

Running head: WHOSE CHILDREN

Whose Children? Rethinking Schools and Education

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While our American school system may have the appearance of a static and unchanging institution, it is not. "Fix our failing schools!" has been the steady mantra from school reformers of all stripes for more than one hundred years. Convinced that the Civil War would not have happened if there had been a public education system to help us understand one another, public school advocates of the late 19th and early 20th centuries lobbied state legislatures for a statute to fully fund schools and a statute to compel attendance at those schools. Inspired by the success of school reformers of 17th century totalitarian Prussia, these visionaries successfully reproduced the government-controlled German system that appeared to render obedient citizens with morals and academics. Government, however, was the latecomer in education. Driven by different objectives, the Church, parents, and finally the government have historically sought to control the educational system in European countries and later here in America. A balance today in education between historical expectations, differing objectives, and individual rights is a futile effort because we have adopted a system intended for a totalitarian state, not our pluralistic and democratic society.

By tracing the origins of the modern state school system driven by the incongruent objectives of parents, the Church, and the state, this article is intended to show that a satisfactory balance can never be attained, and that the system must be replaced, not repaired, for true education to occur. The difference between schooling and education is defined, and then the origins and world reaction to Prussia's school system are discussed. The economic and social justifications used to justify government involvement in schools are then revisited, and contemporary English,

Prussian, and French arguments regarding public school laws are examined. The objectives of parents, then of the Church, and then of the state in a child's education are considered. Compulsion in a free society and criticisms of existing government school systems are then noted before the final conclusion.

When Mark Twain quipped, "I have never let my schooling interfere with my education" (Twain, n.d.), what did he mean? Is there a difference between "school" and "education"? Brian Ray, president of National Home Education Research Institute, defines academic schooling as a small part of the overall life education of a child, which also includes the child's philosophy, morals, manners, and usefulness in his or her community (personal communication, March 9, 2010). Public school advocate Christopher Lubienski, Associate Professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, noted "an emerging recognition of the difference between 'public education' and 'public schools'" (Lubienski, 2003, p. 478). Yet we often say "education system" when we really mean "school system," or "compulsory education" when we actually mean "compulsory school attendance." All 50 states compel school attendance, but not one has a law requiring an education for a child. The debate we have today over schools and education has not occurred spontaneously.

Christian Origins in Prussia

Our modern compulsory public school system is traced to pre-Enlightenment Prussia (current-day Germany) when Martin Luther considered popular education to be a crucial component to the success of the Reformation. Protestant town councils passed ordinances forming schools of religious indoctrination, and Catholic princes followed suit, shocked by the rapid spread of Protestantism (Melton, 1988, p. 5). But

these Protestant and Catholic schools merely provided instruction in the articles of faith with reliance on oral recitation, music, and memorization of catechisms. Literacy was less than 10% in many places, prompting parents to respond by forming small "Winkelschulen," secret schools that were both non-franchised and illegal. Teaching utilitarian "three Rs" academics, these popular "corner" or "hidden" schools taught both boys and girls alike, and by the late 16th century were competitive with the state-sanctioned religious schools (Friedrichs, 1982, p. 372).

Societal deterioration in the mid-seventeenth century caused by the Thirty Years' War, a revival of mysticism, a recalcitrant laity, and poor church and school attendance spurred a demand for a spiritual reawakening. Pietist theologian Phillip Jacob Spener began a small Sunday and Wednesday evening Bible study in his Frankfurt home in 1670, teaching piety and social activism. Believing that "[t]rue Christians fulfilled their obligations voluntarily and through conviction, not mechanically or through coercion" (Melton, 1988, p. 27), Pietists soon gained a widespread following. August Hermann Francke (1663–1727), convinced that Christian education was the only effective antidote to moral depravity, and Johann Julius Hecker (1707–1768) influenced the establishment of hundreds of schools and several teacher-training schools throughout Prussia that were noted for their piety and orderliness (Melton, 1988, pp. 24–54).

