

One Prominent Libertarian Explains Why Unschooling Is the Best Way to Educate Kids

“It seems obvious to me from my own education that one learns things mostly when you’re interested in learning them and not mostly when somebody sits you down and makes you learn them,” said David D. Friedman in our conversation on unschooling in the latest episode of the LiberatED Podcast.

Friedman, a physicist, economist, and law professor who is the son of the Nobel Prize-winning economist, Milton Friedman, is a staunch supporter of unschooling, or the idea of self-directed, non-coercive learning that occurs either as an approach to homeschooling or in “unschooling schools,” such as those schools modeled after the Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts that was founded in 1968.

I wrote extensively about unschooling, the Sudbury model, and other “unschooling schools” in my 2019 *Unschooling* book, and was delighted to discover that the most recent edition of Friedman’s well-known book, *Machinery of Freedom: Guide to A Radical Capitalism*, first published in 1973, includes a chapter on unschooling entitled: “Unschooling: A Libertarian Approach to Children.”

Friedman unschooled his own children, writing in *Machinery of Freedom* and on his blog: “Judged by our experience, unschooling not only saved our children from having to spend a substantial part of every week sitting in class being bored, it also gave them a better education.”

Friedman continues:

“Unschooling worked for us, but two very bright children brought up by highly educated parents are not exactly a random sample of the relevant population. There is evidence that it works for quite a lot of other people; interested readers may want to look at the literature on Sudbury Valley School, the model that the school where our children started their unschooling experience was built on. There may be some children who would learn more in a conventional school, even children who would enjoy the process more. But, judging by our experience, unschooling, home unschooling if no suitable school is available, is an option well worth considering.”

The research on the Sudbury Valley School that Friedman references includes several academic and informal studies of alumni. A 1986 study of Sudbury Valley alumni by Peter Gray and David Chanoff published in the *American Journal of Education* concludes: “Although these individuals educated themselves in ways that are enormously different from what occurs at traditional schools, they have had no apparent difficulty being admitted to or adjusting to the demands of traditional higher education and have been successful in a wide variety of careers.”

Gray, a psychology professor at Boston College, elaborates on this research in his 2013 book, *Free To Learn*. He and his colleagues Gina Riley and Kevin Currie-Knight published similar findings in a 2021 paper on the outcomes of alumni of the Hudson Valley Sudbury School that was modeled after Sudbury Valley.

Even though Friedman home-unschooled his two children after briefly sending them to a small Sudbury-style school in California that closed shortly after they left, he believes that children learning in “unschooling schools” is preferable to them learning at home. He would like to see a robust free market of unschooling schools with different organizational structures from which families could choose.

“My ideal system, which doesn’t exist, would be to have multiple, competing unschooling private schools in which the unschooling school is run by whoever owns it just like an ordinary school, but is constrained to treat the students properly by the fact that if not they’ll leave for another school, which is the way we handle most things in the free market,” said Friedman in this week’s podcast.

The flurry of education entrepreneurship over the past two years, including the proliferation of microschools, learning pods, and homeschooling and unschooling collaboratives, may be edging us closer to Friedman’s vision and toward a robust free market of education options.