

Special Topics in Education: Current Issues in Education

Position Paper

Compulsory Education and Educational Reform through Choice

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Compulsory attendance, school choice, and school reform seem to have something in common. Various segments of our society are deeply concerned about the educational well-being of our children and youth. Politicians use the word “education” as though it were a buzz word; business and industry relies on an educated workforce to do the required jobs; one must have a high school diploma or comparable to enter college or technical school; and parents want their children to have a better life than they had growing up. Even though education is essential for an informed citizenry, where did American education compulsory laws get their beginnings, how have our schools developed since then with their multiple programs, and are these laws standing in the way of educational reform through choice?

From a historical perspective in world events, compulsory attendance laws were mandated in the early city-states of Greece. Sparta was known for forcibly inducting children into their military barracks and training them in warfare techniques. That was the earliest recorded start of compulsory education. If we look closer into the Modern Age, Martin Luther, the individual well-known for his influence in the start of the Protestant Reformation in Germany, forged relationships between the church and a multitude of private educators. Sheldon Richman, in his book Separating School & State: How to Liberate American Families, states that, in 1524, Martin Luther wrote to German authorities this statement:

“I maintain that the civil authorities are under obligation to compel the people to send their children to school.... If the government can compel such citizens as are fit for military service to bear the spear and rifle, to mount ramparts, and perform other material duties in time of war, how much more has it a right to compel the people to send their children to school, because in this case we are warring with the devil, whose object it is secretly to exhaust our cities and principalities of their strong men.” (emphasis mine)

What was Luther’s primary purpose? It was for the purpose of indoctrinating youth in the tenets of Lutheranism. On a related note, John Calvin, the great reformer in Switzerland, instituted compulsory education to indoctrinate people “in the official religious outlook.”

Interestingly enough, in Calvinist New England was where compulsory education for children was first instituted.

In 1840, Prussia was home to Friedrich Froebel, the one first responsible for promoting kindergarten as a way of socializing children. American educators were responsible for importing this system in the late 1800s as a way of directly influencing a younger generation that may have been caught up in the ways of degenerate living, and indirectly of helping parents to become better in home management.

Based on an authoritarian model, the school became seen as an agent of social change, and instead of reforming families, it was seen as a way of protecting them from their environment. Based upon that proposal, the idea of summer school was invented. The objective: to keep children busy, but not necessarily to learn anything.

Could it possibly be that our own American schools have been built on that premise, to “keep children busy, but not necessarily to learn anything”? Albert Einstein, a great theoretical physicist, was a product of these Prussian schools. In fact, he stated that “one had to cram all this stuff into one's mind, whether one liked it or not. This coercion had such a deterring effect that, after I had passed the final examination, I found the consideration of any scientific problems distasteful to me for an entire year.” Based on a quote like that, I could hardly give this particular model of compulsory education a glowing recommendation.

Compulsory literacy laws were instituted in New England as early as 1647 with the “Ole Deluder Satan Act”; after the American Revolution, Massachusetts was once again on the forefront in introducing compulsory education, starting with elementary education, and later on the high school level. Even Dr. Benjamin Rush, a physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence, believed that compulsory attendance was essential, and even went so far as to

institute compulsory attendance schools in Pennsylvania. Two quotes are of special note by him. Pertaining to the curriculum, "He [the student] must be taught to amass wealth, but it must be only to increase his power of contribution to the wants and needs of the state." He even went so far as to state that "...our pupil...does not belong to himself, but that he is public property. Let him be taught to love his family, but let him be taught at the same time that he must forsake and even forget them when the welfare of his country requires it." (emphasis mine)

It was, then, on this basis that Horace Mann started his work of compulsory attendance. Having been a prior practicing Calvinist, Mann studied phrenology (the "scientific" study of bumps on people's heads), temperance, and the common school. It is no coincidence that Mann was interested in both phrenology and education; it was widely believed in his time that the skull's protuberances revealed character and mental ability. Mann is credited with basing his educational philosophy on science. It should be borne in mind that the "science" he based that philosophy on was phrenology.

Based then on that foundation, John Dewey arrived on the scene years later and espoused a philosophy denying the principle of absolutes and that one should base their decisions on what would "work" at the time, a preliminary type of situational ethics. Thus, compulsory attendance laws are nothing new. It had been started in the Old World in Prussia as a means of indoctrination by a strong centralized government, and brought to fruition in the US by the Unitarians who believed that man essentially has a good nature with a perfectible nature. Their hope and goal was to erase the influence of the Calvinists and replace it with a secular system of their own making, to be run by the government. As such, a system has been set in place and forces placed in motion that form the basis of our American system of education. From there, it appears that something has gone dreadfully wrong with our modern educational system, and that

reform and an institution of choice is needed to change what remains if our nation is to remain strong.

Are compulsory attendance laws essential? There appears to be some factual evidence which states that, for there to be a well-educated society, compulsory attendance laws may actually be more harmful than good; those students who actually want to be educated may be done a disservice in the quality of their training by such statutes. When Massachusetts became the first state to adopt a compulsory school attendance law in the 1850s, US literacy was already much more advanced at that time than it is today. Have compulsory laws been a disservice, yea, even a hindrance? It would appear to be so.

Some have come to realize that required attendance in school has its pitfalls. Notice these additional interesting tidbits:

1. A 1970s federal report advocated reduction in formal education called for cutting formal schooling down to two to four hours a day because of the classroom's detrimental effect on children's development.
2. In 1991, a U.S. Department of Education official, John Burkett, criticized the "prolonged adolescence" induced by compulsory attendance.
3. In Japan, which is often held up as model for education, attendance in high school is completely voluntary, and there are few problems with violence or discipline.
4. In contrast, Japan's junior high schools, where attendance is compulsory, are more violent than those in the United States, and the violence is committed by the 7 percent who choose not to continue into senior highs.

Is it possible that our children and youth are at risk in the modern American classroom because there are no choices being given to them by a monopoly, a system that is bent on the destruction of the competition, a juggernaut that is more concerned with their own self-serving interests, and a self-perpetuating entity that seeks to maintain a stranglehold on the future minds of our country? Some modern-day reformers would say that our generation is at risk in areas such as morals, academic learning, religious indoctrination, and even physical safety, as has been illustrated in multiple school shootings over the last several years.

School choice and educational freedom allows anyone in our society who so chooses to be rescued from a debilitating system. Technology has now made compulsory attendance obsolete. One can now learn much more at home than in any public classroom, at less cost to everyone.

The organized monopolies in the form of the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) are a well-oiled machinery, capable of getting almost anything they want monetarily under the guise of education. Their message remains the same: "The cause of educational failure is not bad teaching or even a flawed educational philosophy, but rather a lack of money."

Voters are rejecting this continued message in droves as bond issues are being rejected in record numbers unless the local school district has full autonomy to raise taxes, even against the will of the people. The public seems to have had enough. Those who are truly interested in education have the fearful duty of exposing the flawed system, facing the wrath of the educational elite, and informing the public and their elected representatives of what is actually going on in public education.

True religious, academic and economic freedom will never be restored in this country until educational choice is regained. The nature of a society is determined by the way its children are educated. It would appear that our education monopoly is leading us toward totalitarianism -- the total state that owns its people. The growing conservative movement, the Christian revival, and the trend toward privatization all indicate that more and more Americans are rejecting the kind of statist future the educators want for us. But what it all adds up to is the end of the America created by our Founding Fathers, the America that countless young Americans fought and died for, the America we want to bequeath to our children and our children's children.