

Pandora's Box

Though public schools are intended to promote social cohesion, they actually do the opposite.

By Andrew Coulson

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If you are like most people, you agree it would be terrific if parents could choose their children's schools but worry that the result would be a more divisive society.

But isn't our current school system doing that already? The province of Ontario subsidizes the schools of Roman Catholics — but extends such funding to no other religious group.

This blatant discrimination has angered many families who feel victimized by religious prejudice and intolerance. 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.

In Quebec, a recent task force has recommended the complete secularization of Quebec's public schools and, as a result, parents and other stakeholders are organizing themselves into separate factions in order to more effectively impose their views on their fellow citizens.

This is exactly the kind of balkanization that supporters of public education claim the institution avoids.

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.

The best way to find out if those hypotheses are true is to have a look at the history of education. In particular, we can learn a lot by studying how a given education system has worked in many different times and places.

After a four-year study of the world's schools, from ancient Greece to tenth-century Persia to 19th-century

America, I have found that the divisiveness of state-run schools is apparent in both ancient and modern societies and under both autocratic and liberal systems of government.

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. US public schools have been no exception.

When, for example, Catholic parents 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 over program cuts, controversial books, teaching methods, school closings, prayer in school, etc. have been going on for years and there is no sign that they are on the decline.

Though only a small percentage have escalated to violence, 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 private schools is dramatically superior in this respect. It is all but impossible to find evidence of book burnings and demonstrations surrounding the choices made by private schools.

Though racial integration has been a stated goal of US public schools for 40 years, those schools are little more integrated today than they were before the first mandatory busing plan was introduced. Independent schools, by contrast, offer a much more genuinely integrated environment than do public schools.

Contrary to popular conception, the preponderance of evidence shows that free education markets have far more benign effects on their societies than state-run school systems. State school systems have consistently been used by powerful groups to discriminate against weaker groups.

In the 19th-century US, 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.

Isn't it time to once again give choice a chance?

(Adapted with permission from a speech made at the Fraser Institute Conference on April 1, 2000)

How We Got Our State Schools

The idea that Canada's public schooling arose in response to grassroots public demand, or even that it was a top-down effort to serve the needs of citizens, finds little support in the historical record.

The undisputed leader among Canadian promulgators of state schooling was Egerton Ryerson, a man who saw himself not as a public servant, bound to ascertain and meet the desires of the people, but as a philosopher king charged with shaping public attitudes along whatever lines he considered best.

Ryerson's profound belief was 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 his view, public schools were needed because they offered an opportunity to instruct and mould young minds.

In his words: "The State ... constitutes their collective parent, and is bound to ... secure them all that will qualify them to become useful citizens to the state." (emphasis the author's)