

# Market Education and the Public Good

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From Canada and the United States to England and Australia, a debate is raging over school governance. The central issue is whether educational systems designed around free market principles and directed by the decisions of families would be superior to the government-run school systems most nations have today. Amidst the great variety of arguments that has been made on both sides of the issue, a general pattern has emerged. Supporters of market education tend to assert that their proposals would increase responsiveness to families and raise academic achievement, while critics argue that market systems could not produce the social benefits we have come to expect from public schooling.

With only a few exceptions, the participants in this debate are talking past one another. Many defenders of public schools acknowledge that there is at least a good chance of achievement improving under a vigorously competitive market, and most admit that competition and parental choice would force schools to cater more closely to the demands of the families they serve. Indeed, some public school supporters

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oppose market reforms precisely *because* they would cater to the diverse demands of parents. They fear that if parents were completely free to decide the course of their children's education, our societies would be factionalized and balkanized, destroying social cohesion and precipitating conflicts between different ethnic and religious groups.

Based on this assessment, it seems as though the best way out of the muddy rut into which the school choice debate has fallen is to take a hard look at the indirect social effects of market systems and compare them to those of state schooling. If markets prove to be as good or better at producing positive social outcomes, then the debate could take a great leap forward. But even suggesting such a possibility may be too much for some public schooling proponents to stomach. After all, they may be thinking, the very reason public schools were introduced in the first place was to bring literacy and learning to the masses, to promote understanding of and participation in democratic life, to ensure that all children had access to a good education regardless of family income, and to promote social cohesion. Given these *raison d'être*, how could public schools *not* be superior to market systems in creating social goods?

Such a view is entirely understandable given the aforementioned conception of the origins of public schooling. If we want people to seriously address the question of social outcomes under market versus state schooling, we first need to show that it is even worth asking. One way to do that is to have a brief look at the history of Canada's public schools, to see whether or not it bears out our assumptions.

### **How Canada Got Its State Schools**

The idea that public schooling arose in response to grass-roots public demand, or even that it was a top-down effort to serve the needs of citizens, finds little support in the historical record. As in the vast majority of nations, public schooling was put in place in Canada thanks to the relentless urgings of government-appointed, paternalistic ideologues. The undisputed leader among Canadian promulgators of state schooling was Egerton Ryerson.

Ryerson became assistant superintendent of schools for Upper Canada (now the province of Ontario) in 1844 and was promoted to superintendent two years later. He held the office for three decades and in that time did more to advance the government take-over of education than any other Canadian. Most of his ideas on tax funding and government operation of schools, compulsory attendance, training and

regulation of teachers, and even textbook selection and censorship were passed into law during his tenure.

The motivation behind Ryerson's flurry of activity was his profound belief that his fellow citizens, like so many errant sheep, were incapable of looking after themselves and needed to be herded and watched over by a vigilant government. In 1858, he wrote:

The State, therefore, so far from having nothing to do with the children, constitutes their collective parent, and is bound to ... secure them all that will qualify them to become useful citizens *to* the state (Prentice 1988, 170; emphasis added)

Note that he did not say "useful citizens *of* the state," but rather "useful citizens *to* the state." Ryerson saw himself not as a public servant, bound to ascertain and meet the avowed demands of the people, but as a philosopher king charged with shaping public attitudes along whatever lines he considered best. His contemporary, John Carroll, wrote that Ryerson's ambition had lain "in the direction of influencing public opinion on those questions and measures the carrying of which he deemed to be for the good of the church and the country" (McDonald 1978, 84). Ryerson admitted as much himself, stating that one of his chief occupations was to

Prepare publications calculated *to teach the people* at large *to appreciate* ... the institutions established amongst them; and to furnish, from time to time, such expositions of great principles and measures *of the administration* as would *secure the proper appreciation and support* of them on the part *of the people* at large. (McDonald 1978, 85; emphasis added)

Rather than trying to make the state serve the will of the people, Ryerson aimed to convince the people to follow the will of the state. "Government operates on mind," he wrote with Orwellian fervour, as "a minister of God" showering its blessings on its subjects (Prentice 1978, 132). Ryerson's nozzle of choice for producing that shower was a centrally planned government education system. Writing to the British Governor of Upper Canada, Ryerson explained that "the youthful mind of Canada," must be "instructed and moulded in the way I have had the honour of stating to your Excellency, if this country is long to remain an appendage to the British Crown" (McDonald 1978, 84).