The spiritual rebirth of the individual child was the primary goal of Pietist schools, which were characterized by a strong work ethic, inward piety, compulsory attendance once enrolled, and comparatively mild discipline for the era. To obtain obedience and compliance, parental influence was discouraged as institutional control was intensified to assist in breaking the child's natural will. Innovations of the era included the grouping

of students according to ability, raising hands to ask questions, and vocational schools. Literacy was emphasized to encourage the reading of the Bible (Melton, 1988, pp. 38–44).

The Cameralists

These successes, a "mixture of piety and utility" (Melton, 1988, p. 38), would not have been possible without the enthusiastic approval of the king. The king's officials felt that while the traditional concerns for the instillation of morality by the school was important, even more important to the government for their economic and political values were the Pietist work ethic and social conduct outcomes. Cameralism, the predecessor to today's field of public administration, had as its primary purpose the "consolidation of the political and administrative power" of absolutist princes (Spicer, 1998, p. 151). One by-product of Pietist schooling was productive members of society, and though cameralists such as Joseph Sonnenfels, professor of cameralistics at the University of Vienna, admitted that "the education of children is to be sure a parental duty," he also stated, "but because education is so important to the common good, the state cannot afford to leave it solely in the hands of the family" (Melton, 1988, p. 87, 114). Sonnenfels argued that educational neglect gave the state the authority to remove children from the home and place them in educational institutions controlled by the state. Cameralists held that education was the mediator between obedience to the state and freedom, and was good for the internalization of social duty (Melton, 1988, p. 114, 137). When Frederick the Great signed the very first comprehensive compulsory school law in 1763, he also assumed responsibility and authority over all schools within

his kingdom, including church schools. The transition of educational responsibility—from the parent to the church and then to the state—was complete.

World Approval

School reformers in the United States and Britain looked admiringly at the German system. Kenneth Barkin, professor of history at the University of California, Riverside, notes that Prussia was a precursor of much that is associated with the modernization of schooling (Barkin, 1983, p. 50). John Quincy Adams, U.S. President from 1825 to 1829, wrote in 1804 that Prussian schools aimed "not merely to load the memory of their scholars with words, but to make things intelligible to their understanding" (Barkin, 1983, p. 41). British author William Howitt, after a sojourn to Germany in 1842, dedicated an entire chapter of his book to the German schools saying, "This glorious advance in the true science of government has raised no little sensation throughout Europe" (Howitt, 1842, p. 485). Horace Mann, the "father of American public education," said Prussian children were "taught to think for themselves" (Barkin, 1983, p. 41), whereas Massachusetts children were "taught NOT TO THINK [his emphasis]" (Barkin, 1983, p. 47). Michael W. Spicer, Professor of Public Administration at Cleveland State University, noted the difficulty that American reformers encountered when trying to implement cameralist policies within our American constitutional structure. On the one hand Spicer cited Woodrow Wilson, U.S. President from 1913 to 1921, who wrote in 1887 that the United States could "borrow the 'business methods' of the 'monarchist dyed in the wool' without changing our 'republican spots'" (Spicer, 1998, p. 158). On the other hand Spicer noted that economist Friedrich

Hayek later disagreed in 1944, saying that such a government "would inevitably become totalitarian in character" (Spicer, 1998, p. 158).

Economic and Social Justifications

The transplant of a "business method" from an absolutist government to a free society requires justification to that society. From Mann's day to the present an entire litany of justifications have been used to rationalize governmental involvement in schools. In 1965 British liberal economist E. G. West wrote a book called *Education and the State: A Study in Political Economy*, a book that reexamined the historical data and arguments used by educational pioneers to justify compulsory education. By applying to education James M. Buchanan and Gordon Tullock's public choice theory, a theory that he termed to be "the economic theory of bureaucracy," West stunned the educational establishment with his findings. James Tooley, West's biographer and understudy, noted the ferocity of West's detractors: "an ill-tempered Chesterton on an off-night," "stagnant little academic backwater," and "an academic cul-de-sac" (Tooley, 2008, p. 193). Others praised it: "most important work written on the subject this century," "few books more worth serious attention by educationists," "turning orthodox doctrine inside out, has effected a Copernican revolution" (Tooley, 2008, p. 193). One professor's ad hominem against West was so derisive, terming the book "Copernican in reverse," "verbal rubbish," and "pernicious" (Tooley, 2008, p. 195), that the book's publisher sued for libel, and won. After being forced out of his university position West accepted an appointment at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, where he spent the rest of his life researching and writing.

