

EDUCATION NEWS

Neal McCluskey: School Choice and Democracy

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An Interview with Neal McCluskey

1) [School](#) choice has been hotly debated. And the President has recently given his State of the Union address. Your thoughts post speech?

It is clear that the President is not a strong supporter of school choice programs, especially private school choice. That was only apparent in his speech because he did not mention choice at all, but it has been much more clear in his actions, including trying to defund Washington, DC's, voucher program, and harassing Louisiana over its private-school choice program.

2) For years, there have been private schools – but they have been costly. Should there be vouchers?

Not all private schools have been costly, especially if you include parochial schools in that group. They have, though, been costly relative to the “free” public schools because they don't get taxpayer subsidies and have to charge tuition. But why should someone who needs something different than the public schools for their child have to pay taxes for schools they don't use, and a second time for a school that meets their child's needs?

Ultimately, money should follow the child, not be assigned to a government school. Vouchers are one way to do that, and another, probably better way, is to give tax credits to people who choose private or homeschooling, or who donate to organizations that give [education](#) scholarships. We've seen those programs grow faster than vouchers, and they give taxpayers more control over how their money is spent.

3) Often school choice is thought to be the only system of [education](#) consistent with a free – and harmonious – society or democracy. What is your reasoning for this?

I wish it were “often,” but the prevailing assumption actually seems to be that harmony is achieved by making diverse people pay for – and de facto attend – public schools. The reasoning is that doing so is thought to encourage diverse people to get to know one another and, through “democratic” control of the schools, hash out their differences. I think this gets things wrong: Instead of bringing diverse people together, public schooling forces them into conflict over whose values, histories, etc, will be taught in the schools they all must support. And conflict is inherently divisive.

Historically, there is good evidence of public-schooling inflamed conflict, and for contemporary evidence Cato's new, fully searchable, “Public Schooling Battle Map” offers hundreds of examples of values-based public schooling conflicts. History, as well as some research, also

suggests that when people are allowed to freely interact, conflict is reduced while real bonding – bonding based on shared norms, interests, etc. – occurs.

The existing evidence, I should say, does not prove that school choice is more consistent with a harmonious society. Nonetheless, logic and evidence strongly suggest, I believe, that Americans would be more united through widespread school choice than public schooling. And there is little question that there is greater freedom when government does not control education.

4) I would think that in a true democracy, people would be free to choose their school- but there are these rules and regulations about districting and the like. Where did all these rules and regulations come from by the way? And are they not interfering with school choice?

I'd start by saying that "democracy" is a term used by lots of people in lots of different ways. If it is meant to say "a society based in individual liberty," you would be right to assume that it should include freedom to choose a school without penalty. Many people, however, seem to use the term mainly to imply majority rule, and majority rule need be no more respectful of individual rights than a dictatorship.

Alas, I think a significant reason you see lots of rules and regulations is because there is a tendency to see government as rightfully having control over education as long as some representative process controls government policy. And the public schools have tended to grow in power as people have concluded that, often, someone else's children need to be learning something different than their parents or local communities would choose.

5) Perhaps SOME religious groups would want to education their children in a catholic or parochial or Jewish fashion- and I see nothing wrong with that. But are those students equally prepared to participate in our representative democracy?

Research on the civic knowledge and proclivities of private – including religious – school kids indicates that such kids, on average, are probably better prepared to participate in society and representative democracy than public-school students. But suppose some people wanted to stay largely insular. As long as they didn't impose their beliefs or desires on others, how would that be bad? Indeed, isn't it crucial that we let lots of ways of living coexist and even compete? And is it worth sacrificing a big part of the freedom of all people for fear that some, likely very small, minority would use that freedom badly?

6) Our "melting pot " represents various faiths, creeds, beliefs etc. How do you envision our society coping with a number of different schools with different curriculums?

Historical evidence suggests that different groups tended to assimilate into society out of mutual self-interest, not because of schools. New immigrants would often live in identifiably ethnic communities to begin with because it would simply be too shocking to fully jump into a new society and culture. Over time, though, they would discover that by working with people outside of their groups they could improve their financial and social standing. And, of course, why would someone want to remain an alien in one's home?

In education, there is evidence that private schools foster greater bonds between kids of different groups, quite possibly because the thing for which they chose the school – maybe religion, maybe an arts-based curriculum – is a more powerful bonding agent than whatever is the cause of their initial social distance.

7) I assume that your “ bottom line “ is that in a truly free, democratic society, various religions, races, ethnicities should be allowed to educate according to some internal curriculum or criteria that THEY envision or develop- am I off on this ?

That’s right, and not only does research suggest that educational freedom is actually a better way to create harmony, it is a better way to promote good academic outcomes. Freedom enables schools to develop high social capital – shared norms and bonds – which facilitates efficient and effective education. Heavily simplified, not having to fight means greater ability to focus on educating.

8) What have I neglected to ask?

I think you hit all the important stuff.