While studying the educational systems of Europe, Ryerson was greatly inspired by the extent of the royalty's power to manipulate schools in its efforts to produce a docile and supportive citizenry. According to education historian Neil McDonald, Ryerson concluded that the French king ruled with more absolute power than his English counterpart and that this was only possible thanks to total government control "of the French system of education, from the university down to the primary school" (McDonald 1978, 89). Ryerson's confidence in the ability of the French monarchy to use its power effectively was exaggerated, given that the royalists were ousted from power repeatedly during the 19th century, but it is useful to know where his sympathies lay. Thoughts of monarchical power over education clearly gave him much cheer, and he happily concluded that

democracy, popular opinion to the contrary, was on the wane in Europe and constitutional monarchy was in the ascendancy (McDonald 1978, 89).

### **Do Canada's Public Schools Deliver the Goods?**

The roots of Canadian public schooling thus extend into an unpleasant-smelling pile of autocratic compost rather than into the earthy loam of democracy so often supposed. Still, just because state schooling in Canada was designed and implemented by an anti-democratic monarchist does not mean that the institution is necessarily bad at producing social goods. We should judge it based on its results rather than strictly by its provenance. Our historical reality check has thus served its purpose. Shocked out of our complacency, we are now ready to evaluate public schooling based on how well it actually fulfils our social goals.

So, how are we doing? Canada is certainly suffering less internal turmoil than many other nations, and while its economy is perhaps not the most vigorous in the world, it is at least functioning moderately well. The problem with these kinds of general observations, though, is that it is difficult to decide how much to attribute them to the public schools and how much to other influences such as demographics, civil society, economic policy, etc.

Fortunately, there are some specific cases of social effects that can be clearly traced to government schools. Unfortunately, those effects tend to be negative. Consider government schooling's effects on religious harmony. In deference to a strong Catholic minority, the Constitution

Act of 1867 required the province of Ontario to pay for a separate Catholic school system in addition to the regular public schools. Government funding of Catholic schools continues to this day, while no other religion in the province enjoys such subsidies.

This strikes many Ontarians as unfair, and it drove some parents to appeal to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. Arieh Waldman filed a complaint with the UN stating that he was forced to pay for his sons' Jewish education while taxpayers subsidized the schooling of Roman Catholic children. In a November 1999 ruling, the United Nations found in Waldman's favour, ruling Ontario's education funding system discriminatory and calling on the federal government to address the problem within 90 days. The ruling had no force of law, but it put Canada in an awkward position—the federal government, after all, had freely chosen to sign the UN Covenant on Human Rights of which Ontario was found to be in violation.

Ottawa's response to the UN was to ask Ontario to comply with the Covenant by extending government funding to all the province's religious schools. Ontario's Premier immediately replied that his government had no intention of complying with the ruling or of altering its funding system in any way. Janet Ecker, the province's Minister of Education, defended Ontario's stand, stating that

We've been very clear that our goal is a good quality public education system, and the estimates of \$300 million needed to fund religious schools would be \$300 million that would come out of the public school system. (Brown 2000, On the Web at: <http://www.campuslife.utoronto.ca/groups/jsu/news/thestar2.htm> )

Ontario's refusal to revise its education funding system has angered families who feel that the province is actively discriminating against them on religious grounds. Given their frustration, one might expect these parents to take the province to court, since Canada's own Charter of Rights and Freedoms (adopted in 1982) also guarantees equal treatment of its citizens regardless of their religion. Section 15, paragraph 1 of the Charter reads as follows (emphasis added):

*Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion ...*

As it happens, a very similar case was already taken to court. In *Adler v. Ontario* ([1996] 3 S.C.R. 609), Canada's Supreme Court ruled that the Charter of Rights and Freedoms was superseded by the Constitution Act of 1867, and upheld Ontario's education funding system. (This will no doubt prove confusing to US readers accustomed to the more binding guarantees offered by the Bill of Rights. It is par for the course in Canada, however, where any provincial government can also veto the national Charter of Rights and Freedoms at its leisure by invoking the so-called "notwithstanding clause.")

