

NATIONAL REVIEW

PBS Dares to Air a Documentary Championing School Choice

Paul Crookston

April 10, 2017

School, Inc. challenges the public-school status quo. Your local PBS station might seem like an unlikely place to find a documentary critical of public education, but that is exactly what viewers get this week with the late Andrew Coulson's new documentary School, Inc.

The film doesn't attack public schools. Rather, it asks why education has yet to behave like other industries have in the last 200 years or so — and why it has failed to achieve comparable gains. The three-part documentary airs around the country this week (each part has various time slots, so check your local listings here), and in it Coulson attempts to answer a narrow but important question: Why doesn't excellence in education extend to the field as a whole, as it has in basically every other industry?

Why don't education methods "scale up" to raise quality across the board, as has occurred in basically every other industry? School, Inc. approaches this simple question with a global perspective. One of the film's key virtues, especially for education-policy non-enthusiasts, is that Coulson travels the world examining different schooling models.

This turns think-tank expertise into good TV. Coulson was a senior fellow of education policy at the Cato Institute, so it's not surprising that he takes a thoroughly libertarian view of how to improve education. But he doesn't rely on ideological abstractions. Far from it — he constructs his arguments with an eye to history, international education systems, and hard economic data.

Visiting textile mills and canals, Coulson shows how the Industrial Revolution's elevation of the profit motive combined with sound business practices to create incredible innovation — which was quickly "scaled up" to become standard industry practice.

This pattern has since played out in nearly every field except education. While innovations were transforming most industries, American public schools came under the sway of the public-school model. Authorities prioritized expanding state control of schools even when it meant crowding

out thriving private institutions. Once-common subsidies for students to attend private schools went kaput, and the drive for public-school uniformity produced problems that we still struggle with today.

Coulson highlights bright spots, such as charter schools in New Orleans post-Katrina, but such victories have often met with hostility from school boards and teachers' unions. In Part 1, Coulson illustrates this dynamic with the story of Jaime Escalante, whose classroom was put on the big screen in *Stand and Deliver*, but who left his teaching position just three years after the movie came out.

His big ideas bred resentment, and the union had another teacher installed as department chair. Why weren't the ideas of the most successful teachers supported and replicated? Taking that question overseas, Coulson visits South Korea, where tutoring networks offer a glimmer of hope that particular teaching systems can expand nationwide.

In that country, a few key standardized tests determine students' university and job prospects, and the best lecturers have become national stars serving masses of students remotely. Students and teachers alike credit freedom (including the freedom to choose a tutor and the freedom to make lots of money tutoring) for the system's ability to boost students' test scores.

This victory applies to students only in this narrow testing environment, however, so questions remain about using the techniques honed by prominent South Korean teachers to improve schools broadly. Coulson seems to find a better answer in Chile, but the country's superior schools have paradoxically incurred popular dissatisfaction.

Although Chile has Latin America's best education outcomes, which rely on publicly funding both public and private schools, Communist leaders there have turned many Chileans against their non-uniform education system. Leftists associate the system with dictator Augusto Pinochet but ignore the fact that the system itself is not authoritarian at all. This conflict brings into sharp relief one of the central obstacles to successful education reform: big-government opposition to market-based solutions. This problem has been the subject of documentaries such as *The Cartel*, but *School, Inc.* also provides some clues to overcoming it.

Another issue that has been the subject of several documentaries is religion in schools, and in *School, Inc.*'s third and final part, Coulson examines how government control of schools leads to endless political conflict over what is taught. Allowing parents to choose would lessen this tension, but there must be a mechanism that would offer choices and allow a healthy market to develop. Coulson thinks that mechanism is education tax credits.

Ideally, PBS viewers won't be offended by Coulson's findings that expanding education excellence will ultimately depend, in all likelihood, on profit. For-profit education carries a stigma, as Coulson acknowledges. But he postulates that attitudes toward profit in education can evolve the same way that attitudes toward industry changed in the run-up to the Industrial Revolution.

Given how these conflicts play out in the documentary, one sees that the political questions are in many ways more vital than the policy ones. As reformers have seen from Massachusetts to

California, successful school-choice ideas often mobilize political opposition from entrenched interest groups. In the political arena today, tax credits often have the staunchest opponents.

Critics call education tax credits “pseudo vouchers,” and it’s true that they are at odds with the progressive notion that schools must achieve equality through uniform government provision. No wonder, then, that the public-school establishment has expressed outrage at PBS for even airing *School, Inc.* Left-wing education scholar Diane Ravitch accused PBS of attempting to “curry favor” with the

Trump administration by broadcasting this “one-sided right-wing diatribe against public education.” Of course, the potential for tax credits gets no hearing on her blog, and she claimed that the documentary’s producers are “forces intent on destroying everything ‘public.’” Tax credits resemble vouchers in some ways, but they rely on people providing the money in the first place.

The government doesn’t pay into the system — individuals do, and the government gives them a tax break. (Many of these tax-credit programs rely on donors, such as in Florida). Courts have found that these tax credits do not qualify as “government dollars,” but vouchers do, and thus they are subject to more regulation. *School, Inc.*’s filming preceded the election of Donald Trump and his elevation of school choice to a much-discussed federal issue.

Those pushing for a nationwide tax-credit program could point to some of Coulson’s arguments for support. Coulson, however, opposed national school-choice programs on constitutional grounds.

Sadly, he died in February 2016, but if he were here, he would probably be contributing to this debate by cautioning against a federal tax-credit program. Coulson’s contributions to education-reform ideas — on historical research and political issues — go far beyond championing tax credits. *School, Inc.* delves into hot-button issues and misunderstood aspects of education policy. The film is an insightful dive into the question of why educating children, in countries across the globe, has stubbornly resisted improvements in efficiency.