



FREE MINDS AND FREE MARKETS

## Public Schools Will Always Be Political Battlegrounds

J.D. Tuccille

May 5, 2022

One benefit of homeschooling is that my family looks on escalating conflicts over curricula and disputes about school policies as observers, with little skin in the game. Whether a state law can be characterized as "don't say gay" or "anti-grooming" doesn't touch us, because we teach what we want. School officials mandating masks or letting students decide is unimportant, since we do as we damned well please. We can move without fretting over school districts and our son can take his lessons on the road. Frankly, giving *everybody* such an easy exit from inevitable battles over government schools would go a long way toward relieving social tensions and making people happier.

"Thanks for ruining Disney World, public schooling," the Cato Institute's Neal McCluskey wrote in April. "Disney is now a major combatant in the nation's culture war. Yes, its internal workings have become a part of the war, but it was Disney's weighing in against Florida's Parental Rights in Education law – dubbed 'Don't Say Gay' by opponents – that got Mickey all politicized."

The Florida squabble over what students should or shouldn't be taught about sexuality in the classroom continues to dominate headlines. Progressive teachers call the bill hateful, conservative lawmakers elsewhere plan to copy the legislation, and Disney put itself at the center of the dispute by criticizing the controversial law, making the giant entertainment company a cautionary tale for businesses navigating between competing policy preferences held by people inside and outside their companies.

As if lawmaking over lesson plans wasn't enough, headlines also feature reports of books yanked from schools. Conservatives dislike certain treatments of sex and politics, progressives call out sexism and stereotypes, and everybody gets very upset about race.

"One element unites all the conflicts around these bans — a political and ideological partisanship that buys more into contemporary culture wars than into our students' education," wrote Sungjoo Yoon, a Burbank High School student who took to *The New York Times* last month to document his personal experience with book battles. "Both conservatives and liberals engage in book banning and removal when it suits their political goals."

Anybody who didn't anticipate fights over lessons and reading lists hasn't paid attention to the simmering curriculum wars of recent years, including the endless debate over Critical Race Theory. And they definitely didn't read John Stuart Mill's take on such bitter tussles during whatever passed for their education. Mill, the prominent 19th century philosopher, argued in 1859's *On Liberty*: "Is it not almost a self-evident axiom, that the State should require and compel the education, up to a certain standard, of every human being who is born its citizen?" But, importantly, he *also* argued that the state should have little to do with the delivery of that education.

"A general State education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another; and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government, whether this be a monarch, a priesthood, an aristocracy, or the majority of the existing generation, in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body," Mill warned. He believed that requiring education while letting families choose the means "combined with State aid to those unable to defray the expense" would minimize the danger.

"Were the duty of enforcing universal education once admitted, there would be an end to the difficulties about what the State should teach, and how it should teach, which now convert the subject into a mere battle-field for sects and parties, causing the time and labour which should have been spent in educating, to be wasted in quarrelling about education" so long as the state agreed to "leave to parents to obtain the education where and how they pleased, and content itself with helping to pay the school fees of the poorer class of children," Mill added.

Unfortunately, policymakers listened to Mill about the compulsory part but ignored the rest, which isn't all that surprising for politicians. Today, government-run "public" schools dominate education. The result has been "difficulties about what the State should teach, and how it should teach" between people of widely varying opinions who suspect each other of attempting to establish "a despotism over the mind." We did exactly what Mill cautioned against and suffer the consequences he predicted.

But public schools were losing their grip even before COVID-19, and their institutional face-plant in responding to the pandemic accelerated the process. Homeschooling, my family's option of choice, grew to 11 percent of the student population and gained widespread approval. Traditional private schools as well as innovative microschools took off. And privately run but publicly funded charter schools demonstrated their responsiveness to parents as well as their value as exits from the curriculum wars.

In an April write-up about Hillsdale College's growing network of charter schools, Stephanie Saul of *The New York Times* noted "the Hillsdale schools could be something of a publicly funded off-ramp for conservative parents who think their local schools misinterpret history and push a socially progressive agenda on issues from race and diversity to sexuality and gender."

While the piece quotes several critics of the project, Hillsdale is hardly alone in creating schools that cater to people tired of battling over institutions shared with those who have different preferences.

"Frustrated with what they say is their public schools' failure to provide quality education and nurturing environments for Black children and fearing the persistent school to prison pipeline, a group of mothers, many public school teachers, have created a network of their own schools," *The 74's* Marianna Murdock noted in January of the Arizona-based Black Mothers Forum's charter microschoools.

Homeschoolers and private schools are already free to choose their philosophies and curricula, of course. That means parents can make sure their children are taught as they see fit. But rather than "leave to parents to obtain the education where and how they pleased, and content itself with helping to pay the school fees of the poorer class of children," as Mill prescribed, most places still mug families for the taxes to support one-size-fits-few public schools, making education options of choice an added expense.

But Americans wants better. In February, 72 percent of 2,000 respondents told pollsters they support the "right to use the tax dollars designated for their child's education to send their child to the public or private school which best serves their needs." A separate poll found that "78% of parents want influence over what's taught" in school. Being able to select *where* and *how* your child is taught is the best way to choose *what* is taught without battling others who want something different.

Nasty fights over lessons and schoolbooks are inevitable so long as we force people of different values and opinions to send their children to the same institutions. Over a century and a half after John Stuart Mill advised us to keep government out of it and let parents choose their own schools, it's time we listened.