Constitutions can be amended, however, and yet, four years after the *Adler* ruling, and more than a year after the UN verdict, the majority of Ontarians seem content to leave the Constitution Act of 1867 untouched, thereby continuing to discriminate against religious minorities. In the words of York University law professor Anne Bayefsky, this will undoubtedly lead to continued "discord and unhappiness and intolerance" (Blackwell 1999). Ontario's public schools, so often defended on the grounds that they are necessary to prevent social discord, are in this case actually creating it.

The province of Quebec also had a religiously-based government school system enshrined by the Constitution Act, but, unlike Ontario, it *has* chosen to abandon that system. On the first of July, 1998, Quebec officially replaced its pair of religious government school systems (Catholic and Protestant) with a pair of linguistic ones (French and English). Under the new system, schools can still offer Protestant or Catholic religious instruction, but it must be optional and students must also have the choice of a secular class in morals and mores (Vu 1998).

The vestiges of devotional religious training in government schools are likely to be short-lived. A 1999 report by a government-appointed task-force recommends the complete secularization of Quebec's public schools. The task-force, headed by Université de Montréal professor Jean-Pierre Proulx, recommends that religion be studied solely for its historical and cultural significance, in an academic, non-devotional fashion (Arnold 1999, Read Online at <http://www.cjnews.com/pastissues/99/may6-99/front3.htm> ).

Has this move toward secular state schooling eliminated the sort of religious conflict caused by Ontario's selective funding of Catholic schools? For some groups, the secularization of state schooling is long overdue. Quebec's largest teachers' union, the Centrale de l'Enseignement du Quebec (CEQ), has joined a coalition advocating complete secularization, stating that "Schools are not churches, they're not temples,

they're not mosques, they're schools (Vu 1998)." As the Proulx report declares:

Parents who want their children to attend schools that reflect their values should look to the private school system. (Arnold 1999, Read online at <http://www.cjnews.com/pastissues/99/may6-99/front3.htm>)

M. Proulx notwithstanding, some religious parents object to the idea that they would be forced to pay taxes for schools that do not reflect their values and beliefs. The English Speaking Catholic Council (ESCC), for example, has formed its own coalition "to counter the position taken" by the CEQ's coalition (Walker 1998. Read online at: <http://www.qfa.qc.ca/escc/98-99AR.htm>). In other words, the proposed secularization of government schooling in Quebec is driving the people to organize themselves into separate factions in order to more effectively impose their views on their fellow citizens. It is surely not lost on the reader that this is *exactly* the kind of balkanization that supporters of secularization claim public schools *avoid*.

Alan Borovoy, of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, has stated that public schools are "one of the main instruments for promoting inter-group co-operation and respect in our communities" (Blackwell 1999). It is hard to reconcile such beliefs with the real conflicts playing out in Quebec and Ontario.

Perhaps, one might argue, these sorts of social conflicts are aberrations and are not inherent in the make-up of government schooling. Or perhaps the issue of religion is unusual and the overall social effects of state schooling are actually positive. Furthermore, even if public schooling does precipitate some social discord, it may still be superior to education markets in its overall social effects. These suggestions are investigated below, in an accelerated roller-coaster ride through the history of education.

### **A Note on the Uses and Abuses of History**

The wary reader, before agreeing to be strapped into this particular roller-coaster, may be concerned about the way in which the historical evidence will be selected and used. History is big, and a motivated researcher can usually find a precedent or two to support almost any argument. Even well-meaning scholars sometimes reach faulty conclusions due to

the lack of a reliable method for farming the vast wheat fields of the past.

To minimize such problems in my own research, I have defined the scope of my investigation as the entire span of formal education from ancient times to the present, and I have adopted a careful strategy for comparing the relative merits of alternative school systems. That strategy is comprised of the following three components:

- Observe how similar school systems operate across many different cultural, technological, and economic settings.
- Observe how different school systems operate in similar settings.
- Observe changes in outcomes that occur as a particular society moves from one educational system to another.

The most common error in the use of historical evidence is to select one commendable culture or practice and then suggest it as a model for contemporary policy. The problem, of course, is that what works in one time or place may not work in another. With respect to schooling in particular, there are many factors beyond the classroom walls that affect educational outcomes. The advantage of the strategy I have outlined is that it turns the great variations between cultures into an advantage. Any education system that has consistently produced good (or bad) results across many different settings and time periods may have something very important to teach us.

