

Every Day a Field Day

This book makes a strong case for abolishing compulsory education.

By Karin Litzcke

For most of us, school is so embedded in our lives that it never occurs to us to think about *whether* school is a good thing. School just is.

School shapes our day, our week, our year, and indeed our lives, to the point where we probably wouldn't know where to start planning our time if school were to suddenly disappear, and we certainly wouldn't know where to start making decisions about whether, and if so how, we want to educate our children.

And that is an important part of Matt Hern's premise in his new book, *Field Day: Getting Society Out of School*.

He argues that our degree of dependence on public schools is actually making us stupider, not smarter. Because we don't make any decisions about schooling, either for ourselves as we grow up or for our children, we become less competent at making decisions about everything.

Hern looks closely at things that most people take for granted, for example that education is compulsory. Well, duh, you might say to this. Of course, everyone should go to school, and that is why compulsory education laws have been enacted, and at times brutally enforced, all over the democratized world, including Canada.

But after 60 years, or in some provinces over 100 years, of compulsory education laws, during which time education has grown into an incredibly expensive behemoth that sees more power struggles than learning achievements, it might be time to examine how society has evolved with those laws in place.

Hern takes on that challenge, and convincingly pronounces compulsory education an unmitigated failure at achieving any of its declared objectives, concluding that it exists solely for its own benefit and not for the good of children or society.

The cost of the public education system and its performance, both in gross terms and relative to each other, elicit some harsh criticism from Hern, and he dismisses any chance for successful reform of the monopoly.

"I know that there are many genius teachers doing great work, but schools are just not going to put themselves out of business in any significant way. There is just far too much entrenchment of interest."

Hern obliterates any hope that even the teachers' unions, which many consider to be the conscience of the public school system, might offer useful guidance, with one of the bleakest assessments of unions that I've read.

"Teachers' unions should be recognized for what they are: advocacy groups for their members... They are not interested in anything that undermines their fiefdom and aggressively repudiate any attempts at genuine change with platitudes about the undermining of public education. It is a transparently conservative position based on self-interest, and one that repels any proposal to disperse power to families, communities, or kids. Asking teachers' unions about schooling is like asking Enron about energy policy."

Not only has compulsory schooling failed to deliver on its benefits, but also, Hern argues, it imposes great costs on society and on individual children. One cost he examines most thoroughly is the skyrocketing use of drugs to control children so that they can function in schools, condemning that practice absolutely.

Having rejected monopoly schooling, Hern spends considerable time and energy on a wide-ranging exploration of how alternatives to the status quo could emerge, what those alternatives might look like, and what some people have been doing already to escape the mainstream system.

Hern rejects gurus ranging from E.D. Hirsch, Jr. to Rudolf Steiner for the same reason: "I'm leery of any school based fundamentally on the thinking of a single person."

Consistent with this view, Hern avoids presenting himself as any kind of guru. He wants to find the conditions under which society can "grow" alternatives to compulsory schooling. "I want to see a vast array of independent schools ... whether or not I think them valuable or compelling. Breaking down monopoly schooling means ... independent schools of almost every kind will have the chance to emerge."

My approval of Hern's book is not unqualified, partly for some stylistic reasons but mainly because I don't agree with the pedagogical direction in which he chooses to exit the compulsory school system. I don't just mildly disagree with him on his images of healthy teaching and learning: I think he has some overtly bad ideas in this department, especially on the subject of reading instruction.

Like most deschoolers, he chooses to envision better schooling as being freer schooling; inclination-based discovery schooling and all the progressive junk that experience and research show is contra-indicated particularly for the disadvantaged population for whom all education writers, including Hern, purport to have the greatest concern.

But because he rigorously checks his own assumptions he avoids becoming trapped in ideological servitude to sacred cows, and the book's mood of unconstrained enquiry leaves a reader inclined to forgive the weaknesses and enjoy the wisdom in this very thought-provoking book.

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