



It's Time To End Government-Run Schooling

We need to bulldoze the education establishment and privatize schools.

Larry Sand

September 29th, 2021

The National Center for Education Statistics recently published K-12 enrollment data for the 2020–21 school year, and it showed a 3 percent drop—about 1.5 million kids from the previous year. With a total k–12 enrollment of about 51 million students in the United States, that equates to a loss of 1.5 million children. The largest segment of the leavers and no-shows were kindergarteners and pre-k kids, whose enrollment dropped by 13 percent last year. As American Enterprise Institute policy maven Rick Hess points out, “Such figures are unprecedented; public school enrollment has grown almost every year during the 21st century, with any declines coming in well under 1%.”

While the main reason for the exit is COVID-related, there are other reasons to bail. The latest NAEP—also known as the nation’s report card—reveals that just 37 percent of U.S. 12th-grade students are proficient in reading and a pitiful 24 percent are proficient in math. It’s important to note that these results are from 2019, before the teacher union orchestrated COVID hysteria forced schools across the country to shut down.

So where are the escapees going? Some parents are availing themselves of the new private school options throughout the country. According to the latest available data, 18 states have created seven new choice programs and expanded 21 existing ones this year.

Charter schools also have experienced more growth in 2020-21 than they have in the past six years, according to data released last week from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. While traditional public schools were losing students, independently-run charter schools in 39 states saw an influx of 240,000 new students, a 7 percent increase over last year, more than double the rate of growth from the prior year.

Additionally, homeschooling has been booming. The Census Bureau reports that between 2012 and 2020, the number of homeschooling families remained steady at around 3.3 percent. But by May 2020, about 5.4 percent of U.S. households with school-aged children reported they were homeschooling. And by October 2020, the number jumped to 11.1 percent.

With so many government-run schools not meeting their customers' expectations, perhaps it's time to think about doing away with them. Entirely. I know I will be charged with heresy—being a right-wing shill for corporations, anti-union, a crackpot, and worse, in some quarters, but let's get real. As a country we did quite well before the government stuck its large bureaucratic nose into our lives, and we can do so again.

The push for a governmental role in schooling began in the 1830s, when a group of reformers declared that state involvement was needed to ensure that all children receive a better, more unified education. Leading the charge was Horace Mann who, with like-minded souls, campaigned for a greater state role in the process. They argued that a centrally planned system of tax-funded schools would be superior to the independent and home schools that existed at the time.

As the late Cato Institute scholar Andrew Coulson noted, “Shifting the reins of educational power from private to public hands would, they promised, yield better teaching methods and materials, greater efficiency, superior service to the poor, and a stronger, more cohesive nation. Mann even ventured to predict that if public schooling were widely adopted and given enough time to work, ‘nine-tenths of the crimes in the penal code would become obsolete,’ and ‘the long catalogue of human ills would be abridged.’” While Mann's utopian goals obviously didn't come near fruition, they did create a link in people's minds between the “institution of public schooling and the ideals of public education” that, sadly, still exists today.

A look back at literacy rates is instructive. In 1840, before compulsory public schools existed, literacy rates were about 90 percent. But today? According to the U.S. Department of Education, 54 percent of U.S. adults 16-74 years old—about 130 million people—lack proficiency in literacy, reading below the equivalent of a sixth-grade level. Here in California, we spent about \$79 billion on education in 2019, yet only half of all California students performed at grade level in reading on the most recent state-administered test. Also, just 34 percent of California 4th-graders scored proficient in math on the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Additionally, due to teacher union mandates, it is virtually impossible to fire an incompetent teacher or reward a good one by paying her more.

I can hear shrieks coming from the Randi Weingartens of the world. “Children must go to a school run by the government with a state credentialed (unionized) teacher! Education is too important to leave to the whims of the free market! We just need more (and more) money!”

The simple response here is to compare education to food. To feed your family do you go to the government-run supermarket near your home? Of course not. You find a local, privately-run store that has the food you want at the best price. Just imagine if the government forced you to buy food from that crappy government market down the street that sold rancid meat, overripe fruit, and month-old bread.

The establishmentarians will then clutch their pearls and whine, “But, what about poor people who can't afford to pay for their kids' education! The answer is that we will do the same thing for schooling that we do for food. If a family demonstrates it can't afford to buy food, we give them a SNAP card with which they can then purchase groceries. Similarly, we can assist

impoverished families by helping to subsidize their children's education. Everyone else pays their own way—just as they do with food. (Just think of the billions of dollars in saved taxes!)

I realize this transformation could not happen overnight. In fact, a 12-year phase-in would be workable. Let the kindergartners escape first and add a grade each year through grade 12, so by the end of 13 years the conversion would be complete. That way, every child now enrolled in a public school could complete her k-12 education the old-fashioned way. Also, that amount of time will be needed to help existing private schools get ready for the barrage of students they will be receiving, and new school operators will have time to plan for the new set-up.

I know this will be a tough sell . . . to say the least. The bureaucrats, union leaders and much of the public will do everything they've always done to maintain the status quo, and it will take time for many to see the light.

One ally in this fight is Steve Greenhut, Western region director for the R Street Institute, who recently wrote an op-ed in the *Orange County Register* on the subject, in which he makes many of the points that I make above. His lede is, "Do you ever get the sense that fixing our nation's ill-functioning public-education system is like trying to retrofit a belching, century old coal-fired power plant into a modern, clean-energy facility? Moving forward sometimes starts with a bulldozer—and the realization that one occasionally needs to start from scratch."

Greenhut gets it. Fire up the bulldozers!