While this strategy can increase our confidence in generalizations drawn from the historical record, it should not be confused with scientific proof. The past offers no randomly selected control groups or controlled experimental conditions. Readers must use their own judgement in weighing the evidence.

These caveats in place, we can begin our ride. As already noted, this discussion is of necessity highly abridged. Those wanting a more complete treatment can refer to my book *Market Education: The Unknown History*.

## **The Goods, the Bads and the Uglies**

### *The Social Effects of Schooling across Time and around the World*

Mass education has a much longer history than is generally assumed. As far back as the 5th century BCE, schooling among the Greeks began

to spread beyond a tiny elite and eventually reached the majority of citizens. The ancient Greek educational experience was far from uniform. In fact, two very different approaches to schooling arose in the city-states of Athens and Sparta, making this an excellent starting point for our historical journey.<sup>1</sup>

Classical Athens was at once the most liberal society of its time and one of the most cohesive. Though it was plagued by some of the same social blights that have afflicted modern nations, such as slavery and sexism, the level of freedom enjoyed by its citizens would not be exceeded for the next two-thousand years. This freedom extended to education, permitting families complete discretion over their children's schooling. Government played no role in the funding, regulation, or provision of education, but Athenians were nevertheless the most educated people in the ancient world. Independent elementary schools were created in response to public demand, and more advanced lessons followed shortly thereafter, thanks to the travelling professors known as Sophists.

At the elementary level, a common core curriculum<sup>2</sup> evolved naturally from the fact that parents recognized the need for their children to acquire certain basic skills, values, and bodies of knowledge. The range of subjects offered at the secondary level was far more diverse. Apart from a vigorous competition among teachers, however, this diversity produced little friction. It was generally accepted that every student had a right to study what, how, where, with whom, and for how long he or his parents chose.

The most democratic state in history prior to the foundation of the US republic did not require democracy or anything else to be taught in its schools. It did not even require the existence of schools. It did not need to. If anything, its political institutions were made more stable and resilient by its *laissez faire* policies. The freedom and prosperity produced by these policies were so far superior to the living standards of other contemporary cultures that Athenian citizens had a powerful incentive to ensure their city's survival. Political participation was widespread and intense, far more so it seems than in some modern nations. Presented with the obvious fact that their individual security and welfare depended on the security of the entire community, Athenians generally took sensible educational and political steps to ensure the perpetuation of that community.

Even the obvious flaws in Athenian culture were mitigated by its separation of school and state. Though the widespread sexism of the

ancient world made it common practice to formally educate only boys, it was not illegal for Athenian girls to attend school. As a result, the philosopher Aspasia was able to open a school and successfully encourage parents to enrol their daughters, after having built a reputation teaching oratorical skills to the city's most famous thinkers.<sup>3</sup> This development was met by consternation on the part of the city's conservatives, but they could do little more than grumble, since traditional discriminatory practices were not enshrined in law. Aspasia's school was a harbinger of things to come. Several generations later, it was commonplace in Hellenistic<sup>4</sup> societies for both girls and boys to attend school.

Athens' chief rival during its golden age was the city-state of Sparta. Spartan schools were also a force for minimizing dissention among the citizenry, but they pursued that aim in a very different way. Every aspect of child-rearing which in Athens was the right and responsibility of parents, was in Sparta the prerogative of the government. State rule, unmitigated by written laws, began before a child was even conceived, and ended only in death. Marriages tended to be arranged by the parents, though the proper age for this decision was laid down by the state (Xenophon 1988, 167). To get the flavour of the relationship between family and state in Sparta, it helps to know the views of the city's most acclaimed leader, Lycurgus, on that most intimate of family matters. According to his biographer, Plutarch:

First and foremost Lycurgus considered children to belong not privately to their fathers, but jointly to the city, so that he wanted citizens produced not from random partners, but from the best. Moreover he observed a good deal of stupidity and humbug in others' rules on these matters. Such people have their bitches and mares mounted by the finest dogs and stallions whose owners they can prevail upon for a favour or fee. But their wives they lock up and guard, claiming the right to produce their children exclusively. (Plutarch 1988, 26)

This bit of genetic engineering was followed up by a sort of government triage, in which newborn babies were brought before the city elders and inspected for defects. If these elders decided it was better for the state and for the baby itself, the baby was dispatched to a cliff on nearby Mount Taygetus, from which it was thrown (Plutarch 1988, 27).

