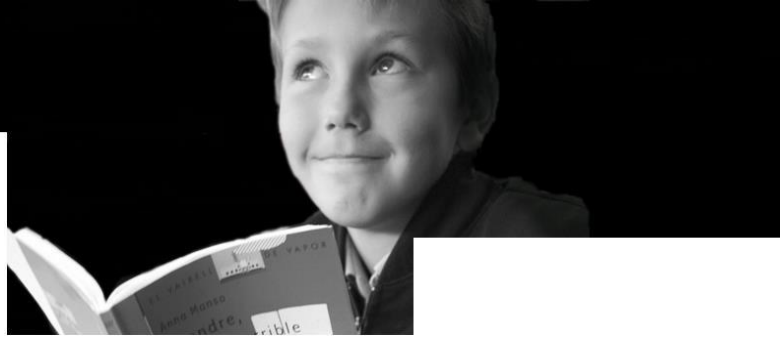




NOTE

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Public Schools, Yes; State Monopoly, No!

Charles L. Glenn

Boston University

What is a public school? Surely that means a school open to and serving the public, though perhaps focused on a particular clientele (a school for girls, a school for pupils gifted in the arts) and responsible to public authorities for providing adequate instruction, just as a public restaurant under private ownership may cater to those fond of Thai cuisine and be subject to public regulation to protect the health of its customers.

But public restaurants are not ordinarily operated by government (for which we can be thankful!), nor, in all cases, are public schools. It is true that totalitarian regimes commonly seek to establish a monopoly on the schooling of their subjects, but in most countries around the world public schooling includes both schools operated by local, regional, or national government, and also schools operated by non-government associations and other entities.

Government has several legitimate roles to play across the whole panoply of popular schooling. One is to ensure that schooling is available to every child and young person, as the Human Rights Council appropriately seeks to ensure by measures currently under consideration. Another is to ensure that the quality and scope of instruction in every school, whether operated by government or by non-government entities, is adequate, as measured by academic outcomes. This is a fundamental requirement of social justice, too often neglected by governments that allow schools enrolling youth from socially-marginal families, including those it operates itself, to provide inadequate instruction.

There are also appropriate limits, in free societies, to government's role in relation to schools. The process of holding schools accountable for adequate academic outcomes does not mean that government may appropriately control the methods of instruction in non-government schools. Indeed, if teaching is to become a genuine profession, a wise

government will allow considerable freedom to the educators in its own schools as well to determine how best to instruct the particular children and youth entrusted to them.

But there is an even more important issue, which goes to the basic nature of a free society. We tend to talk in terms of individual freedoms, and of course these are very important, but individual freedom is meaningless unless it is anchored in societal pluralism, the freedom from government direction of families, of communities of shared traditions and social norms, and of associations and institutions within which individuals, families, and communities find support and common purpose. The most important purpose of these expressions of civil society, perhaps, is the formation of children and youth on the basis of convictions, often unexpressed, about the character and requirements of a good life.

While a totalitarian regime requires obedient subjects, a free society depends upon citizens whose character has been formed for responsible judgment, for collaboration in problem-solving with fellow citizens. Schools are an important agent in this process, but only if they provide coherent education around a shared vision. That vision may rest upon a theory of human development, upon religious convictions, upon a cultural tradition, indeed upon all of these and more; what is important is that the educators in a particular school and the parents whose children they serve share that vision, form a community of mutual trust and purpose.

It is difficult for a school to form such a trusting community, to form character, if its teachers and its pupils have simply been assigned there through a bureaucratic process, if it must seek to avoid offending any parents despite their widely-varying convictions and goals for their children. The mutual trust that characterizes a healthy school community cannot be compelled; it develops from the free choices of free citizens, from teachers who have chosen to work in a school because of its specific mission and culture, from parents who entrusted their children for the same reason.

The failure of many government-operated schools to form strong civic character is in large part a result of bureaucratic constraints that make it impossible to form strong communities around shared educational goals and strategies. Other government-operated schools operate under wiser policies, policies that encourage free choice on the part of teachers and parents, and thus the development of a strong educational culture.

This is even more likely to be the case with non-governmental schools, which are free to pursue distinctive educational missions and indeed commonly operate in a competitive market that makes maintaining such a mission necessary to their survival.

If bureaucratic over-reach limiting the freedom to maintain distinctive school cultures hampers development of the character required by a free society, an even more fundamental problem is that it is simply not consistent with the nature of such a society. Government has no business coming between parents and their children (except, of

course, in cases of obvious neglect or abuse) by seeking to use schools to shape its citizens to a single conforming pattern.

That was certainly a primary goal at an earlier stage of nation-building, when a von Zedlitz, a van der Palm, a Guizot, a Mann, or a Massimo d'Azeglio saw the extension of schooling under government auspices (though often under denominational management as well) as a way to “make citizens.” In its day, this served a purpose in mobilizing resources and voluntary as well as local government efforts to provide popular schooling, but that day has passed and those early enthusiasms have hardened into bureaucratic routines and self-interests that have little to do with forming the character of citizens.

All is not lost. The international landscape of schooling today offers countless examples of school-level initiative to create coherent educational communities. Sometimes these are in government-operated schools organized around some shared theme, perhaps the arts or the formation of citizens, as in many American magnet schools. In other cases they are in schools founded and guided by voluntary associations (often but by no means always of a religious character) or shaped by a visionary educator, by a Maria Montessori.

In summary: the provision of public schooling should be pluralistic, allowing ample scope for schools operated by voluntary associations and institutions, as well as others operated by local, regional or national governments. Government should exercise authority to ensure that the instructional outcomes for every school (especially for those attended by vulnerable children) are adequate, but should leave it up to educators to choose the methods by which those results are achieved, and to form strong school cultures that promote the formation of character.

And government should trust families to choose for their own children among the schools available. As legal scholar John Coons has pointed out, *“[t]he right to form families and to determine the scope of their children's practical liberty is for most men and women the primary occasion for choice and responsibility. One does not have to be rich or well placed to experience the family. The opportunity over a span of fifteen or twenty years to attempt the transmission of one's deepest values to a beloved child provides a unique arena for the creative impulse. Here is the communication of ideas in its most elemental mode.”* Surely no government of a free society should deny its citizens this basic right!