

EDUCATION NEWS

An Interview with Neal McCluskey: The Legacy of Andrew Coulson

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February 9, 2016

1) Sadly, Andrew Coulson recently died, much too young. Your initial thoughts?

When Andrew died, we lost one of the greatest advocates of true educational freedom – freedom not just to choose schools, but for educators, families, and students to decide for themselves what to teach, how to teach it, what to learn, and how to pay for it – in the world. Sadly, this was not a complete shock: Andrew had been battling brain cancer for about fifteen months. But if anyone was going to beat it, it was Andrew, whose invincibly sunny disposition inspired almost limitless optimism.

2) He was well known for his book *Market Education: The Unknown History*. How did that book come about?

I don't know the entire backstory, but Andrew had been a computer software engineer at Microsoft in the late 1980s/early 1990s, and after leaving that job took an interest in education policy after hearing, I believe, about the controversy over a school voucher proposal in California. Basically, if I recall correctly, the idea of school choice struck him as eminently logical, and the results of public schooling seemed so clearly poor, that he decided to make analyzing education his mission. Years of toil and research into the history of education eventually produced the book that put him prominently on the education reform map: *Market Education: The Unknown History*.

3) What were his views on vouchers?

Andrew did not oppose vouchers – I think he saw them as far preferable to a government monopoly – but he was concerned about the dangers attached to them, especially that the state giving money to parents would lead to substantial, freedom-quashing regulations. To a significant extent he has been proven right. He also thought that vouchers involved more coercion than was necessary – the state takes your money and gives it to parents, like it or not – which is why he preferred tax-credit funded scholarships that first involve people choosing to donate, and often allow donors to choose specific groups to fund.

4) His ideas about charter schools?

I think Andrew was more worried about charter schools than vouchers, while still believing that more choice is better than no choice, and charters provide more choice for students and educators. But charters, compared to true, private school choice, are hugely constrained because they are public schools. They have to use state standards. They have to use state tests. They can embrace no religion. And perhaps most concerning, they give parents the impression that they are private schools – or are at least equivalent to private schools – only you don't have to pay for them. The result appears to be that a non-negligible number of charter students would otherwise have gone to private schools, so private schools – much more independent institutions than charters – are hurt.

5) Obviously, he was a great advocate as well as a scholar. Could you share perhaps one story as to his efforts?

Perhaps the greatest story is yet to come. For several years, Andrew had been working on a herculean documentary series entirely of his own devising—illustrating vividly and humorously how free markets have worked and can work in education, and how crippling government education monopolies have been. He was nearly done with the series when he passed, and it should be completed soon. Hopefully it will soon be on television sets – and changing minds – around the country.

6) In terms of his legacy- what has he left behind?

He has left behind his written work, certainly, as well as a documentary with the potential to be a game-changer in the on-going public debate over school choice. But more than that, he has forever put a kind, jovial face on the crusade for true educational freedom for all.

7) What have I neglected to ask about this fighter who fought the good fight?

I think you've covered it.