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## **Crippling the Competition, Part 2**

**by Scott McPherson**

*Independence is the only gauge of human virtue and value. What a man is and makes of himself; not what he has or hasn't done for others. There is no substitute for personal dignity. There is no standard of personal dignity except independence.*

—Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead*

A truly free society ought to have an equally free system of education. Contrary to popular opinion, this doesn't have to mean an elaborate arrangement of brick buildings filled with teachers and classrooms and managed by a central authority. As John Holt, an education reformer, children's rights advocate, and former teacher, observed in *Freedom and Beyond*,

Almost all societies and people now *define* education or learning as schooling, and measure people's intelligence, competence, job-worthiness, and capacity for further learning almost entirely in terms of the length in years and the expense of the schooling they have already received. This is a most serious mistake.

Indeed it is. Not just children but adults as well could just as easily be learning different skills and trades in apprenticeships. They could also attend individual classes in cooking, foreign language, carpentry, painting, computer programming, or any number of other subjects or intellectual pursuits that provide the skills needed to make a living in the world, and that have as their goal the attainment of *knowledge*.

The British economist and education historian E.G. West describes just this sort of environment as prevailing in the 19th century *before* the ascendancy of universal compulsory schooling, in his 1994 essay "Education without the State": In British private education before 1870, the record of educational outputs such as literacy was even more impressive than the

numbers of children in school [because of] the existence of numerous educational agencies outside formal state schooling.

These agencies . . . included the adult education movement, the mutual improvement societies, the literary and philosophical institutes, the mechanics' institutes and the Owenite halls of science. [Also there were] freelance lecturers who travelled the towns and stimulated self-study among the poor. And in part-time formal education the Sunday schools and adult evening schools were obvious examples. Simultaneously also, there were the factory schools.

In this scenario children and adults interact on a regular basis, often in a professional environment, and learn valuable and lasting lessons from one another. This type of setting would undoubtedly be competitive, as students learned of one another's strengths and weaknesses and sought to improve their own abilities relative to their fellows', and worked together voluntarily for a better understanding of the subject matter.

Isn't it at least *possible* that people living under these circumstances would become the kinds of people that make a free society so dynamic and unique, so full of abundance, innovation, excellence, thrift, and variety? In his "Against School" ([www.spinninglobe.net/againstschool.htm](http://www.spinninglobe.net/againstschool.htm)), former New York State and New York City Teacher of the Year John Taylor Gatto cites George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Edison, Andrew Carnegie, John Rockefeller, and Mark Twain among his examples of everyday people who achieved greatness without enduring the compulsory schooling routine that we take for granted in the 21st century. (Of the schooling that Twain did receive, he had this to say: "I did have a public schooling; but I never let it interfere with my education.")

How many Edisons, Twains, or Rockefellers are being discouraged from their potential today because they can't sit passively in a desk, bear to read a dull textbook, or pass a standardized test in order to be deemed worthy?

### **Freedom of exchange**

In a free society, individual persons compete using a different standard from that imposed by the government-school regime: exchange of value for value. There is no authority figure regulating success or failure. In pre-industrial civilization, this was accomplished through simple barter. But as Leonard Read wrote in *Anything That's Peaceful*, "An [advanced] economy has only one means to effect the necessary exchanges of its numerous specializations . . . that is, *a medium of exchange* — money."

Like swapping pelts for beads, exchanging money for goods and services implies that the players, not bureaucrats, are in control of the trade. It's our individual judgment of what is best for us that sets the terms of the trade. A person hoping to buy a product or use a service might look to *Consumer Reports* or an "Underwriters' Laboratory" sticker as a guide, but this type of third-party information is not necessarily, or legally, conclusive or decisive. To offer a good or

service on the market, the provider does not have to please that third party in order to toil in his chosen field (unless, of course, it is some government official who demands that he purchase a business license, but that only buttresses my point).

If two or more people wish to make computers, or cars, or build houses, or produce widgets, they ideally perform at their best ability in hopes of persuading you, the consumer, to choose their product over their competitor's. *That* is the essence of competition.

There can be, and often is, a clear winner and loser in this scenario, but (a) there doesn't necessarily have to be (e.g., Apple and Microsoft share the computer market, as Ford, GM, Toyota, and BMW, share in the automobile industry); and (b) the existence of these companies is not determined arbitrarily by a government bureaucrat who says, "We don't need computers (or cars, or whatever) in our society; you'll have to manufacture (fill in the blank) instead," *but through the ability of the provider of this good or that service to create something sufficiently enticing that his fellow citizens will freely exchange their money for it* (except in the case of a government bailout, but that, too, only supports my point).

