

Forthcoming in Richard A. Epstein, Mario Rizzo, and Liya Palagashvili, eds.,

How Classical Liberal Reform Would Improve K–12 and Higher Education

Chapter 29, *Routledge Handbook of Classical Liberalism*

by Williamson M. Evers

Note: This working paper is a draft, last updated on October 10, 2024.



About the Author



Williamson M. Evers is a senior fellow at Independent Institute in Oakland, California, director of the institute's Center on Educational Excellence, and an assistant editor of *The Independent Review*. He previously worked at the Hoover Institution, the Cato Institute, Emory University, and Santa Clara University. He served as managing editor and member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Libertarian Studies* and on the board of directors of the Center for Libertarian Studies. He is also a former member of the editorial boards of *Education Next* and of the *Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics*. He is a former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education for Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development. Evers has a PhD in political science from Stanford University.



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Abstract

This chapter contends that classical liberal reform of K–12 and higher education would restore liberty and efficacy to all participants. It discusses the pros and cons of public and private provision of K–12 education. It describes the movement from highly local control to increased centralization. The article discusses how the organizational format of K–12 education came about historically, with particular emphasis on the influence of millennialism and its secular successor Progressivism. It shows that Progressivism in educational policy was also influenced by the example of Prussia. The chapter describes teacher-union power and discusses in particular the cases of African

American education and Catholic schools. It examines the classical liberal K–12 reforms of pluralism, demonopolization, and parental choice.

Section 3 lays out higher education’s array of subsidies and its poor incentive structure. The government is quite often inserted between colleges and students. As with K–12 education, the chapter discusses how the institutional organization of higher education came about historically. It relates what classical liberals have said about professorial tenure. It portrays the increasingly illiberal milieu in institutions of higher learning. The section proposes removing direct subsidies and relying mainly on student tuition payments.

Introduction

“We are opposed to state interference with parental rights and rights of conscience in the education of children,” reads the 1892 political platform of the Democratic Party in the United States, back when the Grover Cleveland–era Democrats upheld much of classical liberalism and defended immigrants and religious minorities from conformity and indoctrination imposed by the state. Such interference, the platform goes on to say, is “an infringement” of the fundamental doctrine of protecting “the largest individual liberty consistent with the rights of others” (Democratic Party Platform, 1892).

Classical liberals give liberty the highest political value. Therefore, in what follows, this chapter stresses the interaction between those who would defend and expand liberty and those who would curtail it. Where classical liberals disagree in analysis of education policy, this chapter sketches the debate. Because classical liberalism has often been distorted in political discourse, and its voice has often been drowned out by critics and illiberal

approaches in the news media and on social media, this chapter begins discussion in each area with a succinct statement of the classical liberal perspective.

The chapter starts the section on K–12 schooling by relating why some classical liberals have concerns about completely private education and weighs the validity of those concerns. It also presents classical liberal misgivings about public provision of education, especially provision by the national government. From there the chapter proceeds to follow, with classical liberal commentary, the development over time of K–12 education in the United States—from highly local control to increased centralization. In particular, it examines the efforts of reformers who, beginning in the Progressive Era, opposed classical liberalism and successfully sought widespread illiberal changes in organization and curriculum. It highlights the importance of teacher-union power and discusses the illustrative cases of African American education and Catholic schools. It concludes the section on primary and secondary education by examining the classical liberal reforms of pluralism, demonopolization, and parental choice.

The section on higher education points out that all too often government is found inserted between colleges and students. The result is the poor incentive structure found in these highly subsidized nonprofit institutions run by faculty and administrators. This chapter also discusses how the organizational format of higher education came about historically, and it relates what classical liberals have said about professorial tenure. It portrays the increasingly illiberal intellectual milieu in institutions of higher learning, contending that various players use this milieu to increase the power and resources of certain academic fields and of the administration—at the expense of the faculty. The section concludes by suggesting the removal of direct subsidies in favor of relying mainly on student tuition payments. Then, in closing, the chapter notes how classical liberal reform of education can be a noble endeavor that expands liberty, restores efficacy to all participants, and builds better-grounded institutions.

Primary and Secondary Education

Concerns About Private Provision

While some classical liberals have sought completely private provision of education—primary, secondary, and higher—others worry that two principal considerations stand in the way of thoroughgoing privatization. These two considerations are (1) the worry that parents will neglect the education of their minor children and (2) the worry that people will not seek out enough education to result in some envisaged level of societal betterment.

Child Protection

Classical economists like John Stuart Mill and Nassau Senior wanted to protect children and imagined that parents would neglect their education, perhaps out of ignorance of what was needed. Mill sought to guard against such neglect by prescribing compulsory exams (Mill [1871] 1965; West 2001).

But English economic historian E. G. West and others have found that, in fact, parents tend not to neglect their children's learning. During the Industrial Revolution and thereafter in England and America, the overwhelming majority of parents saw to it that their children became literate (West 1994; Lott 1987). This near-universal literacy (in effect by the mid-19th century) would seem to show that there is no need, based on parental inadequacy, to require compulsory attendance or have universal governmental provision of primary and secondary education (Friedman 1976; Friedman and Friedman 1980).

Neighborhood and Productivity Effects

At the same time, some people see benefits (or perhaps drawbacks) from government provision of elementary and secondary education. A better-educated society produces more than a less-educated society does (Hanushek and Woessmann 2015). Perhaps people in a *government-educated society* feel greater solidarity with their fellow citizens, are less prone to commit crimes, and are more likely to participate in public life. Yet it might well be the case that *privately educated citizenry* would be even more productive and even less inclined to commit crimes. They might participate extensively in civil society and feel strong loyalties toward the institutions in which they are active or from which they benefit. These are largely issues of fact (Greene, Forster, and Winters 2005; Tooley 1995; Wolf 2020).

But there are also conceptual issues involved. Economist Murray Rothbard (1975) maintains that the argument for public provision based on neighborhood effects is overinclusive. Almost anything could be counted as a neighborhood effect—well-dressed people, charming conversation, even neighborhoods with gardens. Must we be taxed to furnish additional supplies of these?

Education policy analyst Corey DeAngelis (2018) argues that publicly provided schooling “may

not maximize” a child’s education and that it may have “significant negative externalities” as compared to a program of universal opportunity scholarships for schools chosen by parents. He shows that publicly provided schools, compared to a program of opportunity scholarships, have significant negative effects on American society as a whole. These negatives come because regular public schools provide less education, make for a less vibrant civil society, and burden the populace with high taxes.

Milton Friedman (1976) even reminds us of a problem of artificial overeducation that has existed in countries like Egypt and India—where people have an education, but the economy does not have enough of the jobs they think are suitable for their level of education.

On the other hand, public education—especially in times of strife, cultural insecurity, or religious or political intolerance—could be a mechanism whereby a stifling conformity is imposed on a captive audience (Liggio and Peden 1978). Indeed, John R. Lott Jr. (1987, 1990) argues that public provision of education is best explained as a mechanism for inculcating in the populace an ideological acceptance of the government, whose actions benefit some and disadvantage others. Indoctrination in schools, in that sense, dampens upset from those who lose from officials’ decisions and thus lowers officials’ cost of doing business.

