



INDIVISIBLE

Social and Economic Foundations of American Liberty

Leading Conservatives
Exchange Policy Perspectives

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INTRODUCTION BY JAY W. RICHARDS

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EDUCATION

A Unified Vision for Education Choice

BY RANDY HICKS

CONSERVATIVES OF ALL STRIPES VALUE THE FREE market, but almost none would say, if pressed, that they support the concept of free markets as an end in itself. Instead, most would say that they support “freedom” generally and free markets specifically because freedom and the competition it encourages produce the conditions in which humans are best able to thrive. Of all the realistic alternatives, it is the system most fitting to human dignity.

As our Founders were keenly aware, however, for man to live in freedom he must be *educated* in the classical sense of the term. He must develop the requisite skills and knowledge to master the world around him. More importantly, he must acquire the moral and ethical training to master himself.

In the U.S. today, the public education system works for many. But too often it fails to do these two most basic things it was intended to do: to educate children so that they can compete with their peers at home and abroad and to prepare them morally and ethically to manage their passions.

We know that this failure to educate hurts poor and African-American communities disproportionately because the public system locks students into schools based upon their zip code, which is in large part determined by income. If you are wealthy, you can buy a home in a district with better public schools, home school, or send your children to private schools. If you are poor, however, your school choice is as limited as your ability to move. Unintentionally, the monopoly-like structure of the public system, which limits choice, has resulted in modern-day, government-enforced segregation—often by race or class, but ultimately by income. It serves to keep poor families poor and wealthy families wealthy by giving to each new generation a predetermined, and often poor, quality of education.

Combined with the failure to educate, especially to educate poor children, the public system is rightfully criticized for its failure to teach moral and ethical values—with the exception, perhaps, of fashionable and politically correct values that tend to contradict traditional values. The second President of our country, John Adams, had this to say in an address to the military in 1798:

We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, revenge, or gallantry, would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inad-



Randy Hicks

equate to the government of any other.⁵⁵

In 1947, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., expressed similar sentiments in an article for the Morehouse College student newspaper, *The Maroon Tiger*:

Education which stops with efficiency may prove the greatest menace to society... We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education.⁵⁶

Teaching morality and ethics is not critical in our society *just* because we want people to be good. Morality and ethics are prerequisites to sustaining the freedom provided to Americans by our Constitution. That freedom is only possible over the long haul if man is able to control his own sinful impulses and direct those tendencies to positive ends. It is man's willingness and ability to control his lesser impulses that also allows our free-market system to function. American-style capitalism is possible because business people, generally, embrace honesty, fair dealing, and good faith negotiating—all hallmarks of personal ethics. In the absence of these, government must legislate or regulate (and, most often, over-regulate) to fill the void created by a lack of ethics.

Of course, any serious assessment of the public education system must acknowledge the role that family fragmentation plays in predicting academic success or failure. With roughly half of all children spending at least part of their childhood in single-parent homes, not all American academic ills can be laid at the feet of public education. Still, the systemic limitations in a virtually closed market have rendered the public schools inflexible and incapable of responding to new needs and conditions.

Ironically, the nation's public schools are just adequate enough to anesthetize many Americans. They do not directly experience the painful realization that far too many children—mostly poor—are locked into schools that are systemically incapable of imparting the knowledge, skills, and values required to hold down jobs and form stable families. As a result, although educational choice fares well in public polls, it has yet to reach the critical mass necessary to effect widespread reform.

MONOPOLY VS. COMPETITION IN EDUCATION

It is not difficult to figure out why our public education system is failing our children. It is failing because, in most significant ways, it is a government-sponsored monopoly. Conservatives will agree that a monopoly in almost any market will create problems for consumers because it need not compete with regard to

55 Charles Francis Adams, *The Works of John Adams* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1854) p. 229.

56 Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Purpose of Education," *The Maroon Tiger*, Morehouse College, Atlanta, Georgia, January/February 1947, at <http://www.ncat.edu/~univstud/The%20Purpose%20of%20Education.pdf> (accessed July 20, 2009).

price nor respond to the needs of consumers. The same holds true for students and families who are the consumers of public education.

