the default assumption should be that parents are not contributing *enough*, that inadequate parental support is the primary reason for unsatisfactory educational outcomes. Parents are not reading to their children. They are not turning off the computer and the television set. They are not deferring to professional educators. They are listening too much to their children. They are whining about teachers, whining about curriculum, whining about the rules, rather than being thankful for the educational opportunity which is both their rightful inheritance and their most profound obligation.

Impolitic as it may sound, when we finally understand that parents are the problem, not the solution, we will be taking a giant step towards fixing our failing educational system. Public education plays a vital role in securing our middle-class country, but the way towards meeting the American ideal of a broadly prosperous and knowledgeable population is to realize that education is its own discipline. Education happens to be one of those areas in life which is not a function of the market, which owes nothing to privatization or choice. Education grows out of the civic ecology of a country. By rights, public education should be *better* than private education. The fact that such an idea seems ridiculous means a circuit has been blown somewhere along the way.

Just as we cannot depend upon oligarchs for the jobs which create widespread economic security and growth, we should not depend upon them for prescriptions about what ails public education. Those prescriptions are inevitably loaded with self-dealing. Rather, middle-class Americans should look to themselves, critically and without illusion, because that is where the answers lie. *Our* self-interest, unlike oligarchic self-interest, is the interest aligned to the interests of the country as a whole. Most importantly, we must recognize that familiar nostrums about public education may *not* be true, however much it may require insight and judgment to see through them. If you have such insight and judgment, then thank a teacher!

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