Liberty Interests and Public Provision

Classical liberals are concerned that public provision of schooling opens the door to encroachment on liberty and imposition of uniformity.

British philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill ([1859] 1977) writes in “On Liberty” that a state-provided education can be “a mere contrivance” for “moulding people to be exactly like one another” (p. 302). Furthermore, Mill writes, the mold in which government officials cast them is “that which pleases the predominant

power in the government.” Such a molding (including in a democracy), Mill thought, would put into effect “a despotism over the mind,” which would, in turn, tend to foster a physically coercive despotism.

Mill acknowledged that writing his essay “On Liberty” was prompted by his reading of the German political theorist Wilhelm von Humboldt. Humboldt ([1852] 1993) believed that liberty was the necessary framework for the self-cultivation of the individual. We need liberty for self-actualization. But if government restricts the set of options available to us for self-cultivation, then our abilities cannot achieve their potential. Cultural variety is the milieu in which we can best thrive, but government provision of education will tend toward uniformity and deprive us of the needed variety.

The Calvinist theologian J. Gresham Machen (1987, 98) comes at education from a somewhat different angle than Mill and Humboldt, but he likewise believes that government provision or close regulation of schooling—particularly at the national level—would tend toward undesirable uniformity and standardization. It would, in effect, restrict our liberty of voluntary association and would, in addition, hamper efforts to advance homeschooling and build and maintain evangelical Christian schools. Machen argues that if liberty is not defended in the realm of education, “there is no use trying to maintain it in any other sphere.” If “you give the bureaucrats the children,” Machen writes, “you might just as well give them everything else.”

Classical liberals point out as well that aid to K–12 schools by the U.S. national government has neither enhanced student achievement nor closed achievement gaps (Hanushek et al. 2019; Alger 2016; McCluskey 2007).

Local Control

Where there are public schools, classical liberals would apply the proverb “The wearer best knows

where the shoe pinches”—and thus prefer local control rather than control by a distant official. Moreover, a multitude of districts and states—somewhat different from each other—allows dissatisfied parents to seek out an alternative school district (Somin 2021).

During his visit to America in the 1830s, French classical liberal Alexis de Tocqueville observed that the American populace displayed a strong sense of loyalty toward their schools and were actively engaged in them. The Americans of that time considered schools integral parts of their communities and close to their households. Although public schools of that era were commonly paid for via fees, people viewed them as quasi-charitable institutions that were voluntarily supported. The public considered them components of what Tocqueville referred to as “civil society,” a concept that modern social scientists continue to use.

In his depiction of American society, Tocqueville highlighted the work of township school committees that were deeply embedded in their local communities. During that era, states’ supervision of local public education was restricted to an annual report that was submitted by the township committee to the state capital. There was no national control.

These local efforts reflected, according to Tocqueville’s observations, a pervasive inclination among Americans to see basic education as a way of achieving better prospects and further opportunities (Tocqueville [1835–1840] 2000; Evers 2015a). Tocqueville expressed his admiration for the self-help nature of American society, where it was not uncommon to come across farmers who did not wait for official authorization but rather took the initiative to interrupt their plowing activities and “to deliberate upon the project of a public school” (Tocqueville [1835–1840] 2000, 60).

Tocqueville worried that if Americans stopped engaging in associations or local government

bodies such as school committees, they would drift toward relinquishing liberty and succumbing to what he referred to as “mild despotism” (Tocqueville [1835–1840] 2000, 662–665).

The public education that Tocqueville encountered in the 1830s was under local control. This local control was part of a face-to-face community. While local rule was prey to the ills that democracy is prone to, parents were not trapped in a large metropolitan-district monopoly. State government had little input into school practices; the national government had none.

Evolution of Provision of Schooling

Classical liberals contend that the transformation that made K–12 schools free, compulsory, and provided by a school-district monopoly has benefited education providers more than it has parents.

In the earliest days of European settlement in British North America and of the American republic, parents paid fees to the teachers (rather than to a state government or school district). Schooling was not free. In the first quarter of the 19th century, there were in the United States private schools where some could get publicly subsidized tuition (like modern-day opportunity scholarships); there were also public schools that charged tuition. Attendance was not compulsory.

But over time, K–12 education became free, compulsory, and delivered predominately by a state-run monopoly. Governments set up and ran their own public schools. These dropped their fees and became wholly supported by taxes. A comparatively small number of private schools (both secular and religious) continued to exist, but with little or nothing in the way of subsidies.

Starting in the 1840s, teachers and administrators launched a campaign to make elementary and secondary schools tuition free. They claimed that providing free schools was in the public interest. As economic historian E. G. West (1994)

says, while conventional history depicts teachers and administrators in the United States as “benevolent” and “distinguished champions in the cause of children’s welfare,” the facts can equally support depicting them as serving their own self-interest (p. 318). Nobel-laureate economist Milton Friedman and his coauthor Rose Friedman (1980) concur. They point out that much of the backing of teachers and school leaders for free schools was self-serving. They believed they would, in the Friedmans’ words, “enjoy greater certainty of employment, greater assurance that their salaries would be paid, and a greater degree of control” (p. 143) in publicly financed schools.

If public school teachers could work to restrict child labor as an alternative use of children’s time, make private schools comparatively costly, and require school attendance, they would reap monopoly gains. Public schools were and are paid based on pupil attendance, and schoolteachers have a captive market.

Child Labor and Compulsory Attendance

Child labor restrictions, as E. G. West (2001, 246–247) points out, should also be seen as “indirect compulsion” of pupil attendance. Once public schools were free, teachers and administrators began to push to make schooling compulsory in order to boost attendance (West 1967; Landes and Solomon 1972).

In America, strengthened compulsory-education laws and restrictions on child labor were favored by certain special interests in business, the professions, and organized labor. But for public relations reasons, these interests “stayed in the background” and played their role “strategically behind the scenes” (Hindman 2002, 50). They let temperance unions, church groups, consumer leagues, charitable associations, social service organizations, settlement houses, and federations of women’s clubs be the public faces of the movement (Hindman 2002, 50; see also Anderson and Tollison 1984; Marvel 1977; Stroup 2020).

Progressive reformer Edgar Garner Murphy, the founder of the nationwide effort in the U.S. to prohibit child labor, came from where the worlds of public education, philanthropy, and Social Gospel intersected. He was the executive secretary of the Southern Education Board when he founded the Alabama Child Labor Committee in 1901—the first of many such state committees. Betsy Wood (2020) writes that the standard narrative of “reformers and commentators alike” was that the national child labor campaign “began in earnest at the inspiration of the Alabama committee” (pp. 65–66). Murphy later went on to be a cofounder and paid executive secretary of the National Child Labor Committee in 1904.