What did West say that bothered the establishment so much? With original research and a re-analysis of existing data, West effectively dismantled the case that government should have any involvement in schools whatsoever, if education is the true objective. He argued that government's participation in anything, including schools, consists of a possible combination of three levels of participation: regulation, funding, and provision (Tooley, 2008, pp. 45, 169). An example of government providing a solely regulatory function would be the requirement that if you drive a car you must have car insurance. The state regulates, but the state does not fund your insurance, nor does it provide it through a state office of insurance. Likewise, for an example of regulation and funding but no provision, the government could potentially have a regulation that compels school, and fund it by giving you money either through a voucher or tax credit system. The government would not provide schools, and you would be responsible to find a private school, or do it yourself by homeschooling your child. In that scenario, the government would not own a single school or school bus or pay a single teacher. Though the state would regulate and fund schooling, it would not physically provide the service.

Contending that parents and industry should drive the market, West decimated the arguments that the government is the best provider of schools for children. As an objective economist West wondered if government schools are the best protectors of children, and questioned if the other external benefits that government education supposedly generates could not be provided less expensively and more effectively by non-government sources. Externalities he oppugned included accepted arguments that government education is needed to make democracy work, government education

reduces crime, government education provides equality of opportunity, government education provides social cohesion, government education is needed for our national defense, and government education causes economic growth (Tooley, 2008, pp. 47–78).

Compulsion: Selective or Universal

Most significant to this discussion is West's comparison of the two types of compulsion: selective and universal (West, 2003a, p. 82). An example of selective compulsion would be the intervention of governmental Child Protective Services on the report of a child being nutritionally neglected. The law that requires you to feed your child is not a universal compulsory law; if it were the government would inspect your pantry on a daily basis and require proof that food was provided regularly to your child. Universality requires a policing on the part of the government to ensure that everyone will follow the law (West, 2003a, p. 90). Selectivity requires action on the part of the government only on reports or discovery of cause. West clarifies that universal is "legislation that is embodied in a statute about compulsion per se," which is distinguished from "the type of compulsion that is usually implicit in ordinary child-abuse laws that attempt to deal with cases on a more ad hoc basis" (West, 2003a, p. 108). He states simply, "Ideally, compulsion should be selective and not universal" (West, 2003a, p. 91).

The question is begged: Which would the government consider to be more serious, a half-starved child or a half-educated child? Summarizing the 1875 argument of Joseph Chamberlain, an advocate for a universal compulsion school law: food is necessary and therefore human nature might be trusted, "but human nature could not

be trusted to supply itself with instruction" (West, 2003a, p. 103) and therefore a school law is required and a feeding law is not. To point out that only a minority of children in Chamberlain's era had not been getting schooling, West quoted a conclusion of a 1972 regression analysis by Landes and Solmon: "the vast majority of school age persons had already been obtaining a level of schooling equal to or greater than what was to be later specified in statute" (West, 2003a, p. 87). There was no need, if the objective was to provide an education for children, for governmental involvement in schools since parents, churches, and charities were already meeting the demand.

Contemporary Arguments

School bureaucrats, teachers, and cameralist-thinking government bureaucrats were primarily responsible for creating the "crisis" to get school legislation passed. West notes that the British, who followed a path similar to the United States with "free" public schooling and compulsory laws occurring nearly simultaneously, may have been "more manipulated than consulted" (West, 2003a, p. 106) when their compulsory school attendance laws were passed. British school inspector Matthew Arnold thought a compulsory law was not appropriate for England and wrote in his 1867 report, "In Prussia, which is so often quoted, education is not flourishing because it is compulsory. It is compulsory because it is flourishing" (West, 2003a, p. 92). After noting that the history of public school governance in the United States and Prussia has been "remarkably similar" (Herbst, 2002, p. 318), Jurgen Herbst, a professor of history and education policy who grew up in Nazi Germany, states: "The issue of state-sponsored education, however, was contentious from the beginning and has remained so for two centuries" (Herbst, 2002, p. 322). In 1763 French legislator Louis Rene De La

