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Why Not a Free Market in Education?

by Jacob G. Hornberger

Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, is a smart man. Such being the case, why isn't he able to recognize the real solution to the woes of public schooling?

Gates recently published an op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times* in which he stated, "Our high schools are obsolete. By obsolete, I don't just mean that they are broken, flawed and underfunded — although I can't argue with any of those descriptions. Until we design high schools to meet the needs of the 21st century, we will keep limiting — even ruining — the lives of millions of Americans every year."

So far, so good. After more than a century of existence, public schooling is an abject failure in terms of educating children and inspiring a love of learning among them. While many people have been able to survive the public-schooling ordeal, many others have been severely damaged by the process, even to the extent of having their pre-school awe of the universe and thirst for knowledge pounded out of them by time they graduate 12 years later.

Gates sees the problem. When it comes to the solution, however, his mind remains mired within the public-school paradigm, leading him to fall into the same reform trap that bedevils so many others. He proposes:

"First, declare that all students must graduate from high school ready for college, work and citizenship.... Second, publish the data that measure our progress toward that goal.... Finally, every state should commit to turning around failing schools and opening new ones."

What Gates fails to recognize is that no reform can ever fix public schooling for the simple reason that the paradigm on which public schooling is based is inherently defective. Therefore, it is incapable of being reformed, even by someone as brilliant as Bill Gates.

Public schools are run by the government, which ought to cause everyone's eyebrows to raise. When was the last time you saw government run anything well? Social Security? Medicare? Public housing?

Public schooling, however, is not just any old government program. It's a socialist one, and we all know how successful socialism has been all over the world.

At a local level, public schooling consists of a government board of successful politicians. That should make anyone suspicious. The board plans the educational decisions of thousands of children in a top-down, command-and-control process. Parents are required to send their children into the system, on pain of being fined or even imprisoned for failing to do so (or for failing to follow some other government-approved educational plan for their children). The schools are funded by mandatory taxes imposed on everyone, even people who don't have children. Textbooks are provided by state government officials.

I challenge anyone to come up with a better example of socialism than that.

Imagine that the government had been running the software or computer industries. What do you think the results would be? Any better than the results in public schooling? I wonder what Bill Gates would say if government had been running the software or computer industry for the last 30 years. Reform it?

Okay, let's say we junk the old government-school paradigm. What do we replace it with?

A good clue lies with Bill Gates himself, only he just doesn't realize it. A successful paradigm for education would be one based on the free market, the same paradigm on which the software and computer industries — and, for that matter, the food and clothing industries — are based.

Yes, a free market in education! A paradigm in which the state plays no role whatsoever. No more school boards, no more school taxes, and no more school-attendance laws. A process where parents, in their role as consumers, are as sovereign as they are in the software and computer industries. A system in which families decide the best educational vehicle for each of their children and in which entrepreneurs are leapfrogging over themselves to best satisfy the ever-increasing demands on them.

How would the truly poor get educated? Just ask Bill Gates. He and his wife have been voluntarily donating millions of dollars to help others get an education.

*Mr. Hornberger is founder and president of The Future of Freedom Foundation, publisher of **Separating School & State: How to Liberate America's Families**, by Sheldon Richman.*

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