Murphy’s influential central argument was that White children needed to be taken out of the Southern textile mills in order to defend the controlling role in society of members of the White race. If White child labor was not curtailed, Murphy claimed, African American children (who were barred by segregation from working in the mills) would outpace the Whites in schooling. This would, he maintained, be to the detriment of the “wise” and “just control” of African Americans by Whites (p. 60; see also Beveridge [1907] 1971; Sallee 2004).

Murphy was also part of another important component of the child labor crusade: the Social Gospel movement. For these early-20th-century millennialists, banning child labor was, in Wood’s (2020) words, a “necessary step” in “establishing the Kingdom of God on earth” (p. 96).

Child labor laws and compulsory-attendance laws frequently went “hand in hand” and were “inextricably interwoven” (Hindman 2002, 58, 61, 178). The two sets of laws were “in large measure” written to be consistent with one another and were often “two sides of the same coin” (Goldin and Katz 2011, 282, 305). Forest Chester Ensign wrote (1921), “That child labor and compulsory school attendance represent but two aspects of a single problem is now generally

recognized” (p. 236; see also Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions [1881] 1971).

Educators pushed for child labor bans (Verplanck [1904] 1971; Darney, 1907; Schaeffer 1907). To bolster his coalition, Samuel McClure Lindsay, Murphy’s successor as secretary of the National Child Labor Committee and former commissioner of education in Puerto Rico, pointedly reminded educators (Lindsay 1907) that the continued existence of child labor was lessening the effectiveness of compulsory-attendance laws (p. 109) and that banning child labor should lead to “additional schools,” higher tax rates, and “new sources of revenue” to support public schools (pp. 104, 107, 108; see also Kelley 1907).

The Influence of Prussia and Imperial Germany

Beginning in the 1830s, the example of Prussia began to loom large in the thinking of American educators. Not only did compulsory attendance enhance teachers’ monopoly revenues, but also it enhanced teachers’ pride in being part of a school system like that of Prussia, which influential American educator Calvin Stowe (1836) called “the best-educated country” on earth (Rothbard [1971] 1999; Karier 1986).

Later on, in the 1870s and 1880s, as American scholars went to graduate school in Germany, the example of Prussia and imperial Germany was even more important in higher education than it had been in K–12 education (Paul 2023; Rothbard [1989] 2018). For example, Frank Johnson Goodnow went to graduate school at the University of Berlin and was an outspoken opponent of classical liberalism. He was a political scientist who was a pioneer in the study of public administration, the first president of the American Political Science Association, and the president of Johns Hopkins University (Pestritto 2007). Johns Hopkins copied its graduate-studies program from German universities and set the pattern for American research universities.

Progressive intellectuals advocated the rule of experts, and Goodnow argued in 1916 that America needed to catch up to Germany in this regard. He said that America had not yet “done what needs to be done” in order to have “expert service” where he thought it was needed. “Nor have we made the progress which has been made in some countries, of which Germany is an example.” Goodnow (1916, 50–51) thought that Germany had made what he considered to be its “tremendous” political and social progress “in no small measure” because of its training and use of experts.

Like his fellow Progressives, Goodnow (1916) held that professors “are in a measure responsible for the thoughts of the coming generation.” Goodnow (p. 31) sought therefore to have professors put added “emphasis” on “social duties” rather than individual rights.

Scholars who did graduate work in Germany, like Goodnow, strove—in the words of philosopher Jeffrey E. Paul—“to reconstruct and replace” America’s classical liberal institutions along the lines of “Germany’s autocratic government and oligarchical society.” The graduate programs that these German-trained professors established at America’s fledgling research universities were self-coopting. Each generation chose like-minded successors. Over the years, up to the present, this process has contributed importantly to hostility to classical liberalism among higher education faculties—especially in political science, sociology, history, and, to some extent, economics (Paul 2023, 2, 28; Gross 2013, 136; Klein and Stern 2009).

From Pietist Millennialism to Technocratic Reform

Classical liberals believe public school systems are governed in a manner based on shaky yet arrogant assumptions. As Nobel-laureate economist and social theorist F. A. Hayek has argued, hubristic government officials think that they know how

to act on a supposedly scientific basis—but in fact, they do not. Hayek (1973) says that “the characteristic error” of such thinking is that it is beset by what has been called the “synoptic delusion”—that is, believing “the fiction that all the relevant facts are known” to the policy maker and that omniscient policy makers can build a “one best system” (p. 14; see also Tyack 1974).

The system of public education, which grew in the 19th century, was principally bolstered by certain sectarian Protestant religious beliefs and a sense of civic virtue. David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot (1981) find this belief structure has “strong millennial elements shared by many of the Protestant sects.” Proponents of public schools saw them as “the means of building a new order for the ages” (p. 6).

Over time, the original millennial vision of those who set up America’s public school system became transmuted into a new Progressive ideology of technocratic management, the rule of experts, the gospel of efficiency, and deference to the supposed findings of science. By the beginning of the 20th century, the leaders of public education in America were “a new breed of professional managers, . . . who reshaped the schools according to the canons of . . . efficiency and scientific expertise.” Tyack and Hansot (1981) describe them as “equally millennial in their own way” (p. 9). They discarded theological rhetoric but kept a millennialist drive and confidence.

Currently, the administration of public school systems throughout the United States is highly uniform across the board. The municipal-reform movement of the Progressive Era, which occurred between the 1890s and the early 1920s, brought about this uniformity. (This era was also when what is still termed Progressive education emerged, with its characteristic curriculum and teaching approaches.) Adherents of this municipal-reform sort of educational policy believed that their new supposed science of society and their favored institutional arrangements supplied virtuous

methods of social control and a blueprint for the future (Lutz 1975; Evers and Clopton 2006).

The Progressive Era proponents of municipal reform (and the related school reform) crusaded against big-city political machines that mobilized immigrant voters. During the Progressive Era, Ellwood P. Cubberley (1909), who was the foremost education historian of that period and eventually became the dean of the Stanford School of Education, made derogatory remarks about immigrants from southern and eastern Europe.

Cubberley (1909) calls the immigrants “illiterate, docile, often lacking in initiative” (p. 15). He says they lacked a sense of public decency. He deplores their coming, saying it “has served to dilute tremendously our national stock and to corrupt our civic life.” When it came to these immigrants, the goal of school leaders, Cubberley says, must be “to implant in their children” Anglo-Saxon values.

District Organization

Classical liberals find that the public schools’ system of governance gives immense power to administrators, pro-forma power to school boards, and little power to parents and taxpayers.

The organization of districts in present-day America is not just attributable to the municipal-reform movement of the past; the ideology of that Progressive Era movement continues to affect school-board elections, deliberations, and policy-making. Laurence Iannaccone (1977), a scholar with expertise in education politics, has observed that the principles of municipal reform have developed into the “political myth” of education, “the ideology underlying fundamental policy assumptions in education” (pp. 270, 277).