At the age of seven, all the male children who had passed this test were separated from their families and taken to live in school dormitories

—here again, the education of girls received less attention than that of boys.<sup>5</sup> The way students were treated was well-captured by the terms used to describe them. A class of boys was referred to as a “*boua*,” the same word used for a herd of cattle, and from each herd, a dominant boy was chosen to act as herd-leader. With satisfying consistency, their head teacher was called “*paidonomus*,” or boy-herdsman. This individual was chosen from the aristocracy, and granted the authority to train the boys and to harshly discipline them if any failed to follow his instructions. In his efforts, he was assisted by two “floggers” armed with whips (Xenophon 1988, 168-69; Freeman 1904, 18). Parents had no direct say in the education or upbringing of their children, having to cede their responsibilities and desires to this single, monolithic state system.

Sparta’s brutal state school system did produce a very effective military, and its totalitarian ability to homogenize children kept dissention within the populace to a minimum, but it achieved these ends at the expense of virtually every human freedom we take for granted today. It is hard to imagine any citizen of a modern democracy preferring the Spartan approach to community harmony to the Athenian approach.

From the sixth through the eleventh centuries, when Western monarchs could barely sign their own names (Nakosteen 1964, vii), Muslims, Jews, and Christians preserved and advanced classical knowledge in intellectual centres across the Middle-East. At its pinnacle in the tenth and eleventh centuries, Islamic scholarship was a rich mixture of Eastern and Western legacies combined with new work in mathematics, physics, and the life sciences.

Before the birth of the prophet Mohammed around the year 570, many children in Persia (now Iran) were already attending elementary schools reminiscent of those of Athens. They learned basic grammar and arithmetic, usually in the teacher’s home, and occasionally also poetry, horsemanship, or swimming. Once Islam took hold in the seventh century, however, a new form of elementary education grew up beside the first, in which the Koran became the central, sometimes the only, subject of instruction (Shalaby 1979, 16-23). These two forms of elementary schooling continued to exist side by side, with many of the secular schools charging tuition, while others, along with virtually all of the religious institutions, were maintained by private charitable grants (Durant 1950, 304, 94).

Though it enjoyed monarchical powers and did not hesitate to use them in many areas of life, the medieval Islamic state initially played little role in education. Artists and scholars were sometimes generously

patronized by the caliphs and lesser officials, but there was no systematic government funding or operation of schools. Just as in Athens and republican Rome, schooling flourished under these circumstances, and a fairly coherent educational system evolved. Education generally reached even the poorest children thanks to the religious and secular grant-maintained schools, and the profound conviction of the time that every child should achieve at least basic literacy and a knowledge of scripture. One modern scholar of medieval Muslim education, presumably unfamiliar with the precedent set in ancient Athens, has expressed surprise at the success of this decentralized educational market:

The most astonishing fact about it is that it worked in spite of the lack of [government] organization. Even the rules and regulations were not uniform in most cases. However, the form of the classes and the methods of teaching were to a great extent the same throughout the Muslim world. (Ahmed 1968, 52)

Some of this consistency in techniques was no doubt the result of respect for tradition in what was a very traditional society, but the influence of competition and emulation were also key factors. Muslim scholars, like the Sophists before them, strove to learn from each other's successes, copying the things that worked and abandoning those that didn't. They were driven by the same impetus that exists in any competitive market: the desire of consumers to reap the advantages of the latest techniques and discoveries. Those teachers who failed to keep pace with the advances in human knowledge occurring in the Arab world could not have prevented their students from finding other teachers who did.

