

Pedants: Converting Good to Bad

A standard argument for government provision of education is that it would otherwise be under-provided. The theory is that, since one's education also benefits other people, one who purchases education for one's own self would only pay according to the benefits to oneself.

If we take this argument seriously, we must determine how much education is under-provided, and subsidize that portion. This can never be an argument for 100% subsidy of education. This is obvious in early arguments for state subsidy, which proposed merely to fill in the alleged gaps of the existing methods for the provision of education.

But laying that aside, there is a much more fundamental problem: what exactly is "education?" The theory assumes that there is one good called education, and widespread agreement about what is desirable, and how it should be provided. Those who have followed the many controversies about education might be excused for scratching their heads at this point, if not laughing out loud. If we do not all agree on what a "good" education is, how can we agree on what should be subsidized?

"School choice" proponents claim to get around this objection. Pick your school, and the government will subsidize it. Really? What happens when the Happy Coven establishes a school, and requests equal remuneration? Or, as allegedly happened in San Bernardino recently, a group of Happy Nepotists use government funds to enrich family members? Is there to be no oversight over the use of these funds?

More broadly speaking, governments are not very good at managing resources.

What is this "education" variable? It's quite an oversimplification. Is the education which suits one person the same as that which suits another? Let us take an example: a first grade reading class.

Typically, about a quarter of the class arrive already knowing how to read; some, quite fluently. When required to sit through "See Dick Run" or some other first grade primer, their education is not being enhanced, but slowed down. Their time is being wasted. They are being taught to endure frustration without purpose. This is a bad, not a good; but the tidy aggregate equations of some economists do not measure this.

Likewise with math skills. The typical "First Grade Math" curriculum lags far behind a certain number of students. I know of a young fellow who could mentally multiply double-digit numbers, and even larger ones; who could work easily with exponents and fractions and decimals and negative numbers. Even a "gifted" first grade class would have been an utter waste of his time. Yet another portion of students find the typical pace to be quite

confusing; their time also is squandered by classes unsuited to their needs.

Bureaucrats thrive on tidiness and regularity. The variations of real children are far too diverse and confusing for bureaucrats and pedants and certain economists. This zombie argument for the government provision of education should be nuked wherever it arises.

The education of our children is far too important to be jammed into Procrustean beds by the arbitrary and uncaring mechanisms of politics. We need, rather, for such important decisions to be left to individual parents, students, and teachers themselves.