According to Iannaccone (1977), the ideology of municipal reform brought a political and administrative program together in a cohesive package. Its organizational design

was “hierarchically structured to produce highly centralized policy-making and control” (Iannaccone 1982, 298). The reformers sought “the concentration of power and professionalization of public services,” with the provision of services “walled off from grass-root client and political influence.” These centralized services were to be run by professionals, who utilized the language and, they asserted, the methods of the social and behavioral sciences.

In the one-best public school system, according to the municipal reformers’ designs, school professionals were to be formally “accountable to small lay [boards], . . . elected by the short ballot, preferably in at-large nonpartisan elections” (Iannaccone 1982, 300). District superintendents are responsible for managing the schools, and they are hired by and report to a school board that is elected by local voters.

The reformers intentionally structured the school board to make it unlikely to become a forum for public debates on educational matters (Iannaccone 1982). The reformers also aimed to discourage school boards from deliberating on or making decisions about curricula (Ostrom 1961).

The boundaries of school districts were deliberately distinct from those of municipalities— “not coterminous with [those of] other local governments whenever possible”—and the timing of school board elections was intentionally set apart (off cycle) from other local elections (Iannaccone 1982, 300).

To reduce the number of voters and limit competition in school-board elections, the reformers introduced nonpartisan elections. Such elections also decrease the extent to which the members of the school board reflect the ideological views of the population (Hartney and Hayes 2021; Anzia 2014). The nonpartisan nature of school-board elections has hindered and continues to hinder the development of organized, open school-related opposition groupings at the district and state levels (Iannaccone and Lutz 1967).

Elections for school board and about school funding usually attract only a small minority of voters (Ostrom 1961). Social scientists have found that frequently the educational establishment purposely aims to promote low and selective participation in elections (Wirt and Kirst 1972). Off-cycle elections (found in almost two-thirds of American school districts) have low turnout (10%–15%). Teachers-union-backed candidates do noticeably better in off-cycle elections, and voters are less likely to hold school board members accountable for low student achievement in such elections (Hartney 2021).

The announced aim of the municipal reformers was to depoliticize education, as reflected in their slogan to “take education out of politics” (Tyack 1972, 71). However, the reality is that it is impossible to remove politics from the public school system. Since the schools are public, they cannot be above or outside politics. School districts are formally governed by individuals who are chosen through an election process, utilize funds collected through mandatory taxation, and depend on truancy laws to ensure that classrooms are filled with students (Peterson and Williams 1972; Peltzman 1993). School districts cannot and do not avoid politics.

In practice, “taking education out of politics” meant, as Michael W. Kirst (2004) explains, moving school districts “away from decentralized control by . . . lay people” (p. 20). The municipal reformers strategically rephrased political concerns, reframing them as nonpolitical matters that were within the purview of skilled administrators possessing considerable discretionary authority (Kirst). As a consequence, the district’s responsibility to its constituents—parents and taxpayers—was diminished (Ostrom 1961; Iannaccone [1977] 1982; Kogan 2022; Evers and Clopton 2006).

One of the most noticeable changes in the organization of K–12 public schools over the years has been the decrease in the number of

school districts from 117,108 (in 1939–1940) to 13,349 (in 2019–2020) (National Center for Education Statistics 2021, Table 214.10). During this boom in consolidation of school districts, educators claimed that such mergers would result in increased efficiencies and student performance. Yet, except for the case of tiny districts merged into small districts, such improvements have not emerged (Niskanen 1998). Very large school districts give larger budgets and greater scope of authority to administrators, but they reduce the influence of school principals and parents. And once very large districts are in place, they are difficult to break up. As economists Gary Galles and Robert Sexton (1995) point out, in very large districts, teachers and administrators are able to use the size of the district as leverage to bargain with the school board for more resources, but the geographical expanse of the district’s monopoly makes exit by parents costly and lets educators “capture those gains for themselves rather than passing them on” (p. 245) to their parent-customers in the form of improved learning.

There is a certain amount of horizontal interdistrict competition (Fischel 2009; Tiebout 1956). Economist Caroline M. Hoxby (2000) conducted research comparing metropolitan areas that featured multiple school districts, such as Boston, to those contained within a single large district, like Miami or Los Angeles. Hoxby discovered that, when compared carefully, academic outcomes are superior in regions with competing districts, where parents with comparable incomes have the flexibility to relocate from nearby areas, in search of an improved education setting for their children. Using a different method, Katie A. Sherron and Lawrence W. Kenny (2017) also came to the conclusion that interdistrict competition made public schools more efficient. Districts wishing to lessen competitive pressure can and do consolidate with neighboring districts.

There is likewise some competitive pressure among the states. States can lessen pressure from

competitive federalism by cooperating with each other or going along with increased federal control. Interstate cooperation on the Common Core national curriculum standards of 2010 can be viewed as an example of this (Evers 2015a; Ealy 2013).

As previously noted, the United States’ educational landscape has over 13,000 school districts (National Center for Education Statistics 2021, Table 214.10) that operate within a federal structure. The state and national levels provide much of the funding and some mandates, but the districts largely function independently. It is worth noting that school districts are primarily financed based on the number of enrolled students. Additionally, the district’s clientele—parents—do not cover the operational expenses, while parents, as owners, cannot exercise ownership powers. Hence, social scientists point out that district decision-makers are not rewarded or penalized for success or failure in educating students (Alchian 1977a; Chubb and Moe 1990). Despite increased spending, there has been little improvement, and in some cases a decline, in student achievement, as indicated by national accountability tests (National Assessment of Educational Progress 2022).

The Progressive Era did not just shape the organization of public schools and how educators and the public thought about them, as we can see here; the era also shaped what was taught in the schools and how.

Curriculum, Forced Speech, and Captive Audiences

Classical liberals deplore curricula in the K–12 public schools that amount to propaganda and indoctrination. Classical liberals want public schools to take politics out of the humanities and sciences. In civics classes, classical liberals would propose that public schools offer an account that reflects the pluralism of outlooks in the United States (Ceaser and McGuinn 1998). At the

same time, classical liberals support the right of nonpublic schools to have a variety of different approaches, reflecting their private and religious purposes.

Public schools' monopoly status makes them an attractive target for an ideological takeover. In addition, teachers are usually required to go through training in institutions of higher education. This training is not only a time-consuming barrier to entry to the profession; it is also when professors train prospective teachers along Progressive lines (Steiner and Rozen 2004; Palmer and Flanders 2022).

The Curriculum of Progressive Education

Nineteenth-century pietist millennialists in America sought to eradicate perceived societal problems in preparation for the Second Coming of Jesus. Their objective was to save sinners and construct a New Jerusalem for the earthly reign of Christ. The 20th-century Progressive educators, who were the successors of these pietist millennialists, formulated comparable secular aims. The Progressive educators interpreted the Kingdom of God in a this-worldly light. They saw it as a new world that they “would build within the natural historical process” (Ahlstrom 1972, 244). They sought to minister to the whole child and build a Progressive society. Progressive educators who concentrated on society urged teaching children to adapt to societal norms, utilizing schools to establish a new political system, or utilizing them to tweak the adult labor market.