During its golden age in the eighth through the tenth centuries, the Muslim world enjoyed a level of literacy at least the equal of anything that had gone before. In poetry and philosophy it was hugely prolific, and in the sciences it led the world. A crucial factor in these advances was the existence and widespread tolerance of peaceful disagreement among scholars. While religion was the driving force in Arab society, it was initially viewed as compatible with criticism and secular inquiry. So long as schooling and state were kept separate, skeptics and agnostics coexisted with orthodox Muslims, and both in turn were tolerant of the Hebrew and Christian scholars who contributed so much to the early work of translation and teaching. Education historian Abraham Blinderman writes:

Perhaps few other periods in the tragic history of the Jewish people have been as meaningful to them as this period of Judaeo-Arabic communion. The renaissance of Jewish letters and science in Arab lands is a glorious testimonial to the cultural cosmopolitanism of the Arabs at a time when Jews in Europe were being burned as witches, plague-begetters, and ritualistic murderers. (1969, 471-474)

This period of unfettered learning did not last. The power of education as a tool of political and religious indoctrination eventually proved too tempting, and around the middle of the eleventh century Nizam-al-Mulk established state-run schooling. Nizam, the chief minister of sultan Malik Shah, was notable for his interventionist government policies and his religious intolerance. An orthodox follower of the Sunnite branch of Islam, he actively sought to suppress the competing Shi'ah branch and looked askance on Jews and Christians. In keeping with his views, the state schools he founded were designed to inculcate Sunnite orthodoxy and to promote his own partisan political aims (Shalaby 1979, 56-57; Nakosteen 1964, 38; Durant 1950, 308-309). Control over what was taught passed from the hands of the learners to the hands of the rulers.

In seizing the education system as a club with which to bludgeon their opponents, the leaders of the Islamic world extinguished the freedom of thought and speech that had raised their civilization to cultural pre-eminence. What had been a vibrant and diverse intellectual society gradually began to calcify. The practical, research-oriented studies that had occupied so many Muslim physicists and physicians were swept away as revelation displaced inquiry and tradition smothered innovation. Ironically, schools abounded during this period:

As Islam began to decline after the end of the eleventh century, the number of its schools of higher learning increased and flourished. These colleges were, however, almost all denominational schools opened and supported by leaders of various Islamic religious factions. Each denominational college was open, with few exceptions, only to followers of a given sect. Religious and literary studies and Arabic language and grammar dominated the subject matter at the expense of philosophy, science, and social studies. (Nakosteen 1964, 42)

And so it was that schooling, which at first had fed the social and intellectual life of the Muslim empire, eventually poisoned it.

The cases just described are not exceptional. The beneficial social effects of market education and the divisiveness of state-run schools are apparent in both ancient and modern societies, and under both autocratic and liberal systems of government. Even in the putatively free and democratic United States, public schools have been guilty of coercion, discrimination, and oppression. While Bostonian public school promoter Horace Mann was going to great paeans to convince the public that state schools would cure all social ills, other mid-19th-century advocates focused on one “ill” in particular: immigration.

The majority of New England’s political and educational leaders was Anglo-Saxon and Protestant, as was most of the population. The society was to a great extent homogeneous and many people preferred it that way. The ever-mounting waves of immigration of the eighteen-thirties through the eighteen-fifties, particularly the influx of Irish Catholics,<sup>6</sup> were thus seen as a grave threat. Advocates of state schooling were quick to point out that a carefully crafted, government-approved education would go a long way towards ridding recent immigrants of their offensively different customs; producing a sort of stone-washed immigrant graduate with no sharp edges or strong fibres. Typical of this new argument was an article in *The Massachusetts Teacher*, published in 1851, concerning itself with the Irish-Catholic immigration “problem.” In a twisted foreshadowing of the sonnet that would grace the Statue of Liberty, it stated that:

The poor, the oppressed, and, worse than all, the *ignorant* of the old world, have found a rapid and almost a free passage to the new ... The constantly increasing influx of foreigners during the last ten years has been, and continues to be, a cause of serious alarm to the most intelligent of our own people ... Will it, like the muddy Missouri, as it pours its waters into the clear Mississippi and contaminates the whole united mass, spread ignorance and vice, crime and disease, through our native population? Or can we, by any process, not only preserve ourselves from the threatened demoralization but improve and purify and make valuable this new element which is thus forced upon us, and which we cannot shut out if we would? (Coulson 1999, 79)

Naturally, the process in question was public schooling. According to the remainder of the article, it was crucial that government education be imposed through “stringent legislation” and “an efficient police” on

immigrants regardless of their wishes. This sentiment was one of the main driving forces in the establishment of public schooling in the United States. Nor were Canadians immune to this xenophobia. Egerton Ryerson promised that his universal government school system would prevent a “pestilence of social insubordination and disorder” from being spread by “untaught and idle pauper immigration” (Prentice 1988, 56).

