

# Incentives or Imposed Instruction?

Do you believe:

A) Governments need to determine if/when people need to develop skills in manufacturing, knowledge work, farming, etc. in order to ensure that individuals and the economy as a whole can prosper.

Or,

B) Self-interested individuals reacting to market incentives will do a better job of matching their skill/interest with what benefits them and the economy as a whole than a government effort to direct them.

If you chose B, congratulations. You understand history and economic theory.

If you chose B, you ought also to have no trouble answering a similar question.

Do you believe:

A) Parents/teachers need to determine if/when children need to learn reading, writing, algebra, chemistry, history, etc. in order to ensure that individuals and society as a whole can prosper.

Or,

B) Self-interested children reacting to market incentives will do a better job of matching their skill/interest with what benefits them and society as a whole than a top-down effort to direct them.

If your answer is B to the first but not the second, you have a very shaky set of assumptions.

On the one hand, you believe it's not from the benevolence of the butcher that we get our meat, but by his regard to his self-interest in a market context. On the other hand, you believe that children have no regard for their self-interest and do not respond to market incentives so must be forced and directed to do what's good for them and by extension society.

If this is true, at what point do humans suddenly begin responding to incentives? This view would require an entirely new social science completely divorced from everything we know so far, and also divorced from observed reality.

If, as I believe, there is no difference and the answer to both is clearly B, we ought to stop worrying about compulsion and curricula and “normal” ages for reading, etc. etc. and let children do what we all do in the market: respond to incentives. When it benefits them to learn something, they will. In fact, they’ll do it in record time. When it doesn’t, they’ll fight it all the way and countless hours will be spent trying to get them to do something they don’t value.

Turns out, markets work. Everywhere.