For Progressive educators, reforming the child and society has always taken precedence over intellectual content. Educational philosopher John Dewey ([1897] 1972), the most influential proponent of Progressive education, made this clear. He wrote that each teacher should recognize that he or she is “a social servant set apart for the maintenance of the proper social order and the securing of the right social growth.” Having this realization, the teacher is messianically “the

prophet of the true God and the usherer in of the true kingdom of Heaven” (p. 3). Tyack and Hansot (1982) write of Dewey’s “naturalistic ethics laced with millennial Christian and democratic values” (pp. 197–198; see also Evers and Clopton 2003).

Beginning in the 1960s, there arose a school of historians who were on the left but were anti-authoritarian, anti-bureaucratic, and also skeptical of the Progressive municipal reformers and their heirs in education. New Left historian of education Joel Spring (1973a) points out that during the Progressive Era, many intellectuals and other influential people abandoned a rhetoric of progress through competition in favor of a rhetoric of progress through cooperation. One effect of this change was dropping “a definition of individualism that stressed independence” in favor of “a definition that included self-sacrifice and cooperation” (p. 2).

In the realm of education, teachers began to conscientiously utilize group work in instruction and to overtly teach social cooperation in the classroom and for life after graduation. In 1909, Michael V. O’Shea, a professor of education at the University of Wisconsin, wrote that the purpose of education should be seen as bringing the individual “into harmony with the customs, ideals, and institutions of present-day society. Intense individualistic feelings and actions must be brought under control, and cooperation must largely take [its] place” (p. 249; see also Spring 1973b).

Pioneering American sociologist Edward A. Ross, an outspoken opponent of laissez-faire liberalism, explicitly linked schooling and social control. In his writings, he argued that education has the power to “help in ‘breaking in’ the colt to the harness” (Ross 1959, 72). The public school teacher, Ross (1910) said, was “to collect little plastic lumps of human dough from private households and shape them on the social kneading board” (p. 168).

Spring (1973a) notes that Ross, in his time, argued that education had become a necessary tool of control, increasingly replacing the church and the family. Ross also preferred the school over the home as a method of control because it was run by a government official rather than a parent.

During the late-19th-century debate in America over public education, welfare-state advocate and sociologist Lester Frank Ward ([1883] 1894) advocated governmental provision of schooling because it would shield teachers from accountability to parents:

The secret of the superiority of state over private education lies in the fact that in the former the teacher is responsible solely to society. . . . The result desired by the state is a wholly different one from that desired by parents, guardians, and pupils. Of the latter [the teacher] is happily independent. (p. 589)

Social Darwinism as a way of thinking came in two varieties: individualistic (like Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner) and collectivistic, of which Ward was a prime example. The collectivist variant was an important influence in Progressivism as it emerged as a movement and school of thought (Pestritto 2021).

New Left historian of education Clarence J. Karier (1973) says that classical liberalism, “with its philosophical justification of a competitive economy, private property, individualism, and freedom from state interference,” was replaced during the Progressive Era by a “new liberalism” that called for “a controlled economy, state planning, group thought, and managed change” (p. 87).

Dewey had, according to Karier (1973), the outlook of “a management-welfare state socialist.” Dewey discarded early in his career, Karier notes, “the classical conception of individualism and its political corollary of a free marketplace of conflicting ideas” (p. 71):

Dewey’s unbounded faith in science and technology led him to call for a new man. Such a man must work well within the corporate [state] system where, almost in Orwellian fashion, positive freedom would mean control. . . . The solution to social conflict, for Dewey, remained the intelligent use of education for social control. (Karier 1973, 72–73)

Education for Social Reconstruction

During the Great Depression era, a group of educators called the social reconstructionists sought to build a new socialist society in America through transformation of the school curriculum (Tyack and Hansot 1982; Counts 1932). Unlike other Progressives, the social reconstructionists were not focused on adapting to or controlling the existing society. Instead, they sought to facilitate its replacement (Evers and Clopton 2003).

For example, the *Report of the Commission on the Social Studies* (American Historical Association 1934) said that teachers were living in a time “marked by transition to some form of socialized economy” (p. 129). The inevitable future was a planned economy (a “consciously integrated society”) in which “individual property rights” will be “abridged” and “individual economic actions” “altered” (p. 17). In such a transitional age, the report claimed, education must “reconstruct its basic purposes” (p. 142) and recognize its “significance” as a “social force” (p. 76). Teachers should “perform all their duties” with a mindset that reflects their role in “shaping” society’s future (p. 126).

Social studies teachers should treat as passé any ideals of individualism or laissez-faire (pp. 33, 36–37). Instead, the report advocated incorporating into social studies teaching materials “the best plans and ideals” for the future collectivist society (p. 27).

Critical Race Theory

In the early decades of the 21st century, an approach called critical race theory was developed by academics in higher education (particularly in law schools) and became highly influential in the curriculum of K–12 education, even in such unlikely areas as mathematics and science (Goldberg and Kaufmann 2023). The proponents of critical race theory view all aspects of society in terms of race. They contend that racism is everywhere and entrenched (until there is an egalitarian revolution) and pervasive in current American institutions. They refuse to consider the possibility that those institutions could be neutral and objective or might allow for a genuine meritocracy. They see all disparate outcomes as substantially the result of racism (Evers and Wurman 2022). In particular, they reject any kind of liberalism that “holds that the purpose of government is to maximize liberty” and a liberalism that calls for equal rights before the law (Delgado and Rousseau 2001, 150).

James Lindsay (2020) notes that proponents of critical race theory perceive the ideals of liberal societies (“individualism, freedom, peace”) as constructs that uphold a “tacit conspiracy . . . to keep racial minorities down.” Advocates of critical race theory would rather that we not have liberal societies and instead want to “arrange society as they see fit and make us all go along with their ideas.”

Sociologist Daniel Bell (1975), who was by no means a classical liberal, has provided an explanation that classical liberals can agree with for the current high profile of ethnic-identity ideology. He argued that as decisions in the U.S. have become more politicized and moved from the realm of the market into the realm of the political, what was once dispersed and decentralized has often become concentrated in a zero-sum conflict. At the same time, upward

mobility has been impeded for some ethnic groups like African Americans by “ineffective” public schools. The “spread of political decision-making” and inadequacy of public schools as an avenue of mobility has encouraged the growth of ethnic interest groups in order to gain advantageous “place and privilege” (pp. 145–146, 161). The ethnic groups and their allies seek out ideologies that can provide an advantage in the scramble for politically determined rewards (pp. 168–170).

Catholic Schools

With regard to Catholic schools and other independent schools, classical liberals believe that the child is “not the mere creature of the State”¹ and that parents and guardians have the right to control the raising and education of their children—and thus a right to send them to Catholic or other nonpublic schools. Likewise, according to classical liberals, Catholic schools and other nonpublic schools have a property right to create and run a school.

During the late 1800s, immigration from Catholic and Lutheran countries into the northern United States was increasing. The countries from which these immigrants came had schools that were Catholic or Lutheran in complexion. They wanted such schooling for their children, and so they built their own independent school systems in the United States.

