

Socialized Education

Ontario's schools teach the perils of central planning — by mistake!

By John Robson

Weird, isn't it? Ontario's education system has all the problems the ideologues say you get when governments run things, from a hellish factory environment for students, to chronic labour problems, to failure to teach the "Three Rs," to discipline that's gone to the dogs, to disastrous modern educationist pedagogy, to constant bizarre budget crises.

It's exactly as though the free-market zealots were right about government administration. How can it be? As Richard Epstein writes in his splendid *Simple Rules for a Complex World*:

"No one wishes to deny that parents are capable of miseducating their own children. But to the extent that all parents can control only the education of their own children, we can avoid the greatest peril of social life, the non-diversification of political risk, which occurs when any central agency is allowed and determined to set the agenda for the system as a whole."

True, in a private system, where the state required an education until at least age 16 and funded it but did not deliver it, some parents would educate their kids badly at home or put them in schools with dubious philosophies or bad teaching. But in a diverse system, examples of excellence, or at least adequacy, are everywhere, so people not only can escape disaster more often, they know it.

Consider restaurants. Some are better, some are worse, and some are awful, just as some people can't cook. But imagine what would happen if we all ate in a government cafeteria. Pretty soon we'd forget good food existed, so we probably wouldn't try to find it.

And even if we did try, we would be most unlikely to succeed unless we were rich enough to import a chef from some backward land where an essential human need like food was still entrusted to the cruel vagaries of the market system.

(Thus, paradoxically, the modern egalitarian system gives the rich a far better chance at a good education. Strangely, the same thing happens with socialized medicine. I'm sure there's a pattern here, if I could only put my finger on it.)

Does no one think it odd that schools look like factories and treat children like petroleum feedstock to be processed into suitably-shaped polystyrene? There is no mistaking a modern high school with its brightly-painted concrete, visible ducts, and students passing through modular flowcharts accumulating credits. Yet what parents would choose this environment for their kids, if they could choose?

Note the latest amusing school crisis. Having realized progressive education was very progressive but not much of an education, the Harris Tories tried to force-feed everyone the same reform at the same time. Among other things, they compressed high school so two classes would graduate at the same time, creating major problems for the students competing for university space, especially those in the accelerated curriculum.

One private school might cut a year out (mine did while I was there). Several might at once. But no sane person can claim that in a privately-run system, every high school in the province might do it in the same year.

Put the state in charge and, instead of the risk of it happening to a few kids at a time, kids whose parents could move them to other schools if they found the idea offensive or particularly hard on their child, it's happening to everyone at once.

Like the hitch-hiker in a hailstorm on a Texas highway, parents, students, and teachers alike can't run, can't hide, and can't make it stop. That's exactly what Epstein meant about "non-diversification of risk" being "the greatest peril of social life."

It gets worse. The universities are contemplating a flood of students for which they are unprepared, though probably not as badly as they maintain. (A peril of public funding is that people have every incentive to overstate their grievances and no incentive not to.)

Can anyone imagine private firms, educational or otherwise, trembling in fear at the prospect of a flood of customers? What about a private enterprise making people wait months or even years, the way our health system does, in the hopes that the wait will discourage them?

Would private firms react to a stampede of cash-bearing clients in any way other than by rubbing their hands in glee, then redoubling their efforts to keep these customers happy lest they take their money elsewhere?

Instead, the kids are treated like some sort of widgets accidentally produced in surplus, to be stored in the rain for a while, then junked if they rust.

It's exactly as though having government deliver education were predictably a mistake. Is that weird, or what?

(Reprinted with permission from The Ottawa Citizen, April 12, 2002. Mr. Robson is a senior editorial writer and columnist at the Citizen, and has the additional distinction of being the brother of OQE honorary director, Bill Robson.)

