

Education in a Free Society

Education in a Free Society

Anne Husted Burleigh, Editor



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This book is published by Liberty Fund, Inc., a foundation established to encourage study of the ideal of a society of free and responsible individuals.



The cuneiform inscription that serves as the design motif for our endpapers is the earliest-known written appearance of the word “freedom” (*amagi*), or “liberty.” It is taken from a clay document written about 2300 B.C. in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash.

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Foreword

Liberty Fund, Inc., was established to encourage study of the ideal of a society of free and responsible individuals who are free from intimidation. This ideal (not utopian) is the polestar by which the directors make their decisions.

In carrying out its purposes, Liberty Fund has made grants to organizations with similar objectives, assisted in special projects and in the writing and publication of ideas involving education conducive to a society of free and responsible people, and organized and sponsored seminars.

The seminars organized by Liberty Fund take their format from the Socratic seminar. The material to be discussed is read by the participants prior to the seminar. The discussion group is kept small to promote a maximum exchange of ideas. The leader asks a minimum of questions but mainly polices the discussion so that as much participation as possible may occur.

Liberty Fund proceeds upon the premise that if we are going to have a society of free and responsible people, they must have some capacity to read and write and reason. How can those capacities best be developed in a free society? What would be the ideal educational arrangement in human society and, in particular, in a society of free and responsible human beings?

In an effort to explore these questions two of Liberty Fund's directors, B. A. Rogge and P. F. Goodrich, collaborated in writing a position paper, "Education in a Free Society," in which they attempted to set forth the problems. Four well-known writers and educators (Gottfried Dietze, Russell Kirk, Henry Manne, and Stephen Tonsor) were asked to present papers dealing with this subject to a seminar which was held in Indianapolis March 28–31, 1971.

The field of expertise of these men was in the college and university; therefore, this seminar dealt primarily with that level of education. However, Dorothy Sayers' "The Lost Tools of Learning" was inserted as background material concerning primary and secondary education.

Participants in this seminar other than paperwriters were Paul L. Adams, Dean of Hillsdale College; Anne Husted Burleigh, writer; Jameson G. Campaigne, Editorial Writer of the New York *Daily News*; John Chamberlain, columnist and Dean of the School of Journalism of Troy State University; William H. Fletcher, Partner, Arthur Andersen & Co.; Robert G. Jones, Principal,

Winchester (Indiana) Community High School; Israel M. Kirzner, Professor of Economics, New York University; George C. Roche, President of Hillsdale College; Arthur A. Shenfield, International Institute for Economic Research; Randall Storms, Headmaster, Wichita Collegiate School; Linda Haifley Walker, public school teacher. These participants have wide audiences in their regular vocations. There were also observers present who did not participate in the discussion.

Anne Husted Burleigh has summarized the discussion in the introduction to this book, entitled "Education Seminar."

In a time of turmoil in public education, it is felt that these writers have ideas that, in a free market, could develop into something highly worthwhile, even though we may not at this moment be able to predict what form that might take. Thus, Liberty Fund presents its ideas to the public with the hope that some little seed will take hold and help bring us closer to the ideal of a society of free and responsible people.

Education in a Free Society

Introduction

Education Seminar

Anne Husted Burleigh

Anne Husted Burleigh received a B.A. with honors in history from DePauw University in 1963 and did graduate work at Indiana University in 1963–64. She is the author of John Adams, a historical biography published in 1969, and has written articles and reviews for such publications as Intercollegiate Review, Analysis, and Academic Reviewer. She is a former staff reporter for The Indianapolis Star.

No other institution plays a more central role in the life of the American family than the public school. Perhaps even more than the church the public school provides the context in which people make the major decisions of their lives.

There are more public schools today than ever before in our history; more students than ever attend the public schools. But scarcely anyone today is happy with the public schools in the United States, whether those institutions be of kindergarten or university level. Hardly anyone would deny that the gravest problems riddle the public school system, that even as more schools are built and more tax money is rushed in to salve the wounds, the dilemma persists and intensifies.