Protestants had dominated society in the North and the Republican Party in particular. They sought to assimilate the new immigrants to their values. The pietistic Protestants emphasized anticipating occasions of sin and heading them off or clamping down on them, and building a kingdom on earth in preparation for Jesus’s Second Coming. The Catholics and high church Lutherans, in contrast, had religious practices that centered on church liturgy. The liturgy-oriented

1 *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, 268 U.S. 510 (1925), 535. <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/268/510/>.

religious denominations were more comfortable in the latter part of the 19th century with the Democratic Party, which opposed religious impositions by the state and championed the rights of aliens and immigrants.

The Catholics and others did not cooperate with imposed acculturation in the public schools and elsewhere. Unsurprisingly, the pietistic Protestants viewed Catholic and other independent schools as a form of resistance to efforts to blend immigrants into the existing political-religious culture (Rothbard [1986] 2020; Glenn 1988; McCarthy, Skillen, and Harper 1982).

Catholic educators tended, later on, to withstand Progressive education, with its neglect of content in favor of process and its utopian passion rooted in pietist Protestant millennialism. Catholic schools resisted abandoning the academic curriculum (O’Connell 1946).

Catholic high schools successfully avoided “the curriculum watering-down and course-content watering-down” that became prevalent in regular public schools during the 1970s (Coleman and Hoffer 1987, 94).

Academic performance of students enrolled in Catholic schools surpasses that of their counterparts in district-operated public schools, according to research findings. Catholic schools do better academically with African Americans, Latinos, and those in low-income households. The schools’ graduates are more civically involved and more engaged in charitable activities (Smarick and Robson 2015).

Yet Catholic schools did not achieve their success through smaller class sizes, higher teacher salaries, or superior buildings and equipment—none of which they had. James Coleman and Thomas Hoffer (1987, 39–50) attribute the “Catholic school effect” to “social capital”—namely, the common values shared by students’ families and between the schools and families (Evers and Clopton 2003).

African American Education

The abolitionist movement argued against slavery in terms of classical liberal principles. The leading Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass, for example, argued that African Americans have, like all human beings, a natural right of self-ownership (Sundstrom 2023). Classical liberals opposed efforts after emancipation to hold African Americans down, including using the public school system for that purpose.

In the immediate aftermath of emancipation, Blacks created many self-help schools (Gutman 1987). But they made the mistake of incorporating them into a public school system. But what statutes can give, statutes can take away (Tyack and Lowe 1986; Allen 2024). Generally speaking, during Reconstruction, the biological and intellectual progeny of the White Northern abolitionists worked to aid Black education in the South (McPherson [1976] 2014). Large numbers of Northern White schoolteachers came to the South to teach the emancipated Blacks. This neo-abolitionist effort was classical liberal and evangelical Christian in its heritage and thinking.

In opposition to them, White governing circles in the South segregated the public schools using the rhetoric of racial supremacy. Progressive Era reform in education in the South included reduced support for Black schools in the newly created public school system, segregating the public system by statute along racial lines, and confining Black students to vocational, nonacademic education. Educational segregation was part of a larger Progressive Era project of cartelizing Southern life in such a way that Blacks were blocked from striving for upward mobility and could be kept as a tractable laboring class (Anderson and Kiriazis 2013; Roback 1984; Bernstein 2001; Bernstein and Somin 2004; Root 2006; Spring 2022).

In the North, White labor unions joined in the cartelization project (Moreno 2005), and attendance boundaries for neighborhood schools

followed color lines reinforced and sometimes created by exclusionary zoning laws beginning in the Progressive Era and then, later, by federal housing policies (Rothstein 2017; Henderson 2017; Kahlenberg 2023; Pinto 2024; Burling 2024).

Restricting African American education, as economist Jennifer Roback (1989) points out, is a way of limiting Blacks' entry to various occupations. Lessening of educational opportunities prevents those excluded from acquiring knowledge and training that would allow them to compete for skilled jobs.

Vocational-only education for African Americans was a project of both the Progressive Woodrow Wilson administration and certain Progressive New South light-industrial and farming interests (Glenn 2011; Anderson 1988). The Wilson administration produced a federal report, *Negro Education* (Bureau of Education 1916), that pushed for the race-based vocational-only track. Prominent Progressives who concurred with this view included Ray Stannard Baker, Walter Hines Page, President Theodore Roosevelt, and John Dewey (Evers 2015b). In the book *Schools of Tomorrow* ([1915] 1972), which John Dewey coauthored with his daughter Evelyn, they describe an all-African American vocational school in Indianapolis where the curriculum was predominantly nonacademic. The Deweys suggest that this type of education is quite suitable for children from African American and immigrant households.

In a similar development in higher education, the Progressive Era efforts of the American Medical Association to reduce the supply of doctors and boost salaries by cartelizing medical schools had the effect of closing down three quarters of the African American medical schools and reducing the number of African American doctors (Kessel 1958, 1970, 1972).

Interest Groups

Thomas Sowell (2020) sums up the classical liberal view when he writes that schools are there

“for the education of children” (p. 209). They should not exist to provide “iron-clad jobs for teachers, billions of dollars in union dues for teachers’ unions,” and “a guaranteed market” for holders of degrees from teachers’ colleges—all sheltered from competition. Yet this is exactly what we find in public schools.

The school district functions as a political entity, and it is also situated within the state and national political landscapes. Operating within the school-district political arena are district administrators, principals, clerical and physical-plant personnel, parent-teacher associations, and teachers’ unions. Among these groups, the teachers’ unions, in particular, are highly organized and wield substantial influence in American politics, as noted by Terry M. Moe (2006, 2011, 2017).

To an important extent, state governments created the highly influential unions that we see. Statutes in the 1960s and 1970s required school districts to bargain collectively with the teachers they employed. This “targeted advantage” lowered costs for union organizing and afforded what Patrick Flavin and Michael Hartney (2015) call state governments’ “patron-like support” (p. 896) and a subsidy of union growth and influence (Hartney 2022).

Moe (2011) argues that teachers’ unions are at the heart of the problems with America’s public schools. They have “more influence” on these schools “than any other group” in society (p. 6).

Often in big cities, collective bargaining agreements are negotiated with unions on one side of the table and school board members beholden to unions on the other side. The bargaining agreements prescribe, for example, inflexibility for administrators in assigning teachers (reducing the ability to match teachers to needs) and rules on firing and layoffs. The rules place heavy burdens of time and money on administrators who would like to fire low-performing teachers. When there is a budgetary need for layoffs, these rules

force administrators to retain teachers based on seniority, not effectiveness (Moe 2011).

Teachers' unions and other interest groups from the producer and supplier side of the education industry tend to propose additional resources as the solution to perceived problems in K–12 education. Such needed resources are said to be more money for class-size reduction, more highly credentialed teachers, and higher teacher pay.