In their early years, public schools did not disappoint the xenophobes. The Protestant Bible was not only freely used in US public schools—to the infuriation of Catholics—but several state Supreme courts ruled that all students could be forced to read from it. Students who refused to read the Protestant Bible could be and were beaten by their teachers, and though a number of parents filed court actions as a result, no teacher appears to have been found in violation of the law for these beatings (Kaestle 1983, 170-171).

When established schools throw the weight of government behind a particular moral or religious view, they inevitably give rise to hostility and frequently to bloodshed within their communities. US public schools have been no exception. When Catholic parents finally won the right to use their own Bible in some Pennsylvania public schools during the 19th century, the city of Philadelphia erupted into what became known as the Bible Riots. More than a dozen people were killed and St. Augustine’s Church was burned to the ground.

While the results in this case were extreme, the high level of tension created by public schools was common then and it is common today. Battles between conservatives and progressives over textbooks, the curriculum, evolution/creation, the hiring and firing of teachers, etc. have been going on since the turn of the century and there is no sign that they are on the decline. Though only a small percentage have escalated to violence (sniper fire on occupied school buses, dynamiting of school buildings, that sort of thing) (Jenkinson 1982, 17-23, 22, 18-19), the amount of antagonism they have generated is tremendous. Neighbours have been set against one another precisely because the public schools are owned and operated by the state, and because the policies they adopt affect all citizens, not just those who agree with them.

The record of US private schools is dramatically superior in this respect. It is all but impossible to find evidence of book burnings and demonstrations surrounding the pedagogical choices made by private schools because no one is forced to attend any particular private school.

Parents who believe creationism is a science can find schools that teach it as such, while those who favor evolutionary accounts of human origins can do the same. Neither group forces its views on the other and both are able to live peaceably in the same communities. The students of Catholic schools do not protest the absence of the Catholic Bible from public schools or from Muslim academies because their own freedom is not impinged by those institutions. There is no need for theory when the facts are plain: free educational markets have consistently allowed a harmonious coexistence of different moral, religious, and pedagogical views in a way that government schools have not and, by their very nature, cannot.

Some schools do indeed serve particular ethnic, racial, and religious groups under educational markets, but these schools *do not* precipitate conflicts. Just as churches of many different faiths are able to coexist peacefully in free societies, so too are schools. It is grossly inconsistent to claim that homogeneous church communities are acceptable, but homogeneous school communities are not. Nonetheless, this inconsistent position is widely held, and so it is worth exploring in some detail.

What, for instance, about racism? Is there an advantage to public schools over markets in the treatment of racial minorities? The evidence indicates otherwise. Throughout history, governments have used their established schools to repress members of ill-regarded groups, whether religious, ethnic, or racial. For six decades, the highest court in the United States held that it was perfectly acceptable for state schools to ignore the fourteenth amendment and segregate students by race. Most did. It is true that the majority of independent schools at that time were also segregated, but there was at least the possibility for enlightened non-racists to send their children to independent mixed-race schools—a possibility that did not exist within the government system, at least not in the south.

This disparity is very much reminiscent of the way that the extreme sexism of the ancient Greeks played itself out in the free education market of Athens versus the state schools of Sparta. While girls were prevented by law from attending school with boys in Sparta, Athenian sexism was only a matter of tradition, and Aspasia was able to successfully flout it by opening her own school. Within a few generations, it became commonplace for girls as well as boys to attend school in Hellenistic cities organized along Athenian lines.

Forty years after the US Supreme Court finally reversed itself and struck down school segregation laws, the public education offered to Blacks is still inferior in the majority of cases to that received by Whites. Urban public schools serving predominantly African-American students suffer from extreme inefficiency, pedagogical neglect, and even decrepit and collapsing buildings (Coulson 1999, 209-211; see also Kozol 1992). When compared to private schools serving the same population, many public schools hardly deserve to be called institutions of learning. Urban private schools serving low-income minority students spend far less per student than public schools, are better maintained, safer, enjoy superior classroom discipline, and raise student achievement above the level achieved in government schools (Coulson 1999, 266-273, 279-286).<sup>7</sup>

Though racial integration has been a stated goal of US public schools for forty years, those schools are little more integrated today than they were before the first mandatory busing plan was introduced. Independent schools, by contrast, have become vastly more integrated during the past four decades, and, according to recent research, now offer a more genuinely integrated environment than do public schools.

