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‘School Inc.’ looks beyond one-size-fits-all education

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“In the modern world, we ride the crest of a wave. Every day, innovators discover new and better ways of meeting our needs. The greatest innovations are routinely replicated worldwide, except in education, which has remained stubbornly at anchor, while the rest of the world has sailed past it.”

The above quote begins, and sets the tone for, *School Inc.*, a terrific three-part documentary first aired on PBS in April. Available now online, it is the brainchild of Cato Institute scholar Andrew Coulson who traveled the world to see what works in education. Sadly, Coulson succumbed to cancer in February, 2016.

We revisit the extraordinary Jaime Escalante, perhaps the greatest teacher ever. Beloved by his Garfield High students, all from the hard-scrabble area of East Los Angeles, who scored so well on their AP Calculus test, they were made to retake it just to show they didn’t cheat. Escalante, who “worked as if his life depended on the success of his students” should have been emulated by colleagues and revered by his school district. But due to petty jealousy and his unwillingness to kowtow to niggling union rules, the innovative educator was eventually hounded from his school.

Coulson takes us to Seoul, South Korea, where fierce competition for entrance to the very best colleges has given birth to hagwons. These intensive, privately run after-school tutoring sessions are attended by 95 percent of all students by the time they leave high school. Hagwon teachers must renew their contracts yearly, but can be rewarded generously. One teacher, Kihun Kim, has pulled in \$25 million over a 10-year period. Unfortunately, government officials, worried that they would lead to inequality in the education system, outlawed most private tutoring in 1980. But hagwons didn’t disappear; they simply went underground, and because Korean students love them, they continue to thrive.

In the 1980s, Chile opened up its education system to consumer choice and competition via a voucher, giving parents a choice between a public or private school. The voucher is differentiated by a student’s socioeconomic situation. So when a school enrolls a low-income student, the school receives approximately 60 to 80 percent more per pupil than if they enroll a student from the middle class or upper-middle class. Chile out-performs all other Latin American countries that participate in international tests. In 1990, about half of Chileans lived under the poverty line. Today, it’s less than 15 percent.

In India, public schools are free, but many poor parents pay to send their children to low-cost private schools. Their reason is clear. James Tooley, whose book 'The Learning Tree,' is similar in substance to School Inc., makes an appearance and explains, "I spoke to one father who had transferred his daughter from the private to public and now back to private. He told me, 'If you go to a market and are offered free fruit and veg, they'll be rotten. If you want fresh fruit and veg, you have to pay for them.'"

Tooley continues that in Hyderabad he has seen "dedicated entrepreneurs who are running schools. They come in on their weekends, and run science fairs, and sports competitions." After being warned by a parent about government run schools, he visited one and saw "130 children, all bright-eyed, eager to learn, eager to welcome this stranger in their midst, doing nothing ... abandoned."

The stories have a similar theme. When schools are innovative, reward excellence and are accountable to students and parents, good things happen. But when the government and unions intervene, a one-size-fits-all mentality takes place and quality suffers.

Not surprisingly, all the usual suspects are up in arms over the documentary. The leftist Media Matters charges that the program is a platform to right-wing ideologues. Educational establishmentarian Diane Ravitch lashed out, claiming that the show is "paid propaganda." At the National Education Association convention earlier this month, the union adopted an official position of objection to School Inc., claiming the documentary "was funded by a foundation known to support vouchers and allied with Koch Brothers' Americans for Prosperity and the Richard and Helen DeVos Foundation."

Andrew Coulson's sunny disposition and upbeat presentation bring his pro-libertarian, freedom and capitalist ideas forward in a non-pedantic manner. His points are sensible and backed up by data. The ideas he promotes have been proven to work with rich and poor all over the world.

Now, if we in the U.S. could look past the centralized, bureaucratized, big-government-knows-best mentality and into the 21st century.