Chalotais, already famous for writing the report responsible for banishing the Jesuits from the country, had written in his "Essay on National Education" that his purpose was "to claim for the nation an education which depends only on the State, because it belongs essentially to the State" (La Chalotais, 1934, p. 47). La Chalotais then stated that if France had plans of instructions for each profession "as there are in Germany," then

education will be an easy matter; all that will be required of masters, tutors, and governesses is that they should be religious, moral, and able to read well. This will revive home education, which is the most natural form of it, and the most beneficial to morality and to society. (1934, pp. 166–167)

Although Germany today is no longer a totalitarian state under an absolutist king, this supposedly democratic country apparently clings to its cameralistic absolutist heritage by banning all free, parent-led home education.

Whose Children?

All of this prompts the most obvious question: When parents have children, whose children are they? What were, and are, the objectives of the parents, the Church, and of the state when it comes to a child's education?

Parents

Parents will always be the foremost advocates for the best interests of their children, with very few exceptions. In Prussia, parents sent their children to Winkelschulen when it became clear the children were not learning to read at the state-recognized church schools. After the Protestant Pietist movement the Church embraced literacy as a required skill for strengthening the faith. Administrators within

the government, many of whom were Pietists themselves, recognized the benefits of the school experiment for the state. Working with the Pietists, a system of government church schools was built. Parents acquiesced to this church and state involvement because their values were being taught in the school, as well as practical skills. This pattern was repeated later in American public schools, which theologian and author Rousas J. Rushdoony claimed had taken over basic responsibilities traditionally assumed by the church. In 1963 Rushdoony noted, "In this sense, the public school system of the United States *is* its established church" (Carper & Hunt, 2007, p. 2). But that same year, after a series of lower court decisions dating back to the mid-19th century, the United States Supreme Court removed devotional Bible reading and state-sanctioned prayer from the schools, resulting in godless public schools that no longer reflected the values of a large percentage of parents. The concurrent shift from a patriarchal family structure where children were effectively owned by the parents to the modern parent-child relationship that is similar to a "fiduciary" power, granted by society, which can be removed by the state in cases of abuse (Tooley, 2008, p. 48), has resulted in parental values that are subordinated to the godless ever-changing subjective amorality of the state schools, which have the power to define what constitutes as abuse.

Parental objectives in education have remained the same over the ages—help the child find a skill with which he/she can succeed in life, develop the child morally and spiritually with parental values to secure his/her eternity, and teach the child the family heritage. Isabel Paterson reacted to the state's current role as follows: "There can be no greater stretch of arbitrary power than is required to seize children from their parents,

teach them whatever the authorities decree they shall be taught, and expropriate from the parents the funds to pay for the procedure" (Paterson, 1943, p. 255).

The Church

The Church, historically either Protestant or Catholic for this discussion, has considered schooling a critical means to convey its soul-saving messages. From 579 A.D. to the time of the Reformation the Catholic Church held a complete monopoly on education "as a protection to orthodoxy" (Cubberley, 1920, pp. 308, 318). The more worldly objectives of parents are clearly secondary objectives to the Church; Carper and Hunt (2007, p. 45) note the Church's position that true education includes physical, moral, religious, and intellectual development, but the three Rs, "given man's supernatural destiny, are the 'least important part of education.'" Even Martin Luther, while recognizing popular education as crucial to the Reformation's success, was ambivalent about literacy for the laity, feeling that rote memorization, catechisms, and music were more important (Melton, 1988, pp. 4–9). Mankind's spiritual contest in the world "with the devil himself," as he preached in a 1530 sermon, made it incumbent on authorities to compel the people to keep their boys at school for their "own good and the general welfare," without which "will your city or your country suffer a true famine, and, without the smoke of conflict, will be silently destroyed from within" (Cubberley, 1920/1948, p. 244). The influence of the Church continued into the 20th century, with the State battling "to substitute its own organization for this religious monopoly of instruction" (Cubberley, 1920, p. 176). In modern times in the United States, with their political influence largely disestablished, churches that previously supported public schools have begun to open private schools and support homeschooling after the

