

THE CASE AGAINST PUBLIC EDUCATION

"It is contended here, then, that compulsory support of public education is (1) wrong in principle and (2) has actually impeded rather than hastened educational progress."

From the unending arguments over tax overrides, school boards, integration, sex education, etc., one might suppose that the only question about public education concerns the kind of public education we should have. The issue that should really be debated today, however, is whether we should have a state-run, compulsory system at all. Throughout history, genuine progress in every other area—science, industry, medicine, the arts—has been the product of the free society, not of state monopoly. It is not at all clear that we are wiser, more just—or more free—for having been educated by the state.

The objections to public education are both ethical and practical.

The Ethical Objection to Public Education

In the old South when men were compelled by force to serve the needs of others, we called it slavery. Today, however, when men are forced to serve others (through tax support of programs such as public education) we call it "fulfilling one's duty to society." Call it what we will, however, compulsory support of schools is ethically no more defensible than any other form of involuntary servitude. It is the premise of this paper, then, that compulsory support of public education is simply wrong in principle.

But, of course, appeals to exalted principle are something less than convincing if the apparent alternative to state force is chaos. Accordingly, even those who question the rightness of the present system stop short at suggesting that tax support should be halted. They fear that the result would be some kind of a new dark age with the nation sinking into ignorance, crime and violence. These considerations bring us to the second issue, the practical one.

The Practical Issue

As a practical matter, what would be the condition of mass education today if support of it were not compulsory? What about the poor? Has educational progress been furthered by government involvement? Or has state force actually impeded progress by displacing private, voluntary effort? In considering these questions it would be helpful to look briefly at educational progress in England and in the United States before education became a concern of the state.

Mass Education in Nineteenth Century England: Contrary to popular opinion, the first successful experiments in mass education of the poor came about not through government action but through the voluntary efforts of private individuals. One of the true pioneers of mass education was a Quaker schoolmaster named Joseph Lancaster who opened his first school in London in 1798. He invited children of miners, factory workers, even of paupers. To the amazement of observers, these ragged children, some barefoot and hungry, began to read, write and spell. By the time Lancaster was 21 he had outgrown one temporary accommodation after

another and had finally designed and built his own school building. The sign above the entrance declared, "All that will may send their children and have them educated freely; and those who do not wish to have education for nothing may pay for it if they please."

Incredibly, Lancaster, by himself, was able to teach as many as 1000 pupils at once! (A prospect that would paralyze the imagination of today's public school teachers!) Lancaster achieved this by teaching fundamentals to a few of the older boys; then, as soon as one achieved sufficient proficiency, he became a monitor with responsibility for teaching the rudiments to ten younger children. There were monitors for reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic. Monitors ruled paper, gave exams and promoted pupils. Pupils were promoted immediately and individually upon completion of the required work.

The poor, it seems, were willing and able to pay the cost of education. (And one suspects that they paid less than they do today in hidden taxes for supposedly "free" public schools.)

But, unfortunately, this period of progressive, voluntary activity was soon to come to an end. Mass education was now becoming a political issue. Characteristically, politicians are not creative themselves, but they are very adept at exploiting what other men have developed. Government officials now began to conduct surveys and promote their own ideas. Efforts were made to bring the private schools under government inspection. At first, this interference was vigorously rejected. Later, however, in 1833, Parliament began to offer financial assistance. Many schools eagerly accepted. Thereafter, they were obliged to submit to government inspection and control. Agitation continued to grow, however, for still further government activity to "fill in the gaps" in the existing system which, although subsidized, was still essentially private. The turning point came with the Education Act of 1870, which established the first government operated "board schools" supported primarily by direct taxation. Unlike the private schools, the board schools had virtually unlimited funds at their disposal, for the 1870 Act provided that "Any sum required to meet any deficiency in the school fund, whether for satisfying past or future liabilities, shall be paid by the rating authority out of the local rate." The result of this blank check was such an orgy of extravagance that one observer, G. R. Porter, was moved to comment:

Unfortunately, expert knowledge of education and expert knowledge of finance are not often found in combination, and the greatest enthusiasm for educating the young is often accompanied by utter carelessness of the money of the taxpayer . . . At present, there is a vast amount of waste in unnecessary luxuries, in the building of ornamental palaces, in the multiplication of clerks, inspectors, and so forth.

As taxes to pay for all this went higher and higher, the inevitable results of state involvement soon became apparent: When people are forced to support a government institution, many can no longer afford to patronize a private one. Accordingly, scores of voluntary schools were now being forced to close. Many others were taken over by the state and converted to board schools.

In 1900, the transformation to state monopoly was nearly complete. Yet, considering the amazing progress that had been achieved earlier by men like Joseph Lancaster, one cannot help but wonder what abundance in educational resources might have been developed in England had private effort not been forced out of the market by the politician and bureaucrat.

Mass Education in Nineteenth Century United States: State involvement in education had earlier origins in the United States than in England. The Puritan leaders of Massachusetts had passed compulsory education laws as far back as 1642 and 1647. In general, however, state involvement up to the Nineteenth Century was limited to occasional modest subsidies to existing private schools. Of course, no two states were alike in their subsequent approach to education, but New York State may be taken as representative of the trend.