Public education's monopoly status has the characteristics of any other monopoly. Because it is government-funded, the public system has a powerful financial advantage over private competitors. For families to choose a private education, they must be willing to pay for that education twice—once in taxes to the public system that they will not use and once for tuition to a private institution that they will. For most families, the cost is prohibitive and the public system becomes the default “choice.” And like other businesses that have enjoyed a monopoly status for years, the public education system has developed a web of constituencies (from administrators to teachers to bus drivers) who are willing to spend tremendous sums of money to maintain the status quo and protect their personal interests, without regard to the needs of students and families.

Because it best accommodates the natural human drive to improve our lives and the lives of those closest to us, educational choice is desperately needed.

In seeking their personal interests at the expense of education recipients, those in the education establishment expose the central problem with our system and with monopolies generally. At their core, monopolies misdirect our natural pursuit of self-interest into socially harmful, rather than beneficial, outcomes. If we agree, as I believe all conservatives can, that individual humans are naturally driven by self-interest, then we can recognize that the organizations that we create will also tend toward pursuing self-interest. Economists recognize that the pursuit of self-interest is our tendency—both as individuals and collectively. The great genius behind the free market, which entails competition and market incentives, is that it manages to harness and channel self-interest (and even its disordered state, selfishness) to create goods and services that provide for the needs of the community. In many ways, the free market is the best voluntary structural approximation to altruism that humans have devised. The market can direct even our fallen instincts into socially beneficial results.

In contrast, a monopoly, rather than harnessing self-interest in a way that can benefit others, encourages the worst aspects of self-interest to run amok. A monopoly intensifies and entrenches the worst of human nature by providing virtually no check or counterbalance to selfish pursuits. Instead of encouraging producers to focus on the needs of the consumer, a monopoly encourages producers (in this case, education providers) primarily to amplify their power by further entrenching themselves and illegitimately driving out threatening competition. This is an apt description of the current state of public education.

SCHOOL CHOICE AND THE ROLE OF PARENTS

Because it best accommodates the natural human drive to improve our lives and the lives of those closest to us, educational choice—that is, a competitive market for primary and secondary education—is desperately needed. For the same reason,

parents should have greater control over the education of their children. All things being equal, parents are closest to their children and have far more detailed knowl-

When parents exercise their choice, it also places a healthy limit on the power of government.

edge of the child's skills and needs than even the most well-intentioned education official. And no factor is more compelling than the reality that the family has the greatest interest in the child's success. The very existence and perpetuation of a family rests on its ensuring that its children have the skills necessary to succeed in life. The family is best situated to make educational decisions because it stands to lose the most from a failure to educate its children. Government has a similar, but much more generic, interest; its interest can never be as strong or specific as the urgency felt by the family.

When parents exercise their choice, it also places a healthy limit on the power of government by keeping power localized to society's foundational unit, the family. In practice, this limitation on government stems from two facts. First, if families take care of their children's educational needs, government will not feel compelled to intervene. Second, if families understand that they have a vested interest in directing their children's education, they will jealously guard against encroachments upon their authority to do so.

Rhetorically, conservatives have much to learn in communicating the truth of these ideas. Although some speak in terms that can attract the average observer,

The common ground unifying these various arguments is, again, our commitment to the dignity of the individual.

too many of us speak a language that is native to our ways of thinking but is perceived by others as being cold, disconnected, or extreme. Some conservatives speak of choice in terms of efficiency, competition, cost-effectiveness, and free markets. Others speak in terms of morality, religion, discrimination, and parental control. While each of these arguments is legitimate and worthy of consideration, each is also highly theoretical and nuanced in ways that can hardly capture the attention (much less the hearts and passions) of those we are trying to influence.

The common ground unifying these various arguments is, again, our commitment to the dignity of the individual. Most Americans share this conviction, however inconsistently. Moreover, school choice arguments can be framed pragmatically as an answer to the question that is native to each of us, namely, "What difference would education choice make in my life?" Cutting through the theory, conservatives must be able to say to the student that choice means that he or she will have access to a quality education and the brighter future it implies. To parents, conservatives must be able to say that, with school choice, their children will be better educated and better prepared for life than under a government-dominated system.

Choice most certainly will bring cost savings and greater parental control, but until our language demonstrates a determined and unified concern for the

well-being of the individual child (and, by extension, the family), we will not win the rhetorical battle over school choice.

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