aforementioned 1960s Supreme Court decisions. In this role today, Christian churches of all denominations are joining with parents to reassert parental rights and authority in the home. "The current structure of public education," argue the Protestant James Carper and Catholic Thomas Hunt, "is incompatible with America's confessional pluralism and our sacred commitment to universal liberty of conscience in matters of education and religion" (Carper & Hunt, 2007, p. 5).

The Government

Governmental objectives in education are far less defined, and much more debated. The claim that the government can do a better job of imparting knowledge to children has been disproven innumerable times. In his quantitative meta-analysis that examined the outcomes of hundreds of studies on the effects of religiosity and religious schools on academic outcomes, William Jeynes proves that religious instruction in conjunction with academics improves academics, with private and homeschools outperforming public schools in nearly every category. Yet he notes, "Nevertheless, the present atmosphere of America's public schools appears to discourage rather than encourage religiosity" (Jeynes, 2003, p. 238).

Government school advocates use externality arguments, not academic excellence, to justify their involvement in education. One such externality argues for social cohesion in society, an argument that was and is still being used to justify public schools. After the Civil War the public schools "came to be looked upon by many as the leading means whereby national unity could be achieved and maintained" (Carper & Hunt, 2007, p. 77). Mary Novello, education advocate and lecturer, likens public education to a three-legged stool; leg one is the preservation of a culture that depends

on educating its citizens, leg two is compulsion to make children attend, and leg three is convincing the public that "parents are incapable of or unwilling to take responsibility for providing their children's education and that specially trained teachers are a necessity" (Novello, 1998, pp. 102–105). Of course one must first question whose culture is being preserved after reviewing the plight of Native American tribes and cultures. Educational policies authority Joel Spring states, "Consequently, schools were created to destroy Native American cultural and linguistic traditions and replace them with the English language and Anglo-American culture" (Spring, 2004, p. 1). The real intent is to Americanize, or even homogenize, all citizens, especially new immigrants (West, 2003b, p. 126).

Another externality of public schools is our national defense, with the argument that an educated warrior is the most important weapon that any country can have. While the merits of this argument may be debatable, the question resurfaces about the ability of government schools to provide the best academic education. John Hood, research director for the John Locke Foundation, notes the following:

When government policy continues to impose rigid personnel rules, bureaucracy, regulations, and a mandate to use education to engineer social or political outcomes, a school cannot successfully impart the needed skills, knowledge, and perspective to its students—whether these students choose to be there or not. (Hood, 1993, p. 45)

The list of these "external benefits," which are separate from imparting knowledge to children, is extensive and is debated throughout all educational literature. With today's

technology and communication, many of them are outdated or have been proven insufficient to justify governmental intervention in schools.

The Freedom to Become Subservient

Throughout this discourse there has been allusion to the impact of a Prussian-style compulsory school system on individual rights and liberties in a free society. Countless people have questioned the contradictory concept of compulsion by the state in a free society, including John Holt, an advocate for home education in the 1970s and 1980s who was an outspoken advocate for the right of children to determine what, when, from whom, where, and how they got their education. The roots of just such a child-centered education began with philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), whose impact on education and the world can hardly be overestimated. Indeed, Mary Novello states the following:

It may strain the imagination to regard one man, a slightly demented philosopher of the eighteenth century, as the inventor of childhood, the inspiration for the founders of progressive education, the starting point for the Romantic movement, an early collectivist, the intelligent force behind the French revolution, and the founder of nationalism, but Rousseau cannot be denied any of those positions. (Novello, 1998, p. 93)

Novello establishes the impact of Rousseau's progressive philosophy on current American education, a philosophy that requires all social order to be under the control of the state, which in turn requires state education to convince citizens that this is true freedom. She wryly notes that in Russia and China "the populace was granted the unfettered freedom of becoming subservient to the state" (Novello, 1998, p. 74).

