



## The Education Establishment Fears You Might Teach Your Kids Unapproved Ideas

J.D. TUCCILLE

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Public schools can barely teach kids at all, but their defenders don't want you trying alternatives.

With families opting out of the faltering public schools in ever-growing numbers, the establishment's attacks on competing education offerings continues apace. Now, a retired teacher insists that private schools may become terrorist training camps. The over-the-top argument is the latest attempt to reinterpret the refreshing viewpoint diversity offered by chosen educational offerings as a danger to the American way of life.

"[T]he American public school is where we learn to be Americans," argues one-time journalism teacher Susan Johnson in a *Charleston Gazette-Mail* column. "In public schools, the public decides the curriculum. The public votes to elect school boards who decide the facts our children will be taught. We leave high school and enter college or the workforce with a common set of civic norms and agreed-upon facts that are derived from reason, critical thinking and the scientific method."

Johnson contrasts values taught in government institutions with what she sees as nefarious alternatives.

"In charter schools, a private board decides the curriculum. Same for private schools. One board might teach that the earth is flat. Another might teach that the pope is infallible; another might teach he is the anti-Christ," Johnson writes. "Many children are homeschooled using private instructional programs — some that are online — that are marketed for particular religious and political persuasions."

Oh, no! To what dire fate could all of these independently selected curricula lead?

Invoking fearful visions of fundamentalist Islamic schools training terrorists, she asks, "are we very far away from schools like that in America? Proud Boy Academy? Boogaloo Boot Camp?"

This is bang-your-head-on-the-desk silliness, rooted in a fundamental misrepresentation of what public schools are all about. Just last year, *The New York Times'* Dana Goldstein marveled at the contrasting ideological spin in textbooks crafted for public schools in California and Texas: "The books have the same publisher. They credit the same authors. But they are customized for students in different states, and their contents sometimes diverge in ways that reflect the nation's deepest partisan divides... [C]lassroom materials are not only shaded by politics, but are also helping to shape a generation of future voters."

If this conflict of interpretations is what Johnson means by "a common set of civic norms and agreed-upon facts" the schools in which she taught must use words in extremely unusual ways. Or maybe she's shading the fact that public school curricula are constant sources of struggle over emphasis and ideological content among people with "particular religious and political persuasions."

In truth, disagreements over what kids are taught in public schools are so common that the Cato Institute maintains an [online map in an effort to track the various battles](#). The introduction notes: "Americans are diverse – ethnically, religiously, ideologically – but all must pay for public schools. The intention is good: to bring people together and foster social harmony. But rather than build bridges, public schooling often forces people into wrenching conflict."

Johnson probably knows this — she taught in those schools. Her silly warning that private schools might divert kids into the boogaloo movement is the latest expression of establishment fears that the state is losing its grip on young minds.

"A very large proportion of homeschooling parents are ideologically committed to isolating their children from the majority culture and indoctrinating them in views and values that are in serious conflict with that culture," Harvard Law School's Elizabeth Bartholet huffed last year in a high-profile *Arizona Law Review* [article](#). Bartholet, who favors a "presumptive ban" on homeschooling, went on to argue that "[p]olicymakers should impose greater restrictions on private schools for many of the same reasons that they should restrict homeschooling."

Once again, it's fair to ask which "majority culture" Bartholet favors: that in California textbooks, or in those of Texas? But that would be missing the point. In less florid language, the Harvard professor preceded the retired teacher in advocating a state monopoly over what children are taught.

"The idea that only government schools can (or should) make people 'American' is a dangerously statist notion that should be rejected," the Home School Legal Defense Association's Michael Donnelly told me via email. "Freedom of education is at the heart of our founding principles of self-governance and liberty. In a free society education should not be one place and one system that seeks to create servile citizens. Rather, education is about helping all learners to achieve their fullest individual potential."

Despite the objections of Johnson, Bartholet, and company, freedom of education is enjoying a boom. In fact, while interest in education choice has been growing for years, (fueling experiments in charter schools, vouchers, tax credits, and homeschooling) it has really taken off in the past 12 months because of the abject failures of the public schooling establishment to effectively teach children during the pandemic.

"COVID-19 has created a strange natural experiment in American education: Families who would have never otherwise considered taking their kids out of school feel desperate enough to try it," Emma Green [wrote](#) in *The Atlantic* last September.

"Comprehensive national data aren't available yet, but reporting by NPR and our member stations, along with media reports from around the country, shows enrollment declines in dozens of school districts across 20 states," NPR [reported](#) in October.

And families, by and large, like their new options.

"Private school and traditional homeschool parents remain more positive about their children's progress compared to district school parents," according to February polling by EdChoice. The numbers remain stronger for homeschoolers and private schoolers than for district school families across academic learning, educational development, and social development.

Undoubtedly, many of the families choosing new educational options are teaching their kids ideas of which Johnson and company disapprove. But as children learn perhaps conflicting ways "to be Americans" that they can hash out in healthy discussion and debate, they're wonderfully free of force-fed lessons crafted by smug defenders of establishment-approved versions of the truth.