

EDUCATION NEWS

Thoughts on Cato Institute's Andrew J. Coulson

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Andrew Coulson, Senior Fellow of Education Policy at the Cato Institute, has passed at the age of 48.

Cato colleagues Neal McCluskey and Jason Bedrick have detailed Andrew's contributions to how we think about markets in education and how we can implement what we know through systems of choice. And as Monday's podcast testifies, he took an uncommon path.

Doug Tuthill at redefinED wrote that Andrew was methodical, civil, and influenced even those who disagreed with him. Jay Greene of the University of Arkansas' Department of Education Reform noted Andrew's humorous, witty, independent voice and his unique professional background, while Nick Gillespie of Reason called him a "free market education radical" — a title carrying tremendous meaning when we consider that what seemed so radical in 1999 is reality for hundreds of thousands of kids in 2016.

Those 400,000 kids are writing their own tributes to Andrew Coulson each day without even knowing it — or him.

There are few arenas of public policy that generate cults of personality quite the way education does. Tribalism and the desire to deify (or demonize) people associated with a particular ideology are forces so strong that throwing out a name or two has become shorthand for laying bare one's entire educational belief system. The movers and shakers in education jockey for position in that ecosystem, growing their brand and habitually checking their rankings (Whose rankings? Anyone who will rank them, and for anything) as they compel their supporters to wage battles via proxy on social media and in school board meetings.

They sell, sell, sell. It doesn't get us anywhere and it's uncomfortable. Great for the individual, not so great for the problem they're trying to solve.

But a few people just plain work. They offer something new, explain why it's better than what we've got, and make a case compelling enough to fuel a movement. They shore up that case obsessively and make adjustments as evidence dictates. They understand the most important

concept in sales: people hate to be sold to, but they love to buy. They focus on creating intellectual products people want to buy, and they have one overarching goal: moving the needle.

Andrew Coulson moved the needle.

Over a decade ago when I was transitioning into education policy, someone suggested that I read “Market Education: The Unknown History.” I won’t go over the contents of the book — you’ve either already read it, or you’re about to — but I was struck by how much Coulson knew. This guy has a command of virtually every topic under the sun, and what kind of background allowed for that? A little Googling showed that on paper, he had no business writing that book, yet there it was, and it was remarkable.

I found the Ph.D. program I was in to be a useless grind, so I met with a professor-friend about how you can do something like this — I had Market Education in my bag, so I held it out — without trudging through tired, narrow academic channels. He said, “Well, really... you can’t.”

I said, “You can.” I had a book to wave in the air that proved it. He just had words and a slavish devotion to academia, so I chalked it up as a win.

I skipped out on the Ph.D. program after receiving an e-mail that asked for grad students to classify the ethnicities of student research subjects by their surnames for part of an education-related study. The pay was \$20/hr, but I wouldn’t have done that for \$2,000/hr. I had proof that I could advance my studies elsewhere, ethically, in a broad range of fields, and come out alright — so I spent the next ten years working on a hundred different topics in a dozen different places. I was right and my academic friend was wrong.

Years later I crossed paths with Andrew Coulson himself through mutual friends on Facebook. He proved himself to be a “gentleman-scholar,” as Doug Tuthill wrote. I never met him in person, but if I had, I would have called him Mr. Coulson.

I saw credentialism dominate many different fields in many different countries, enough so that I stopped caring where anyone went to school or what letters they had before or after their names. Titles indicated how or where someone spent a block of time and anything beyond that was a crap shoot. I hate credentialism.

Over the last year or so I had friendly exchanges with Mr. Coulson — and I followed along closely with the discussions I wasn’t a part of. They were master classes in wit, analysis and advocacy. That I had access to them at a cost of nothing more than my time was an almost-daily lottery win. I half-stalked the poor guy professionally, but I wasn’t about to waste the opportunity.

Through those back-and-forths about every facet of school choice and its related disciplines, I gained an incredible amount of knowledge from Mr. Coulson — and he exposed himself to be a good man. You can’t go to school for that. You don’t apply, pay tuition or take up space in a

classroom, and there's no certificate at the end. It takes more time, more work, and comes at a greater cost. It's a lot harder to do.

A good man deserves a title that reflects the respect he's earned rather than a title he's forced the world to acknowledge because of some series of endeavors that the world may or may not find value in. A good man is a Mister. It's the highest title anyone can hold.

I am, for the most part, tied to a desk and manning its requisite nerdbox. That is by choice. Mr. Coulson was limited lately by circumstance, but we both seemed to have had the blessings of a few windows and a little bit of time outside. I posted a photo of Grommit, the little rabbit with an off-center tail who marshaled our Cooperstown, New York lawn with an uncommon competence. Mr. Coulson regaled me with the occasional update about Pamplémousse, the critter who does whatever it is that critters do on lawns in the Pacific Northwest.

That's the hard part about not taking that narrow, well-defined path — there aren't too many people who you know are doing something like you're doing each day, then stopping to look out a window to anthropomorphize bunnies. When you come across someone who you recognize might spend 15 seconds of their day the same way you do, it matters. When you come across someone like that who also takes you seriously, it really matters.

I regret that Mr. Coulson didn't know anything I've written here. I never told him or anyone else. And I regret that I won't have the opportunity to change his mind on the only two issues of substance that we disagreed on — the importance of sports in culture (I am a fan, he seemed disinterested) and verb agreement with collective nouns (I insist collective nouns are singular, while he said the British plural approach was supreme). Given another 60 or so years of debate and I do believe I could have converted him on both scores — because I, like Mr. Coulson, am something of a Sisyphean optimist with those things.

Andrew Coulson has passed, leaving behind an impressive body of work and a legacy that's a little part of the life force of hundreds of thousands of kids, their families and their communities. Those numbers are poised to multiply.

I still don't know what, if any, official credentials he had. Someone might tell me, but I won't bother to look them up. I don't need to. I know that he advanced the work of countless others, including mine, and helped lead a successful movement that decades ago seemed impossible. He did it with humility, civility and a seriousness of purpose.

There are 1,300 words above, but five probably would've sufficed:

Mr. Coulson moved the needle.