

What's Wrong with Our Schools

Free to Choose, Chapter 6 Milton Friedman

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Introduction

- At first, schools were private and attendance **strictly voluntary**.
- The first **compulsory attendance** law was enacted by Massachusetts in 1852, but attendance did not become compulsory in all states until **1918**.
- The “movement” gained additional ground in the 1930s along with the general tendency toward both **expansion and centralization** of government.

- **Parents** complain about the declining quality of the schooling their children receive. Many are even more disturbed about the dangers to their children's physical well-being.
- **Teachers** complain that the atmosphere in which they are required to teach is often not conducive to learning.
- **Taxpayers** complain about growing costs.

Elementary and Secondary Education: The Problem

- In 1836, schooling was widely available to (white) children from families at all economic levels.
- The movement of “free school” in 1840s, led by Horace Mann– the father of American public education.
- “Education is so important that government had a duty to provide education to every child.”

- “Schools should be secular and include children of all religious, social and ethnic backgrounds.”
- “Universal free schooling would enable children to **overcome** the handicaps of the poverty of their parents.”
- Though the arguments were all pitched in terms of **public interest**, most support of **free school** movement came from teachers and administrators, **not from parents**.

- Teachers and administrators expected to enjoy **greater certainty** of employment, greater **assurance** that their salaries would be paid, and a greater degree of **control** if government rather than parents were the **immediate paymaster**.
- The United States was not unique in moving from a mostly private to a mostly governmental system of schools.
- The government takeover in Britain resulted from pressure by teachers, administrators, and well-meaning intellectuals, rather than parents.
- As professional educators have taken over, control by parents has weakened.

- The results: Input up and output down.
- In the 5 years from school year 1971-72 to 1976-77, total staff in public schools went up 8 %, cost per pupil went up 58%.
- Excellent public schools tend to be concentrated in the wealthier suburbs of the larger cities, where **parental control** remains very real.

- If the consumer is free to choose, an enterprise can grow in size only if it produces an item that the consumer prefers because of either its quality or its price.
- The **interests** of teachers, administrators, and union officials are different from their interests as parents and from the interests of the parents whose children they teach.

A Voucher Plan

- Voucher plan is a simple and effective way to **assure** parents greater freedom to choose, while at the same time **retaining** present sources of finance.
- Parents should be permitted to use the vouchers not only at private schools but also at other public schools.
- The desire of parents to spend more on schooling could readily add to the amount provided by the voucher.

Possible Problems with the Voucher Plan

- *The church-state issue.* First Amendment. 2002 U.S. Supreme Court **5 to 4**.
- *Financial cost* will increase, voucher paid to student now attend private schools (10%).
- *The possibility of fraud.* Voucher would have to be spent in an *approved* school.
- *The racial issue.* Integration has been most successful when it has resulted from choice, not coercion.

- *The economic class issue. Rich and poor families.*
- *Doubt about new schools.* What reason is there to suppose that alternatives will really arise?
- *The impact on public schools.* The threat to public schools arises from their defects, not their accomplishment.

Obstacles to a Voucher Plan

- The **educational bureaucracy** is the key obstacle to the introduction of market competition in schooling.
- It has adamantly opposed every attempt to **study, explorer, or experiment** with voucher plans.

- Dennis Gee, secretary of a local teachers' union: “We see this as a **barrier between us and the parent...** It's this sort of philosophy of the marketplace that we object to.”
- “Despite the unrelenting opposition of the educational establishment, we believe that vouchers or their equivalent will be introduced in some form or other **soon.**”

Higher Education: The Problems

- At government institutions at which tuition fees are low, students are **second-class customers**.
- Low tuition fees attract many young men and women who come **because fees are low**. This results in high dropout rate.
- Atmosphere in the classroom is often **depressing** rather than inspiring.

- The rewards for faculty are **not for good undergraduate teaching**. Even the most famous state universities are not noted for undergraduate teaching.
- At private institutions, the students are the primary customers.
- Complete rate is higher in private schools than public schools, 95% in Dartmouth, 50% in UCLA.

Why subsidize?

- Social benefits?
- Equal education opportunity?
- Student from higher-income families benefit the most from the subsidies.