But studies show that class-size reduction does not improve student achievement (Hanushek 1999, 2003), and neither do more credentials or higher pay (Chingos and Peterson 2011; Peterson 2006). Better teachers would improve student learning. Teachers' unions and others usually suggest that the mechanism for boosting teacher quality should be stricter licensing standards.

But as economists Dale Ballou and Michael Podgursky (1999) point out, making licensing and accreditation more difficult will heighten “barriers to entry” that will dissuade able people from entering the teaching profession. The unions have “a clear interest” in narrowing the path of entry. Such restriction is sure to create teacher shortages “that can be used to pressure states and local school boards to raise salaries” (p. 54). More promising avenues to improving teacher quality are merit pay and removing obstacles to firing low-performing teachers—both of which are opposed by teachers' unions (Hanushek 1997, 2009).

Unions also have the effect of making school districts similar to each other. Copycat union contracts have the effect of inhibiting parental exit. Parents who wish they could flee to another district to find something different discover that districts are often quite similar in many ways and unresponsive to trying different approaches (Hoxby 1996).

The ability of the special interests of the educational establishment to exert the influence

they do is an instance of a frequently observed political phenomenon: Factions with a compact, readily mobilized membership, whose interests are concentrated, hold more sway than broader groups, such as parents or taxpayers, whose interests are diffuse.

E. G. West (1968), who possessed expertise in both the history of education and economics, highlights the settled fact that “suppliers of state education” (p. 31), such as district officials, administrators, and unionized teachers, wield an outsized influence compared to that of education consumers. The customers, West notes, have interests that are scattered among numerous government-provided goods and services, not just education. The suppliers, who rely on education provision for their livelihood, can anticipate the gain for themselves from assuming “the costs of pressure group politics” (p. 72).

The Monopoly Problem, Parental Choice, and Pluralism of Delivery

Classical liberals agree that there is a government-imposed monopoly problem with public schooling. But there is some dispute among classical liberals about the best course for demonopolization.

Milton and Rose Friedman (1980) point out that centralization in K–12 education has resulted in “larger size units, a reduction in the ability of consumers to choose, and an increase in the power of producers” (p. 157). The Friedmans point out that the interests of administrators, teachers, and teachers' union officials are advanced by increased centralization and bureaucracy and diminishing the power of parents.

The public school system's monopoly issue prompted Milton Friedman to advocate opportunity scholarships, also referred to as vouchers, as a potent exit strategy (Friedman 1955; Friedman and Friedman 1962). A similar mechanism called Town Tuition has been used in rural New Hampshire, Maine, and Vermont since

the latter part of the 1800s; John Stuart Mill ([1859] 1977) also proposed such a mechanism.

Proponents of opportunity scholarships, such as Milton Friedman, maintain that replacing the existing public school monopoly with a system of competing schools would lead to more effective schools. These competing schools, in Friedman's idea, would charge tuition and the tuition could be paid, at least in part, by opportunity scholarships given by the state to parents. Such scholarships and the like, though, are anathema to the teachers' unions and the rest of the education establishment. They are against anything that diverts money that would otherwise flow directly into the public schools' coffers.

Over the years, pluralism has increasingly emerged in the delivery of schooling. There are now magnet schools and other public schools of choice—including privately managed public charter schools. Also, parents have opportunity scholarships, tax credits, or government-funded savings accounts usable in public or private schools. This pluralistic environment puts pressure on regular public schools to improve. Education savings accounts are the most flexible of all, giving parents the power to direct money for one child to multiple suppliers for different aspects of education (Bedrick and Burke 2015). As pluralism of delivery grows, competitive pressure from parental choice will increase school effectiveness (Chubb and Moe 1990) and may check the desires of some educators to engage in ideological indoctrination.

Opportunity scholarships are widely supported by racial minorities in the United States (Henderson et al. 2021; Moe 2001), but opponents have endeavored to discredit such an aid program by claiming falsely that it has a tainted origin in the segregationist side during the civil rights struggle of the 1960s. Not only does such aid date in practice back to the 1800s, long before the civil rights era, but also it has its intellectual roots in classical economics, the Chicago school

of economics, and public choice analysis. As economic historian Phillip W. Magness has pointed out, as early as 1955 economists such as Milton Friedman were promoting opportunity scholarships as a way to speed up desegregation of schools (Magness, Carden, and Geloso 2019; Magness 2021).

Some classical liberals dissent from the policy proposal of giving parents opportunity scholarships, tax credits, or government-funded savings accounts. Certain of those dissenters disapprove of the entanglement of church and state that would come with giving funds to religious schools. Others fear that regulations will follow the money and that religious and other private schools would lose their independence (Rothbard 1975; Pearson 1971; Richman 1995). Still other classical liberals acknowledge that parental choice would make government-provided education more efficient but do not want to see the government performing a function more efficiently that they do not want to see the government perform at all (Rothbard 1975). Proponents of parental choice counter that subsidies to demand are less dangerous than subsidies to supply and that a legal firewall can protect against the return of regulations (Walberg and Bast 2003). This debate among classical liberals is not over, but either approach is, in truth, dependent on a pro-liberal change in public opinion and political culture.

Higher Education

Classical liberals agree with Nobel Prize-winning economist James M. Buchanan and his fellow economist Nicos Devletoglou (1970) when the authors contend that government has inserted itself between colleges and students, to deleterious effect. They point out that government has come (with subsidies, regulations, research grants, and accrediting agencies) between universities and their student-consumers. Hence universities are in no position to respond to demand or obtain enough capital in the market that could be used

to supply academic courses and related services matching student-consumer wants. Because of this interposition of government, demand from student-consumers is given short shrift.

Buchanan and Devletoglou (1970) write that members of the faculty at institutions of higher education in the United States are “producers who do not sell” (but get to decide what classes are offered), that taxpayers who support these institutions are “owners who do not control” (in the case of public universities), and that boards of regents or trustees are governing boards that do not govern, since they primarily green-light what the administration presents to them, without much consideration (pp. 34, 62).

In private nonprofit and public universities, there are no owners in the usual sense. Faculty, staff, and administrators are paid, but no one officially takes out profits. Members of the faculty take some of their income in money, some in working conditions (both physical—e.g., offices, lecture halls, laboratories—and collegial—e.g., faculty colleagues, students selected for admission), and some in the security of tenure (Alchian 1977b).

Members of the faculty may be producers who do not sell, but like K–12 teachers, they do have tenure. They hold their jobs until they reach retirement age. Robert McGee and Walter Block (1991) write that tenure “increases overall costs, decreases flexibility, disenfranchises the paying consumer of education, increases dependence on unaccountable insiders, and makes it nearly impossible to remove incompetent and unnecessary professors” (p. 546).

There are some classical liberal proponents of tenure. They argue that it safeguards professors in their search for truth or provides more secure expectations in a labor-run enterprise (Machlup 1964; McKenzie and Tullock 2012). That may be so, says economist Armen Alchian (1977b), but tenure encourages those who have it to take their jobs “less carefully” and to spend more time on “politics or social ambitions” (p. 196).

