

Cookie Cutter Kids

One-size-fits all schooling will benefit some students — but devastate others.

By Karl Zinsmeister

(Mr. Zinsmeister is the editor-in-chief of The American Enterprise magazine,

For me, one humbling aspect of raising children was discovering how much youngsters can differ, even within the same family, and how strong each child's internal predispositions tend to be.

Rearing children is not like kayaking, where you point the boat precisely where you want to go. It's more like sailing — you take the prevailing force as a given and simply try to redirect it. If you're good, and lucky, you'll zig-zag your way to about where you'd like to be. But be prepared to roll with the seas!

Good schooling, like good parenting, must begin by acknowledging this reality. Some children are delicate and in need of extra-sensitive treatment; others will be ruined without a whip hand.

Some students thrive on independent coursework, while others desperately need structured days and inspired guidance. Some children are bursting with quirky gifts; others have a fire for competition burning within their breasts; yet others will achieve precisely as much, or as little, as is demanded of them.

To make it even more confusing, some youngsters go through several of these phases at different points in their lives. Schools must take the differing natures of children into account. To a considerable degree, this is a sorting exercise.

There are, to put it simply, certain children who should never darken the door of a military academy; others will blossom only in one.

When it comes to writing, memorizing, learning languages, pursuing science, absorbing music, obtaining religious training, exploring athletics, there is not strictly one answer to educational excellence. Rather, there are multiple answers for children of different ages, origins, and temperaments.

Education is a humane undertaking — a people business — and, as with other people businesses, what we really need is a bloom of competing options. They all need to be serious, demanding, and clear-eyed. And they must share certain universals of truth, common language, joint history, and tradition. But these fundamentals may be pursued through a variety of methods and mechanisms.

Because we need wide choices to suit differing circumstances, we ought to be encouraging competition among schooling alternatives.

We should require every school to disclose its results, and then let parents and children select the best match for their situation — without pointlessly eliminating alternatives like private or religious schools.

As even arch-liberal Brent Staples wrote recently, "the argument that millions of children must have their lives snuffed out by failing schools and incompetent teachers just to keep impregnable the wall between church and state has worn thin in millions of homes, including my own."

The great — and tragic — irony is that while education is one of life's undertakings least suited to one-size-fits-all production, our current system of publicly-financed schools is one of the most uniform and monopolized portions of our society. Compare the way we school to the way we provide doctoring, or housing, or even college education.

Our liberal élites love to criticize cookie-cutter shopping malls and assembly-line hamburger chains. Yet they haven't a word to speak against the automaton blunderings of public education monopolies.

For a glimpse of how rich and multi-faceted childhood education could be in a freer world of de-monopolized education, please wander through the classroom doors we open for you in the pages of the January/February issue of our magazine.

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