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), John Locke (1632–1704), and Rousseau all subscribed to the concept of a social contract, by which a person born into a society has an obligation to that society and must sacrifice some personal freedoms in order for the society to maintain stability. The current debates in academia on the benefits of compulsory public schooling are all rooted in this theory.

The crisis in American education today is the result of blindly throwing money and legislation at an institution that does not serve the parents of children, the Church, the state, and most importantly the children themselves who are compelled to participate. In an 1880 essay where he called compulsory state education an ill-considered, exaggerated idea that is "probably as short-lived as some other ideas of the present moment," former Member of Parliament Auberon Herbert predicted academic suicide and a social reordering:

[Compulsory state education] is fatal to the free growth of an intelligent love of education; to that moral influence which those of us who have learned the value of education ought to be exerting over others; to a true respect of man for man; for each man's right to judge what is morally best for himself and for those entrusted to him. ... It is a copy of a continental institution, taken from a nation that, living under a paternal government, has not yet learned to spell the letters of the word *liberty*. The example of Germany and its highly organized state education is not alluring. In no country perhaps is there less respect of one class for the other class, or greater extremes of violent feeling. Where you subject people to strong official restraint, you seem fated to produce on the one side rigidity of thought and pedantry of feeling, on the other side those

violent schemes against the possessions and the personal rights of the rich which we call socialism. (Herbert, 1978, p. 78)

The fatal effect on education of state control over godless schools was observed by Soviet Russian teacher, author, and Nobel prize recipient Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn after his release from the Gulag in 1953, saying, "the Soviet school had died; it no longer existed; there remained only a bloated corpse... When spiritual death creeps through the land like poison gas, the school and its pupils are of course among the first to suffocate" (Solzhenitsyn, 1976/1978, pp. 428–429). In 1996 Libertarian attorney Jacob Hornberger, after noting the power of the state to order parents to deliver their children to state-approved institutions, said, "In the ultimate analysis, children no longer belong to the family; they belong to the state... Final power and control lie with government officials, not with parents or families" (Hornberger, 1996).

John Hood notes the effect this has had on American education: "By any reasonable measure, America's monopolistic, bureaucratic, over-regulated system of public schools is woefully unprepared to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century" (Hood, 1993, p. 50), and concludes that political, business, and education leaders should be discussing replacing, not reforming, the present system.

Conclusion

The objectives of all parties in our American society can be better attained if we return to the principles of individual responsibility and liberty by disestablishing the state monopoly in education. Parental, Church, and State motives to educate our children differ significantly, but it is only when parental objectives are met that schools can be successful. Skills for success in life is a primary parental objective; Martin Luther

believed religious education was so important that government authorities should compel boys to attend (Cubberley, 1920/1948, p. 244), but when literacy was not taught, parents formed illegal schools that taught both boys and girls the 3Rs. The moral and spiritual development of the child is a primary parental objective; Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn observed the result of a godless compulsory government school system in twentieth century Soviet Russia, calling it dead and a "bloated corpse" (Solzhenitsyn, 1976/1978, p. 428), while Englishman Auberon Herbert in the 19th century said any compulsory state education will result in rigidity of thought or socialism and is fatal to morals (Herbert, 1978, p. 78). State objectives in education such as crime reduction, equality of opportunity, social homogenization, and national defense are far down the parental list of priorities. When schools and education are examined the matter ultimately distills to ownership title of our children. A free society that forces government education on all citizens, operating by an unwritten "social contract" instead of a republican constitution, is in many respects no freer than a totalitarian society. Homogenized governmental education, whether driven by religious interests, industrial and business interests, or bureaucratic interests, does not allow individual liberty of conscience in matters of education and religion. The most beneficial form of education to morality and to society, and its most natural form as observed by La Chalotais, is home education (La Chalotais, 1934, p. 167). Compulsion and coercion, the trademarks of totalitarian governments and our government public school systems, are anathema to true education.

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