In the 1968-69 school year, 93 percent of all independent school students were non-Hispanic whites, 3.6 percent African-Americans, and 3.3 percent of other racial or ethnic groups. Thirty years later, the percentage of African-Americans in independent schools has almost tripled to 9.1 percent, approaching the (12.6 percent) proportion of African-Americans in the population at large. The overall percentage of minority students in independent schools has leapt from 6.9 percent to 22 percent during the same period. Even after this rapid rise, the rate of growth in black independent school enrolment continues to outpace that of total independent school enrolment or white independent school enrolment. (Coulson 1999, 276)

But how much do students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds really interact in private or public schools? Professor Jay Greene and his colleague Nicole Mellow cleverly addressed that question by observing the voluntary seating choices of students in school lunchrooms. This, they reasoned, was a far more meaningful measure of integration than overall district or even school-level enrolment figures. What they found

is that students in private (particularly religious) schools were much more likely to choose lunch partners of other races than were students in public schools (Greene 1998, Published on the Web at [www.SchoolChoices.org/roo/jay1.htm](http://www.SchoolChoices.org/roo/jay1.htm) ). Just as integration of the sexes was better achieved under the free market of ancient Hellenistic civilizations, so racial integration is now better achieved by independent schools.

## **Conclusion**

Contrary to popular conception, the preponderance of the evidence shows free education markets to have far more benign effects on their societies than state-run school systems. Though this finding may seem counter-intuitive at first, a single realization is all that is necessary to understand it: Coercion, not diversity, has historically been the cause of balkanization in education systems. Time and again, heterogeneous societies have been able to exist in comparative harmony thanks to the freedom of parents to obtain the sort of education they valued for their children without forcing it on their neighbours. State school systems, by contrast, have consistently been used by powerful groups (whether democratic majorities or ruling elites) to discriminate against weaker groups. In the 19th century United States they were used as a club to beat down Catholic immigrants, and in turn-of-the-millennium Ontario they elevate Catholics above all other religious groups. The social tensions are just as real in either case.

It is certainly possible that the preceding distillation of the historical evidence may leave some readers unconvinced—in much the same way that seeing only the tip of a particular iceberg may have left the Titanic's captain unconvinced. But just as there is more berg than can be seen above the waves, there is more historical evidence than can be related in a single paper. It is my hope that this essay will encourage all sides in the school choice debate to consider the historical precedents when drawing conclusions about the relative social benefits of state school systems versus free education markets.

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## Notes

- 1 For greater detail on ancient education, see Coulson, *Market Education*, Chapter 2.
- 2 Reading, writing, athletics, arithmetic, poetry, and music. Art was later added.
- 3 Socrates, for example, apparently counted himself among her grateful students.
- 4 The term Hellenistic world, though literally meaning those societies steeped in Greek culture, more accurately refers to cultures based on Athenian practices, as the traditions of Sparta and other divergent Greek city-states were not widely adopted.
- 5 Spartan girls were encouraged to train and compete in athletics, however.
- 6 Especially during the Irish potato famine of 1845-50.
- 7 See also: Anthony S. Bryk, Valerie E. Lee, and Peter B. Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). And: Jay P. Greene, Paul E. Peterson, Jiangtao Du, Leesa Boeger, and Curtis L. Frazier, "The Effectiveness of School Choice in Milwaukee: A Secondary Analysis of Data from the Program's Evaluation." Harvard University Occasional Paper 96-3/August 1996. And: Weinschrott, David J., and Sally B. Kilgore. "Educational Choice Charitable Trust: An Experiment in School Choice." Hudson Briefing Paper no. 189, The Hudson Institute, Special Report on School Choice, 1996. And: Fuller, Howard L. "New Research Bolsters Case for School Choice," Wall Street Journal, January 21, 1997. And: Coleman, James, and Thomas Hoffer. *Public and Private High-Schools: The Impact of Communities*. New York: Basic Books, 1987. And: James Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore. *High School Achievement* (New York: Basic Books, 1982).