

Home Education: A “Public Benefit?”

Random comment from the ‘Net: “I think a tax break for home schooled families is a great idea. However, you forget that we live in a community, and no man is an island. Those families do benefit from living in a community where others are educated.”

Whoa! This argument cuts both ways: the community arguably benefits more from brilliantly-educated home schoolers than home-schoolers benefit from badly-educated children at government schools; therefore, the home schoolers might deserve a break.

Consider Erik Demaine, who obtained a PhD in mathematics by the age of 20; the community benefits from his teaching of mathematics and computer science at MIT; the community benefits from his having obtained that PhD six years earlier than usual, due to homeschooling. Yet, it is also obvious that Erick Demaine himself benefits - he started his career six years earlier, and his lifetime earnings will be enriched by at least six years of near-peak earning levels. Erik is but one of many famous people who were educated at home. The image above is of Alexander Graham Bell, a renowned home-schooler.

I must insert a caveat regarding the preceding list. Horace Mann, famous advocate for the Common School movement, curses be upon his name, was largely self-educated, but did spend a few weeks per year in formal schooling before he was accepted to university. In fact, most children in those days spent only a few weeks per year attending; they were expected to learn and read independently, not to be micro-managed and spoon-fed 180 days per year for twelve years.

Despite the preceding argument, I am still rather nervous about tax credits for home schoolers, mainly for this reason: when governments deign to “grant” tax credits, they usually push for more regulation, not less. Politicians don’t understand home education - even those few who do home school their own tend to be categorically different from many other home schoolers, more likely to be “control freaks” who cannot perceive the harm done by arbitrary regulations.

Studies by Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) show that the regulatory environment has at best no statistical relation to the success of home schooling, and may actually be harmful. Part of the reason why government regulations do not much alter outcomes may be that a) regulations are unenforceable and are mostly ignored, and b) home schoolers do so much better than government schools that it is unlikely that would-be regulators even have a clue about what home schoolers need to do.

It is pointless to translate regulations designed for government schools, which are doing badly, to the very different realm of home education, which is doing extremely well. Home

educators enjoy learning every day, not merely half the calendar, and they learn in very unconventional ways.

I propose that Government schools are actually a Public Bad, for many reasons, chief among which is that graduates of such government schools, and of private schools which use textbooks either approved by or heavily influenced by the government, so often graduate without having a clue about what is and is not a “Public Good.” It is not hard to discover the truth; even the Wikipedia page defines “public good” in the first sentence: “In economics, a public good is a good that is both non-excludable and non-rivalrous in that individuals cannot be effectively excluded from use and where use by one individual does not reduce availability to others.”

Education is obviously excludable - students in the school obtain the bulk of the benefits; children playing in the street outside do not. The fact that there are some spillover benefits to outsiders does not make education a “public good” — if it did, then your planting a garden would be a “public good”, since others smell the fragrance and see the pretty flowers; everything with a positive externality would be a “public good” by such a vague definition.

Schools which teach students - even good students - to think badly are a public bad. There are incentives for government teachers and administrators to teach such confusion. There are incentives for such teachers, administrators, regulators, and other politicians not to teach about Public Choice Theory in the “civics” curriculum; such truthful analysis makes them look bad indeed.