

Yes, Parents Are Capable of Choosing How Their Children Should Be Educated

At the heart of debates around education freedom and school choice is the subtle but sinister sentiment that parents can't be trusted. They are too busy, too poor, or too ignorant to make the right decisions for their kids, and others know better how to raise and educate children. Never mind that parents have successfully cared for and educated their children for millennia, ensuring the ongoing survival and continued success of our species.

Distrust of Parents

As economist Richard Ebeling writes in the introduction to Sheldon Richman's book *Separating School & State*:

The parent has been viewed—and still is viewed—as a backward and harmful influence in the formative years of the child's upbringing, an influence that must be corrected for and replaced by the “enlightened” professional teacher who has been trained, appointed, and funded by the state.

We see this distrust of parents play out in a number of policy areas, including most recently with the implementation of universal government preschool for four-year-olds (and increasingly three-year-olds) in cities like New York and Washington, DC, and in academic reports arguing for “Cradle to Kindergarten” government interventions. These efforts are nearly always framed as helping parents, taking the burden off of low- and middle-income families, and addressing inequality and achievement gaps. But the message is clear: parents, and especially disadvantaged parents, can't be expected to effectively raise their children and see to their education without the government's help.

Some researchers say this outright. In an article published in this week's *Washington Post* about alleged summer learning loss among schoolchildren, Kelly Chandler-Olcott suggests that to fix the problem, we need to stop expecting parents to nurture their children during the summer months and instead rely on experts to do it for them. She writes:

Also troubling is the assumption that families, not educators, should promote learning in specialized areas such as mathematics, reading and science. Although families from all walks of life promote varied

kinds of learning in everyday life, most parents lack preparation to address academic subjects, and their year-round obligations don't end just because school is out for their offspring.

This is during the summertime, mind you, when parents have long been responsible for the care of their children. Apparently now the academic crisis is so dire, particularly for low-income children, and parents' "year-round obligations" are so huge, that we should entrust others to do throughout the summer months what seemingly didn't work well during the academic year. As I wrote at *NPR*, we need to ask ourselves if kids can so quickly forget during summertime what they purportedly learned during the school year, did they ever really learn it at all? And if "most parents lack preparation to address academic subjects," then what does that say about the education they received through public schooling?

"Perennial Force" of Parenthood

The idea that parents get in the way of children's education and can halt their flourishing is nothing new. As he was designing the architecture for compulsory mass schooling in the 19th century, Horace Mann argued that education was too important to be left to parents' discretion. He explained that strong parental bonds are obstacles to children's and society's development, writing in his fourth lecture on education in 1840:

Nature supplies a perennial force, unexhausted, inexhaustible, re-appearing whenever and wherever the parental relation exists. We, then, who are engaged in the sacred cause of education, are entitled to look upon all parents as having given hostages to our cause.

Mann goes on to say that "just as soon as we can make them see the true relation in which they and their children stand to this cause, they will become advocates for its advancement," supporting the complete shift in control of education from the family to the state. It's for the good of all, Mann said—except for parents like him who homeschooled his own children while mandating forced schooling for others.

The solution is for parents to push back against creeping government control of education and child-rearing. Don't be wooed by the siren song of feigned empathy for your burdens of work and family. Don't be convinced of the false belief that you are incapable of caring for your children and determining how, where, and with whom they should be educated. Don't let your "inexhaustible" parental instincts be weakened by government guardians who think they know what is best for your child. Demand freedom and choice.

Parents are powerful. They are not perfect, and they do fail, but they are more perfect and fail much less than state agents and government bureaucracies intoxicated by authority and ego. They should take back control of their children's education by advocating for parental choice and resisting efforts to undermine their innate capacity to care for their children's well-being.

Place trust in the "perennial force" of parenthood, even when—or perhaps especially when—others distrust it.