If it were possible, many may wonder, to pry loose from the present educational system, to start afresh with a system of any choosing, what sort of educa-

tional arrangements would we make? What arrangements would coincide with the nature of man, his search for freedom, his quest for understanding of the spiritual and physical world? What role would the state have in these arrangements? Is there an alternative to state provision and compulsion of education? Even if the state were not to subsidize education, is education so necessary to a free citizenry that the state at least ought to compel people to send their children to school? If we could answer those questions, then we might know in what direction to head in trying to extricate ourselves from the present educational predicament.

And so, to explore a scheme of education that they would consider ideal, a group of scholars brought together by the Liberty Fund, Inc., met March 28–31, 1971. Since the participants in the seminar were proponents of limited government and a free market, their intent was to examine the ideal educational arrangements in a society of free and responsible people. How the citizens of a free society should provide for education of their children and what should be the composition of that framework was the subject designated in advance as the topic for investigation.

A position paper, “Education in a Free Society,” the work of Pierre F. Goodrich and Dr. Benjamin A. Rogge, served as a springboard for discussion. Hence, a summary of the position paper must precede the report of the seminar proceedings.

The Position Paper

When the authors speak in their paper of ideal educational arrangements, they do not have in mind a system suitable for a paradise inhabited by perfectible beings. Instead, they consider the optimal framework for educating a society of imperfect human beings—intellectually, morally, spiritually imperfect—who, though improvable, cannot in this life escape their condition. The authors, though accepting the idea that perfection exists, think that imperfect men can never know perfection but can hope only to know the optimal—and probably not even that. In other words, men who put their imperfect minds to the task of pursuing perfection will do well to discover merely the optimal answer; viewing the world through myopic eyes, they will perceive only half-truths, partial truths. Nonetheless, they must make choices, and so with their hazy, constricted perception of the ideal, they will try to make the best of imperfect choices. In the context of the position paper, then, ideal is assumed to be optimal—that is, the closest approximation to perfection that imperfect men can conceive.

Since men are imperfect, they consequently have need of improvement; they require education to acquire the vestments of civilization. Education, as defined by the authors, is growth in understanding on the part of a particular human being. It is an interior process for

the individual and can happen anywhere, not just in the classroom or school. Furthermore, because of the infinite variety of human beings, because of their diverse capabilities and inclinations, no one kind of education suits them all equally well. Thus, the ideal educational arrangements will allow for these wide variances. In their definition of education, the authors are quick to point out that education will not transform man into God. Though it may be hoped that education will turn man down the path toward virtue, it will not necessarily do so; education will not make man perfect.

With “ideal” and “education” thus described, the position paper defines the free society as one in which each individual is free to do anything that is peaceful, where he is free to behave responsibly and free from intimidation. In other words, the free society is one in which the state serves only as night watchman.

After this brief introduction, the authors pose three problems: First of all, What are the purposes of education in a free society? Second, What economic and political arrangements will be most harmonious with those purposes? And, finally, What kinds of educational techniques will most likely meet those purposes?

Because it is assumed that the purpose of education in an unfree society will be to serve the whim of the dictator, proletariat, priest-king, or whoever holds power, the authors are concerned only with the purposes of education in a society of free and responsible

men.* They believe that in a state where government acts only to prevent people from harming each other the answer to the problem of the purpose of education will be a simple one. The state will have no purpose of education at all. Rather, education, as are all endeavors other than police action, will be totally a matter of individual concern. Only the individual in a free society will define the purpose of education. Whether he wants to become the classically educated Renaissance man or to become the best barber in town is entirely up to him. The choice of what he will do with his education belongs only to him. So long as he does only that which is peaceful, he has sole control over the means and ends of his actions.

For that reason, the authors of the position paper argue that all intervention by the state in the educational process is both unnecessary and undesirable. Except as the state protects its citizens against force and fraud, it will have no authority in any aspect of the educational picture. The authors make an unqualified statement in this regard:

We oppose state operation of educational programs at any level; we oppose state finance of such programs at any

* The authors are concerned about the question of what is to become of those people who are either internal or external enemies of the free society, who are incapable of exercising freedom or who are unwilling to exercise it. The authors, however, do not deal with these issues in their position paper.

level, in any form (including tax relief); we oppose state coercion or participation in such programs, whether public or private. We believe that education must, by its nature, be a part of the *private* sector of society. . . .

