

Leftist Lessons of The Case Against Education

Overall, reactions to *The Case Against Education* have been civil and fair. While I've been heavily criticized, I've been criticized for what I actually said and believe. My main disappointment: While the *quality* of the left-wing critiques has been fine, the *quantity* is modest. Yes, I had a great conversation with Sean Illig at Vox, and Steve Pearlstein has a nice write-up in the *Washington Post*. And don't forget my animated podcast with center-left Michael Baranowski on *The Politics Guys*. But I'd still say my un-left podcasts outnumber the left podcasts by 10:1. – and at least so far, no left-leaning think tank has invited me to speak.

This strikes me as particularly unfortunate because there are *many* results in *The Case Against Education* that leftists should appreciate. Starting with...

1. *Lots of workers – especially less-educated workers – are paid less than they're worth.* If signaling is important, there are bound to be numerous “diamonds in the rough” – good workers who are underpaid because they lack the right credentials to convince employers of their quality.
2. *Lots of workers – especially more-educated workers – are paid more than they're worth.* Again, if signaling is important, there are bound to be lots of bad workers who are overpaid because they obtained misleadingly strong credentials.
3. *A lot of education is meaningless hoop-jumping.* Campus radicals have long accused the education system of imposing an irrelevant, backward-looking, elitist curriculum on hapless kids. I say they're right.
4. *The education market is inefficient.* In signaling models, education has negative externalities. My story therefore implies a serious market failure, where self-interest leads students to pursue more education than socially optimal.
5. *Locked-in Syndrome.* Due to conformity signaling, the market for education isn't just inefficient; it's *durably* inefficient. The education market doesn't just fail; it *durably* fails.
6. *The government's “ban” on IQ testing is grossly exaggerated, and does next to nothing to explain employers' reliance on credentials.* While the *Griggs* case nominally imposes near-insurmountable hurdles on IQ employment testing (as well as virtually every hiring method), it is cursorily enforced. Lots of U.S. employers admit they use IQ testing, and the expected legal costs of doing so are tiny.
7. *Credential inflation is rampant.* Technological change explains only a small fraction of the evolution of the modern labor market. The popular perception that workers need far

more education to get the *same* jobs their parents and grandparents had is deeply true.

8. *Working your way up takes ages.* While there's good evidence that worker ability raises pay, the process takes *many* years. If you're smart but uncredentialed, even a decade of work experience isn't enough to fully catch up.

9. *In many ways, the labor market used to be better for people from poor and working-class families.* Sure, average living standards are much higher today than in 1950. But in 1950, there was *far* less stigma against high school dropouts, and very little stigma against workers who didn't go to college. Moderns who look at college graduates from poor families and see "social justice" are neglecting the troubles of the massively larger number of kids from poor families who *never* get college degrees.

10. *Forcing middle-class aspirations on everyone causes misery and failure for poor and working-class kids.* Lots of kids loathe school. They're bored out of their minds, and humiliated by teachers' endless negative feedback. Such kids disproportionately come from poor and working-class families. But since the middle- and upper-classes control the curriculum, they've stubbornly moved to a "college-for-all" approach to school - and turned vocational education into an afterthought. The result: Most poor and working-class kids endure thousands of sad hours, then leave school unprepared for either jobs or college.

I don't deny, of course, that *The Case Against Education* has plenty of right-wing lessons, too. Scoff if you must, but I try to just follow the arguments and evidence wherever they lead. My point is that there is plenty between the covers of my latest book that the left should appreciate. To all my left-wing friends, I say in all sincerity that I'd be delighted to discuss all this in depth!