How did the current situation in higher education in the United States come about? Before the latter part of the 19th century, higher education was supplied almost entirely by privately run institutions. These were proprietary institutes to train future professionals (like doctors and lawyers) and nonprofit colleges to train future preachers. The nonprofit colleges did not have an immaculate conception. They were artificially assisted by colonial and state governments’ monopolistic charters, land and cash subsidies, and regulatory barriers that discouraged new entrants. There were also in the antebellum period the beginnings of federal land subsidies (Bennett 2014).

The donors and churches who paid for the early clergy-training colleges had common values and could be served well by a nonprofit board of trustees. In the words of law-and-economics scholar Henry Manne (1973), the contributors “purchased their own utility in the form of religious training for their and others’ children” (p. 105).

Some of the church colleges evolved into liberal arts colleges, where students could gain knowledge of classical scholarship and perhaps obtain background knowledge for the liberal professions. These colleges kept governance through nonprofit boards.

In the mid-19th century, leading figures among farmers and those in skilled mechanical fields began to push for publicly funded agricultural and mechanical colleges. This lobbying was successful, and the U.S. Congress provided land-grant subsidies for such colleges via the Morrill Act of 1862. The land-grant colleges and their analogs adopted the board-of-trustees governance of the earlier preacher-training nonprofits and extended themselves to provide education for prospective professionals. Public higher education, armed with munificent subsidies from taxes, proceeded to crowd out the previously proportionately larger private sector in higher education (Stroup 2019, 20–30).

The nonprofit mode of organization means that colleges and universities have no incentive to systematically seek out what students want so as to provide it. The faculty came to decide institutional policy by negotiating among themselves and working out compromises. Manne (1973) describes it as “a bureaucratic, nonprofit-oriented, political environment” that is inflexible, unchanging, and unattuned to student-consumer wants (p. 129).

The subsidies to public higher education have been a transfer from taxpayers in general (who are largely middle class) to college-attending people who would, as adults, have high incomes, in part because of this subsidized schooling (Hansen and Weisbrod 1969; Alchian 1977a). Federal programs have provided subsidized loans to college attendees. The loan programs have, in turn, brought more money to institutions of higher education while allowing them to boost tuition rates—in tandem with increased provision of loans (Bennett 1987; Vedder 2019; Gordon and Hedlund 2022). Attending and completing college, moreover, does not necessarily indicate that students absorbed the knowledge available in classes, though college work can indicate persistence and perseverance (Caplan 2018).

The colleges and universities of the early 21st century are beset with an illiberal milieu that threatens genuine scholarship and academic truth seeking. A certain amount of the pressure that has brought about that milieu comes from threats and protests from students and faculty members. The protesters’ claims are usually phrased in terms of social justice—a goal F. A. Hayek (1976) described as a “mirage.”

Proponents of critical race theory have been, in the late 20th century and the early decades of the 21st century, major contributors to this illiberal milieu. In addition to its intellectual and factual flaws, this theory also has a potential Machiavellian feature. As legal scholar Randall Kennedy (1989) writes, individuals in higher

education may utilize it as a tactic to label their rivals and adversaries as racist. Furthermore, it can also be employed to gain special benefits or to safeguard positions as professors, educators, or suppliers of educational materials (pp. 1790–1791, 1795, 1809, 1810). Critical race theory has the potential to serve as a tool for acquiring and expanding higher education territory. Those who subscribe to critical race theory may employ it to shield their market share and to disqualify those who do not share their views from competing for jobs (Evers and Wurman 2022).

Some see the results of these protests (whether over critical race theory or other social justice claims) as self-serving. In a nonprofit enterprise where resource allocation is not accountable to a bottom line, protesters make demands that would boost spending in the humanities, social sciences, ethnic studies, and women’s studies (Brennan and Magness 2019).

Administrators accede to demands that expand the powers of the administration at the expense of the power of the faculty (Ginsberg 2011, 2017). Some see the growing power of administrators in universities as a response to the burden of compliance with government regulations. Some see it as the result of faculty members offloading tasks they do not want to do. But some see it as bureaucratic aggrandizement by administrators who face few constraints.

Buchanan and Devletoglou (1970) offer an alternative to the existing situation in higher education. They suggest that universities should be competitors for resources “in the style of publishers or automobile manufacturers” (p. 32). Students’ tuition payments would then fund universities, instead of governments subsidizing universities directly. Direct subsidization does away with the normal bargain between supplier and customer and puts universities often artificially in a position to make students clamber for the prize of admission or tailor admission policy to benefit favored interests (Steindl 1990).

Under the suggested alternative approach, universities would have to either satisfy the wants of their student-customers or convince them that what is on offer is what they should really want. If institutions of higher learning had to earn their way honestly, they might well not have the problems they have.

Conclusion

Clearly, the proponents of the classical liberal project have strenuous work to do if they wish to transform education and remove the burdens of compulsory monopoly in K–12 and governmental subsidization of sclerotic colleges.

Education policy analyst Jay P. Greene (2011) writes that if we believe that children should be raised by their parents, “both out of respect for the liberty and autonomy of the parents and out of a conviction that [it] is in the best long-term liberty and autonomy interests of children,” then the education of children ought to be under the control of their parents. Teachers reading with children in school, Greene continues, is “not fundamentally different” from parents reading with children at home before they go to sleep. “Learning values, priorities, and self-discipline in school” is not fundamentally different, Greene adds, from learning those traits and skills in one’s family. If we think that parents have the “primary responsibility” for raising their children, then parents should also have the primary responsibility for educating their children (pp. 3, 5).

Caroline M. Hoxby (2001) notes that one of the ways in which families should be able to support their children is by selecting their schools. “Well-planned school reforms,” she says, “can exploit the power of families, making their influence better.” Reforms will encourage parents to be better consumers if they eliminate “arbitrary constraints on their choices” (p. 90).

The classical liberal project is unlikely to succeed if its advocacy rests solely on the material benefits

(large as these would be) of a classically liberal society. In order to win people over, classical liberals need to show that the liberal project will give people the freedom in which they can both flourish in terms of their best sense of themselves and engage in public-spirited activities. As political theorist Jonathan Macey (1998) points out, classical liberals are in a position to say that “private and consensual civic social and religious organizations” can provide more extensive opportunities for “meaningful self-expression” than can propped-up creatures of subsidy or monopolistic governmental bureaucracies (p. 411).

Thus, transformation would not be merely an effort of tearing down. To be successful, schools and colleges will need to be designed or reshaped—both to serve parents and students and to provide fulfilling careers for teachers and administrators (Murray 1988). In a thoroughly liberal society, some schools and colleges may be proprietary enterprises, some may be run by religious groups, some may be parent cooperatives, and others may be teacher-owned firms (Vedder 2000; Murray 1988; Manne 1973). Whatever form they take, there can be, in a liberal society, communities of activity and genuinely shared goals and values. A classically liberal society provides a framework within which such communities can be built without artificial distortion or control by state action (Nozick 1974; Leslie 1993).

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