But at this point arises the inevitable question: Can the citizens of a free society be assumed to make the choices that will preserve their freedom or must they be educated specifically in the principles of freedom? Burdened by their imperfections, may they not likely succumb to the temptation of short-term benefits that the unfree society offers? If so, then should they deliberately be educated to opt for freedom? Should the state compel education of its citizens in the institutions of a free society?

“In other words,” ask the authors of the position paper, “does the survival of the free society require that its citizens be unfree in at least the one area of education?” As the authors point out, most societies that have described themselves as free have always refused to trust the citizen to exercise complete freedom in the field of education. By compulsory school attendance laws, tax support of schools in whole or in part, and authority over curriculum, most states throughout history have used their coercive power to regulate education. All such interventions of the state are both unnecessary and undesirable, say the authors. If the citizens wish to make sure that their children are educated for freedom, then they will see that society as a political unit is excluded from all decisions concerning

education, except as the state protects people from force and fraud. The authors believe that history has revealed too often how dismal are the results when corruptible men, lusting for power as all men do, use state control of education to enhance the power of the state and of themselves. The authors insist that “the task of educating individuals for freedom, if done at all, will be best done by private agencies and institutions, manned by individuals deeply committed to that cause.” Some private agencies within the free society no doubt will preach a philosophy antithetical to freedom. Nor can people be expected to be attracted automatically to the structures of a free society. Nonetheless, this is a small risk when contrasted with the danger of state control in which the state in all probability would *not* teach its citizens to limit its power. It is simply inherent in the state that it will refuse to retreat from any extension of power to which it can force itself. (Also see Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*.)

If, then, educational arrangements are to be made wholly by individuals and not at all by the state, a further problem arises when the individual who is the educational subject is a child rather than an adult competent to make decisions. In such a case, who is responsible for the child—parent, voluntary welfare agency, state? The authors of the position paper are firm in their insistence upon parental responsibility for education. Imperfect as some parents may be, the state may claim no jurisdiction over the parent-child relation-

ship (except, again, in cases of force). The family, the authors say, though imperfect, is still the least imperfect decision-maker for its children—and is a far less imperfect decision-maker than the state. Those who make decisions should be ideally those who bear the consequences, hence making parents or guardians peculiarly suited to judging the educational interests of their children until those children become financially independent and responsible for themselves.

Thus, either the individual directly involved or the person legally responsible for him is the proper one to decide the purpose of education in a free society. Much as the authors of the position paper would like to see everyone educated in the ideal of a free society, they refuse to take the risk of state intervention in that education. They prefer instead “the uncertain outcome of competitive educational programs, free of state control.”

Affirming that individuals will be able to decide for themselves why and in what way they will be educated, the authors next tackle the economic and political arrangements in which these individual purposes may be carried out. Politically the free society will be, as already stated, a limited state with government restricted to being a night watchman with authority only in cases of force and fraud.

“We begin,” say the authors, “by assuming a society in which the state plays no part in the educational process. Gone would be all state colleges and universi-

ties, all public elementary and secondary schools, all public libraries and public opera houses. . . .” What, then, will be the economic arrangement for education in a free society? With all publicly supported institutions absent, what would take their place? The authors cannot certainly predict. Without actually trying a free society, no one will ever know what manifold choices it offers. The private sector of education as it exists today suffers from such a clutter of state interventions that it gives no good clue to the answer. Nonetheless, the private sector in other endeavors is relatively free enough to indicate some possibilities for really private education.

In the first place, great diversity would be likely in the kinds of educational opportunity. Books, tapes, newspapers, films, televised lectures, and so forth, might be more utilized than at present—all much less expensive than traditional methods of formal teacher and textbook. Second, more schools might be operated on a profit basis, in contrast to the less efficient not-for-profit institutions now prevalent. Finally, the formal schools that would exist in a free society would be at least as varied as those that now function in the private sector. Some schools might stress liberal arts, others vocational studies; some would be religiously affiliated, others secular; some would cater to gifted students, others to handicapped, still others to minority groups, to wealthy students or poor ones. Some schools would be highly structured; others might be no more than meetings held