Even where there are clear losers, as in the case of a company going bankrupt, the distinction between the free market and the government school system is clear: a "loser" at school is, as indicated in part one, not allowed to succeed, because somewhere, some time, some bureaucrat decreed that a student must know how to add fractions, or understand algebra, or have read Shakespeare, or know when the Civil War ended — *and be able to regurgitate these facts on command* — in order to proceed to make a successful life for himself.

By comparison, a person who loses in the bid for customers can find another good or service to produce for trade, or simply try to improve his performance, on the basis of his *own* judgment and initiative, his *own* ability to determine what is important — to both himself and his fellows.

The "market" of school "competition" is prescribed and necessarily limited; the true marketplace is based on voluntary action and is immeasurable in its range. In the marketplace, you do what *you* think you're good at, and the sole factor determining whether you were right in your decision is *reality*. Your customers won't ask you to recite from *Macbeth* or tell them who the Axis Powers were before they purchase your computer or ask you to build them a house. They will make that determination on the basis of their understanding of the quality of your product and reward *you* with their *money*, not an A+ on a report card sent to your parents or filed in a government database.

### **Competition and compulsion**

A person's competence in the marketplace is determined by something more concrete than his ability to perform on demand like a circus animal. He doesn't take a written test to prove his

worth; his abilities are revealed through trade with voluntary consumers. *That* is true competition.

In short, in school you are told what to do and what you *will* be proficient at if you hope to succeed: and you are ultimately graded on your performance (which is necessarily affected by the fact that you did not choose your “occupation” voluntarily) on a standardized, written test that may very well be in a language foreign to you or written in a way that you don’t understand, or that may be administered in an environment that is not conducive to proper concentration (e.g., loud noises in the hall or frequent interruptions), or that you simply don’t want to take. In any event, you’re expected to do what you’re told or be punished.

Education ought to be about free will and personal judgment, not compulsion and a paralyzing fear of failure. The free market is based on the former, not the latter.

This view of education is not without its critics. Political conservatives are quick to jump on any suggestions for ridding schools of their “competitive” nature as “progressive” or “liberal,” “politically correct,” “new age,” perhaps even “emasculating.” But they partly misunderstand my point: more than a desire to see schools abandon their arbitrary system of grading and testing, carrot and stick, I want the government to get out of the education business and stop granting unfair advantage to this particular form of teaching and learning over others. Government favoritism hurts true competition, in every sense of the word.

I want to see schools determining freely, without force, coercion, or subsidy, whether the current system of grades and other rewards truly creates an educated person, or whether children learn better in an environment where their individual interests are encouraged (or at least not discouraged). I want to see an environment where students are free to explore and experiment; where no one is ordering them around, telling them what, how, and when to learn; and where they discover how to think and act for their *own* sake and pleasure, not perform for a pedagogical master.

And where their success or failure is determined by something more substantive than bureaucratic whim. Like the students themselves, parents and schools will see the results of their efforts in *reality* — how the pupil functions in the real world, not how well he pleases his teachers. If knowing all the state capitals is vital to being a successful businessman, artist, musician, carpenter, auto mechanic, cook, or computer programmer, we’ll find that out soon enough.

Many people on the political left will claim that I have missed a valuable point, that so long as we must compete we are still slaves, just slaves to the marketplace instead of bureaucrats. We should return to the days when people manufactured for themselves and not for profit, they may say. My first answer would be that we can’t logically compare a system grounded in voluntary exchange with a system of involuntary servitude. And secondly, I would point out that making so momentous a decision as choosing to turn your back on our modern, industrial society

would require a steadfastness of character that few could hope to retain after 12 years of mind-numbing, forced “learning” that teaches at its root that you should just do what you’re ordered to do.

In *On Education*, the 18th-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau advised, “Let my student be destined for the sword, the church, the bar. I do not care. Prior to the calling of his parents is nature’s call to human life. Living is the job I want to teach him.” Education is meant to be about preparing young minds to live and thrive in the world around them. No one can honestly claim that the current system is coming even close to accomplishing the goal of making children learn what they’re *told*. How can we honestly expect this same system to help them learn what they *need* to live healthy, productive, and fulfilled lives?

John Holt wrote of schools in *Escape from Childhood* that “no other institution does more harm or more lasting harm to more people or destroys so much of their curiosity, independence, trust, dignity, and sense of identity and worth.” None of that seems at all consistent with a society based on independent, self-motivated citizens competing freely in the marketplace for the voluntary exchange of goods and services and in pursuit of their own happiness. Nor do these schools have any chance of ever preparing people to function as such.

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