

Not Everyone Has the Same Capacity for Learning

In America, since the first half of the 19th century, much energy has been expended on offering education to all citizens.

At first, this desire for universal education was for an education in the *basics*. It gave birth to the [Common School Movement](#) (the progenitor of America's public school system), which was guided in part by a Unitarian and Rousseauian optimism about the human condition, and in part by the belief that America's form of government required a minimally-educated citizenry.

Since the dawning of the Common School Movement, things in America have changed... or developed... or regressed. At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, it went from universal education in the basics to [compulsory](#) high school for all. For the past 40 or so years, the push has been for college for all.

But according to social critic Albert Jay Nock (1870-1945), America's egalitarian push for higher education for all was doomed to failure from the start. According to Nock, it was doomed to failure because not every person is capable of higher education.

Why? Two reasons, both of which run contrary to the assumptions of those who think everything can be controlled and determined by systems.

One, human beings are endowed with free will, and not every person will choose to discipline themselves in the way necessary to receive instruction. No amount of tinkering with a system can substitute for the all-important element of a

student's free choice to become educated.

Two, as a result of either divine providence, or original sin, or circumstance, or the accident of birth, or bad luck—whatever you want to call it—not everyone was born with the same abilities or means to achieve the heights of education. Some people are born smarter than others; some people are born to parents smarter than other parents; some people have the fortune to go to better schools than others; some people have the fortune to have better teachers than others. As education progresses it becomes more difficult. When confronted with the increased difficulty, some will inevitably fall by the wayside... unless they're propped up.

Here are Nock's own words from his book *The Theory of Education in the United States*. Keep in mind that by "education" in the selection below, he's referring to the upper levels of education, i.e., high school and college:

"An educational system was set up in our country, and lavishly endowed in response to the noble sentiment of parents for the advancement of their children. It was to be equalitarian, as the average man understood equality; that is to say, everybody should be regarded as able to take in its benefits. It should be democratic, as the average man understood democracy; that is to say, no one had any natural right to anything that everybody could not get. Very well, then, we said, education, traditionally, is the establishment of certain views of life and the direction of certain demands on life, views and demands which take proper account of the fundamental instincts of mankind, all in due measure and balance; the instinct of workmanship, the instinct of intellect and knowledge, of religion and morals, of beauty and poetry, of social life and manners. The aim at an inculcation of these views and demands is the Great Tradition of a truly civilised society. The traditional discipline, the process which has been found most competent to the purpose, is that chiefly of scrutinising the longest available

continuous record of what the human mind has hitherto done with those instincts; what it has made out of them; what its successes and failures have been; and what is to be learned from both. Bring on your children, and we will put them through this process under the sanction of an equalitarian and democratic theory.

It did not work. We discovered almost at once that it did not work, and that apparently there was no way of making it work. The reason it did not work was that this process postulated an educable person, and everybody is not educable. Far from it, we discovered that relatively very few are educable, very few indeed. There became evident an irreconcilable disagreement between our equalitarian theory and the fact of experience. Our theory assumed that all persons are educable; our practical application of it simply showed that the Creator, in His wisdom and in His loving-kindness, had for some unsearchable reason not quite seen His way to fall in with our theory, for He had not made all persons educable. We found to our discomfiture that the vast majority of mankind have neither the force of intellect to apprehend the processes of education, nor the force of character to make an educational discipline prevail in their lives.”

Nock wrote this in 1932. At that time in America's history, he and others had already discerned the fruitlessness of trying to provide the higher levels of education to everyone.

But since then, the government has not backed down from a radically egalitarian theory of education. Instead, arguably, they have doubled down on it. And it has made education worse—for all.

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