

Coming Clean: My 5 Suggestions for Improving the Education System

At Intellectual Takeout, we often criticize today's American education system. In reaction, some in our audience make the blanket accusation that we are "against public education." Others accuse us of merely "cursing the darkness" rather than "lighting a candle," and wonder what we would suggest to improve things.

Are we against public education? If by "public education" you mean publicly supported education, the answer is "no." That has always been a fixture of Western civilization. If by "public education" you mean the public education system as it is currently structured, we might give a qualified "yes."

What would we suggest to improve it? I can't necessarily speak for everyone in my institution, but here, quickly, are some of my recommended changes:

1) Fund education at the local level. Stop taking money from the federal and state governments. Money comes with strings attached, and takes away the autonomy of local communities, i.e., their power to do what they feel is best for their own children.

2) Get rid of grades and stop the arbitrary separation of children by age – at least at the elementary and middle school levels. Allow children to progress at their own pace, assuming they're putting in the work. Do not allow them to move up to the next level in each subject until they have clearly demonstrated mastery of the previous level.

3) Get rid of compulsory education. For some children, if they do not wish to be there, no amount of coaxing or inspiration on the part of the teacher will change their minds. If they do not do the work, and are a clear hindrance to the learning of the other children, they should be kicked out. If they have a change of heart and express contrition, they can be allowed

back in.

4) Provide more options for those who are not academically inclined. It used to be that high school age was the time to begin tackling subjects that required more abstract thinking – philosophy, theology, rhetoric, etc. Not everyone is equally capable of this level of thinking, nor does everyone wish to pursue a traditional academic track at this level, at this time in their lives. We should have a society that does not effectively punish teenagers who fall into these latter categories. Create more apprenticeship options... have more businesses be open to hiring them... let them make some real money... don't solely assign value to college degrees.

5) Have more appreciation for tradition. The frenetic pace at which the modern education system “innovates” is dizzying, dissatisfying, and symptomatic of having been cut off from the past. Learn from over two millennia of wisdom about how to educate children. Put the insights of today in dialogue with the past. Give students a better grounding in past authors and history so that they might be able to more accurately interpret and appreciate the present.

These are some initial suggestions. I'm sure if I thought about it longer, I would have some more.

Thoughts?

Image credit: Don Norris / One-Room Schoolhouse / Chase County, KS