

Compulsory Schooling Is Incompatible with Freedom

If we care about freedom, we should reject compulsory schooling. A relic of 19th-century industrial America, compulsory schooling statutes reduced the broad and noble goal of an educated citizenry into a one-size-fits-all system of state-controlled mass schooling that persists today.

Horace Mann, the designer of the nation's first compulsory schooling law in Massachusetts in 1852, saw taxpayer-funded, universal compulsory schooling as a way to mold children into moral, democratic citizens. He famously said: "Men are cast-iron, but children are wax."

Despite the fact that he homeschooled his own children, Mann built the Prussian-inspired foundation for the modern government schooling apparatus, cementing education's enduring association with schooling. His biographer, Jonathan Messerli, writes of Mann: "That in enlarging the European concept of *schooling*, he might narrow the real parameters of *education* by enclosing it within the four walls of the public school classroom..."

Founding Father of Forced Education

For Mann and his colleagues, compulsory schooling represented a dramatic leap from the Founding Fathers who influenced their vision. Thomas Jefferson, for example, recognized the essential connection between education and freedom, writing in 1816: "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."

Jefferson supported a decentralized framework of education, free to the poor; but, unlike Mann, he recognized that making such a system compulsory and government-controlled would be a threat to liberty. Jefferson wrote in 1817: "It is better to tolerate the rare instance of a parent refusing to let his child be educated, than to shock the common feelings and ideas by the forcible asportation and education of the infant against the will of the father."

Despite Jefferson's warnings, compulsory schooling laws were enacted and expanded during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, mandating school attendance under a legal threat of force. Some 20th century education philosophers and social reformers, like John Dewey, aimed to lessen the impact of forced schooling, striving to make classrooms and curricula more relevant to children's experiences and more hands-on and experimental.

What these well-meaning reformers often ignored, however, was the inherent conflict between freedom and compulsion in mass schooling. One cannot be truly free within a mandatory, coercive system of social control.

In 1962, just over a century after the initial onset of state-controlled compulsory schooling, Paul Goodman wrote his scathing treatise, *Compulsory Mis-education*, describing the key failures of compulsory schooling. He wrote that “education must be voluntary rather than compulsory, for no growth to freedom occurs except by intrinsic motivation. Therefore the educational opportunities must be various and variously administered. We must diminish rather than expand the present monolithic school system.”

Even as social reformers ranging from A.S. Neill (*Summerhill*, 1960) to John Holt (*How Children Fail*, 1964; *How Children Learn*, 1967) to Ivan Illich (*Deschooling Society*, 1970) wrote about the serious problems with forced schooling, compulsory education laws tightened and expanded worldwide in the latter half of the 20th century.

The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child (adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989 and ratified later by all UN member nations except for the United States) asserts: “The child is entitled to receive education, which shall be free and compulsory.” According to the U.N. every child has a right to a forced education, mandated by law and compelled by the state.

Empowering Parents

Today, as compulsory schooling consumes more of a child’s life than ever before, beginning in toddlerhood and extending into late-adolescence for much of each day and year, many parents and educators are recognizing the disconnect between forced schooling and freedom. Increasingly, they are choosing – or creating – alternatives to school.

A rising number of “free schools” and Sudbury-type democratic schools, like those promoted by A.S. Neill, are opening nationwide, enabling young people to direct their own education free from coercion.

Homeschooling is booming, and the philosophy of unschooling, or self-directed education, advocated by John Holt and others is growing in popularity and influence. Lawmakers in some states are urging a repeal of antiquated compulsory schooling laws, and are re-empowering parents with more education choice measures.

These are promising signals of a quiet exodus from mass schooling, as more people realize that freedom and compulsion make strange bedfellows.