

Libertarian Education

Most libertarian discussions on education focus on promoting private schools. Advocates for private schools do not go far enough. They assume that a system of private education would be consistent with libertarian principles. However, private schools can be as oppressive or even more oppressive than government schools. Private funding does not necessarily result in schools that respect the personal sovereignty and individuality of each student. Libertarians need to promote libertarian principles for all schools.

The foundation for a libertarian education requires recognition of both **personal sovereignty** and **individuality**. A sovereign individual is a free agent engaged in self-determination. Free agents set their own goals and choose the means to achieve those goals. Further, a community of unique individuals represents a diversity of goals and of methods for reaching those goals. The only limits libertarians should accept on personal goals and the means used to achieve them would be prohibition of the use of coercion or force to prevent the exercise of personal sovereignty by another. The purpose of education is to help an individual acquire knowledge and develop skills. This is a noble objective, but it does not justify the use of coercion or force in its pursuit. The choice to seek an education and the nature of that education is a matter of personal sovereignty.

The education of children raises an important question about personal sovereignty, what is the extent of personal sovereignty possessed by a child? In principle, no difference exists between the degree of personal sovereignty possessed by a child and an adult. Practically speaking, however, dependence on adults limits a child's sovereignty. Childhood dependence implies a degree of immaturity and a limited capacity to employ reason in making choices. Thus, a parent or parent surrogate has a right to be involved in the educational choices of a child. However, there remains a question about the nature of that involvement.

Parents or others can attempt to influence educational choices by a child in several ways. One can use **force, threat** or **intimidation**, or use **contrived incentives** to influence a child's educational choices. Finally, one can use **persuasion** to influence a child's educational choices. Clearly, the first two options are coercive and inconsistent with libertarian principles. Albeit more subtle, the third method is also coercive. The use of contrived incentives to influence a child's choices is an effort to manipulate the child and therefore represents a soft form of coercion. The final method, **persuasion**, may be the only method that is consistent with libertarian principles. Persuasion, properly conducted, appeals to the reason of a child. Successful persuasion convinces a child of the correctness of a particular choice. Persuasion is not coercive but educational and contributes to the development of a child's reasoning ability. Teachers function as surrogate parents. Thus, a persuasion-based approach to education should also extend to teachers. A teacher can best exercise persuasion through a **cooperative alliance*** with a student. In such an alliance, a student's participation and cooperation in the educational process is essential. The only way that a cooperative alliance can be formed is for a teacher to develop a positive, supportive and therefore a personal relationship with a child.

Thus, education should be a persuasion-based process that is consistent with personal sovereignty and free choice. The most obvious educational practice that is contrary to this view is compulsory education. Compulsory education, whether imposed by law or parental fiat, should be the first target of libertarian efforts to reform education.

Libertarians should focus on the repeal of compulsory attendance laws and promote the principle of persuasion as the basis for education. Compulsory school attendance and the authoritarian atmosphere it promotes often leads students to engage in counter control behavior. Counter control is behavior intended to neutralize or overcome external efforts to manipulate a person. Counter control in students can lead to withdrawal from participation, disruptive behavior, vandalism, truancy and dropping out. In short, it produces many of the maladies that affect schools.

The second important principle for a libertarian education is individuality. Individuality is a natural product of diversity. First, people are biologically diverse. Biological diversity produces a range of abilities and predispositions that are highly variable at the individual level. Thus, part of our individuality is a natural consequence of our complex genetic heritage. Second, people exhibit cultural or social diversity. Different cultures have adopted a variety of values, goals and means. Biological diversity interacts with cultural diversity to produce a complex bio-social individuality. The only limitation a libertarian education should accept on the expression of individuality is on the use of coercion or force to prevent the exercise of personal sovereignty by another individual.

A pervasive focus in education that disregards the individuality of children is a one-size-fits-all curriculum. Obviously, given bio-social diversity, schools can offer no single, best curriculum for all students. An educational program guided by libertarian principles requires a diverse curriculum that reflects the bio-social diversity of a student body. Such a curriculum needs to be diverse in both content and teaching methods to maximize choice. When schools maximize choice, a child's natural interest can be engaged. An education program that respects a child's individuality promotes personal responsibility and self-determination. A sufficiently diverse curriculum would not need to use coercion or bribery to motivate students. Thus, a second focus of libertarian efforts at educational reform should be directed at promoting recognition of individuality and its implications for educational programming.

One can apply the principles of a libertarian education to home schools, nonprofit private schools, for profit private schools or to government schools. The principles may be easier to implement for some schools than others, but the principles are appropriate for them all. Libertarians who are interested in educational reform should promote adoption of libertarian principles in education. Adoption of such principles has the potential to transform both government and private schools.

David Center, Ph.D.

*** See also: <http://www.davidcenter.com/documents/Publications/42.pdf>**