About the turn of the century private schools were beginning to develop rapidly, just as in England. Church schools were commonplace. In 1805, DeWitt Clinton founded the Free School Society whose school, as noted above, utilized the methods of Joseph Lancaster. A public school system was first established in New York State in 1812. These schools, called "common schools," were supported only in part by state funds and local taxes, however. The largest single source of revenue was the "rate bills," i.e., fees paid by the parents. Even though the common schools were not "free," however, education during this period was virtually universal: a report in 1821 by the State Superintendent of Education declared that of the 380,000 children in the State between the ages of 5 and 16, 342,479 were attending school. Mass education, it appears, was already an accomplished fact. Yet, in spite of the rapid progress being achieved in this predominantly voluntary system, agitation was increasing to abolish the rate bills, thus making support of the public schools entirely compulsory. This campaign, spearheaded by public officials and teachers, soon bore fruit. The rate bills were abolished in 1849, re-established in 1851, then abolished for good with the Free School Act of 1867. The public schools were now 100 percent tax supported. Or, to put it another way, the individual no longer retained any measure of choice as to whether or not he wished to support a state system of education.

As noted above, voluntary schools cannot readily compete with tax subsidized public schools. Accordingly, by mid-century the voluntary school population was beginning to decline. (DeWitt Clinton's Free School Society held out for a time, but finally merged with the New York City system in 1853.) This trend was not viewed with any sorrow by the public school enthusiasts, however, who had been generally hostile to the voluntary schools all along. The State Superintendent had declared in 1849:

Private schools ought not to receive the encouragement of the State, or the support of the community. They are usually sustained by those who have the ability to employ competent teachers, and the common schools are weakened by the means applied to their support. Our district schools may be so elevated (by more public expenditure) that those who seek superior advantages for their children, can find them only in the common schools.

Horace Mann, had been especially irked that private schools competed for the better teachers:

If teachers look for more liberal remuneration, they abandon the service of the public, and open private schools . . .

While we pay so inadequately a salary at home, many of our best educated young women go south or south-west, where they readily obtain \$400, \$500 or \$600 a year . . . Others of our best educated young women become assistants in academies or open private schools on their own account.

Back in 1812, the first common schools had been established merely to "fill in the gaps" in an essentially voluntary system. By now, however, the goal was not to supplement the voluntary sector, but to supplant it.

The methods of Joseph Lancaster, incidentally, were in use in some of the common schools as well as in many private schools. Opposition, however, especially among teachers, was beginning to grow. Some teachers (an increasing number of whom were products of the state teacher institutes) evidently regarded the monitorial system as an affront to their own authority and resented being reduced to the supervision of "transient, ignorant and unskilled monitors." Lancaster's methods gradually fell from favor. In New York City, the monitorial system was banned by the Department of Education in 1846.

And so evolved education in the State of New York. At the beginning of the century, it was primarily a voluntary undertaking. By the end of the century, it was virtually a state monopoly. Yet, contrary to popular opinion, mass education was already an accomplished fact many decades before that monopoly finally became established.

What might the educational facilities of this nation be today had private, voluntary effort not been preempted by state force? In considering this intriguing question, one might ponder this highly significant fact: the goods and services provided today on a free market basis—automobiles, entertainment, food, etc.—are available in abundance at steadily declining (real) cost, while the goods and services provided through state monopoly (education) are in chronic short supply, while the taxes to pay for those services go up and up and up. Indeed, present experience as well as past history suggest that this nation would have better and more abundant educational facilities today for rich and poor alike had education never become a concern of the state.

Conclusion

As public school officials never tire of telling us (especially before a bond election) education is a vital commodity. They are right, of course. But there is little to indicate that education is best provided through a compulsory, tax-supported state monopoly. On the contrary, it is painfully evident, especially in the larger cities, that the bureaucracy-ridden public school system is simply incapable of coping with the stresses and complexities of modern society. The idea that mass education can be provided only by state force is a myth. In fact, the poor were getting a better education in 1798 under Joseph Lancaster than they are receiving today in many of our public schools. At least Lancaster's pupils could read and write.

It is contended here, then, that compulsory support of public education is (1) wrong in principle and (2) has actually impeded rather than hastened educational progress. If these contentions are correct, what measures should be taken? Of course, further expansion of the public system should be opposed, and demands for increased revenue rejected. The most important issue, however, is restoration of freedom of choice. After being taxed to finance the public schools, few parents can afford to send their children elsewhere. Legislation might be sought by which parents could deduct from their school (or other) taxes an amount equal to that which they might expend in private school tuition. In this manner, parents would no longer be penalized by having to "pay twice" if they chose to patronize a voluntary, private school. Accordingly, genuine freedom of choice would be assured.

If freedom of choice in education were to prevail, the effect would be profound. Over a period of years, the public school system would gradually decline in importance. At the same time, there would be an explosive and enthusiastic growth in the number of voluntary schools: conventional private schools, trade schools, industry-sponsored schools, church schools, Black Muslim Schools, store front schools, community action schools, right-wing schools, left-wing schools, "progressive" schools, "Three R" schools, and schools of every other description. Those which satisfied their customers would flourish: those which did not would close. Perhaps many of the better teachers who now feel trapped in the public system would find in these voluntary schools a challenge, a freedom and a satisfaction which they do not presently experience. Perhaps, here and there, the methods of Joseph Lancaster would be used once again with success. If education could be freed from the dead hand of the great corpse bureaucracy, there is no limit to what might be achieved, for there is nothing more productive, more innovative, and more diverse than the free society.

Public education has been a sacred cow in this country for many years. Resistance to change would be immense. The vested interests of politicians, school bureaucrats, teacher associations, etc., would indignantly oppose any measure which might reduce their influence. But the fact must no longer be ignored that public education has provided neither the rich nor the poor with anything that could not be provided in greater abundance at lower cost by private, voluntary means. The mainspring of human progress is freedom, not state force.

It is time for a change.

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AN HISTORICAL VIEW

R. W. GRANT



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