



School's Out Forever?

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With just about every public school in the country closed at this time, the only way for kids to get an education is at home. Many see this as nothing less than tragic. Writing in Education Week, Stephen Sawchuk claims that schools are an “absolute necessity for the functioning of civic culture, and even more fundamentally than that, daily life.”

If Sawchuk is correct, the country's troubles extend way beyond the Wuhan virus. While shutting down public schools is certainly a massive disruption, our civic culture was just fine before the government's monopoly on education came to be.

The push for the government's role in education began in the 1830s when a group of dedicated reformers declared that state involvement was needed to ensure all children get a better, more unified education. Leading the charge was Bostonian Horace Mann who, with like-minded souls, campaigned for a greater state role in education. They argued that a centrally planned system of tax-funded schools would be superior to the independent and home schools that existed at the time.

As the late Cato Institute scholar Andrew Coulson noted, “Shifting the reins of educational power from private to public hands would, they promised, yield better teaching methods and materials, greater efficiency, superior service to the poor, and a stronger, more cohesive nation. Mann even ventured to predict that if public schooling were widely adopted and given enough time to work, ‘nine-tenths of the crimes in the penal code would become obsolete,’ and ‘the long catalogue of human ills would be abridged.’” (Emphasis added.) While Mann's utopian goals obviously didn't quite work out as planned, they did create a link in people's minds between the “institution of public schooling and the ideals of public education” that tragically still exists.

A look at literacy rates is instructive. In 1840, before compulsory public schools existed, literacy rates were about 90 percent.

But today?

According to the Literacy Project, 45 million Americans today are functionally illiterate, unable to read above a 5th-grade level. Half of all adults can't read a book at an 8th-grade level. In California, 25 percent of the state's 6 million students are unable to perform basic reading skills. It's way past time to reappraise the Mann-created mess.

Homeschooling certainly has its challenges, especially when foisted on families with little or no warning. But unlike in the 19th century, home learning today doesn't have to depend on family members sitting at a common table going over the ABCs. With computers omnipresent, the best teachers in the world these days can teach the world.

In "We're All Homeschoolers Now," the Heritage Foundation's Lindsey Burke cites just a few of the ample resources available to parents. Outfits like Zearn and STMath are providing their materials online for free during the coronavirus outbreak. Longtime resource Khan Academy has a wealth of educational resources. Prenda Microschool is offering its coursework to families for just \$100 for the remainder of the year. The Cato Institute's Kerry McDonald lists even more resources. Also, the Home School Legal Defense Association is a one-stop-shop for all aspects of homeschooling.

Additionally, many home-schooling veterans have been offering a trove of support to the newbies, many of whom will find their unfamiliar role difficult. Married to a teacher, Michelle Thomas homeschools her four children and explains how she and her husband can swing it on a single income. She extols the many virtues of educating at home: her kids have become close friends, the family has no competition in helping form their kids' character development, flexibility in the school day, etc.

Even families who enthusiastically embrace their new role may find the money lost from cutting back on work hours daunting. But, writing about California, Reason Foundation's Corey DeAngelis suggests that the state could "give some portion of that funding to parents to cover educational expenses during the shutdown. The state could allow school districts and families to split K-12 education funding 50–50. That could be a win for both groups. School districts would get to keep half of the funding for students who no longer attend them. Families would get to use half of their children's education dollars to find a school or program that fits their current needs."

As good an idea as that is, California lawmakers undoubtedly will pass on it. Any legislation that disrupts the big government-big union complex is a sure loser. Despite the fact that kids educated by their parents outperform traditional public school students, the teachers' unions and other wild-eyed statists have been gunning for homeschoolers for years. In March 2008, a California state appellate court ruled that parents who lack teaching credentials could not educate their children at home. Needless to say, this decision sent waves of angst through California's homeschooling families, while delighting the teachers' unions. United Teachers of Los Angeles President A.J. Duffy asserted at the time, "What's best for a child is to be taught by a credentialed teacher." Lloyd Porter, a California Teachers Association board member, chimed in: "We're happy. We always think students should be taught by credentialed teachers, no matter what the setting."

Sadly for the unionistas, however, sanity prevailed a few months later. In August 2008, a state appellate court ruled that parents may indeed legally homeschool their kids in California even if they lack a teaching credential. No matter, the California Teachers Association maintains that allowing parents to homeschool their children without a state-issued stamp of approval results in "educational anarchy."

At its yearly national convention in 2015, the National Education Association passed Resolution B-83 (exactly the same as 2011's B-82, 2008's B-75, etc.), which read in part: "The National Education Association believes that homeschooling programs based on parental choice cannot

provide the student with a comprehensive education experience . . . Instruction should be by persons who are licensed by the appropriate state education licensure agency, and a curriculum approved by the state department of education should be used.”

Also, courtesy of the California Federation of Teachers, there is a law on the books which hurts homeschoolers. It stipulates that enrollment in online charter schools be restricted to students living in a contiguous county to where the school is based. This makes as much sense as being told that because you live in Los Angeles County you can't use Google as your search engine because the latter's home base is in Santa Clara County, which is not adjacent to L.A.!

According to the latest numbers from the National Center for Education Statistics, about 1.7 million kids are homeschooled in the United States, with about 190,000 of them based in California. That number undoubtedly will increase if the virus threat continues for a protracted period—by how much is anyone's guess.

As you contemplate homeschooling your young ones, please consider: your family may wind up a tighter unit and your children more literate. At the same time, they will not be exposed to perverse sex education, bullies, indoctrination, the teachers' unions' archaic tenure and seniority rules, and so on.

Think about it.