



The Separation of School and State

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By Wendy McElroy

FOX NEWS

In the wake of a fatal shooting, the security for a D.C. high school was officially turned over to the city's [police department](#) last week. Armed officers will patrol the halls.

This is one more indication of the severe problems haunting the public school system: violence, illegal drugs, the mandating of medication such as Ritalin, low academic achievement, controversial curricula, perceived prejudice against boys.

Parents who wish to explore educational alternatives at their own expense should be encouraged to do so, yet the opposite is occurring. Advocates of public schooling view other systems of education as threats to be regulated, discouraged and sometimes demonized. (Often the income and careers of these advocates depend upon the continued tax funding of public schools.)

Is there any validity to their criticism of educational alternatives?

Two of the most viable ones are homeschooling and apprenticeships. Neither prevents anyone from choosing public schools; each merely offers a choice at no public expense. How could anyone reasonably object to that?

One objection comes from the assumption that public schools [are necessary](#) for children to [become literate](#). The assumption is unfounded. Prior to the spread of public education in the early 1900s, literacy rates in America were amazingly high. A much-quoted estimate comes from a book written in 1812 at the behest of Thomas Jefferson. The French statesman Pierre Samuel DuPont de Nemours, who emigrated to America, declared of young Americans, "Not more than four in a thousand are unable to write legibly, even neatly."

Other sources also attest to high literacy rates [prior to the 1900s](#), a literacy that arose largely from homeschooling.

Pointing to the past is unnecessary. Today homeschooled students often perform better on standardized tests than those from public schools. In 2001, for example, [homeschooled SAT-takers](#) averaged 568 on the verbal test and 525 on the math; the national average was 506 on verbal and 514 on math.

Moreover, nations that actively encourage apprenticeship programs such as Germany and Switzerland enjoy very high literacy. Clearly, public schools are not a necessary path to that social goal.

Two additional criticisms of educational alternatives are common.

First, alternatives weaken the public school system; and second, they harm children.

The first argument assumes that dissenting parents should support and strengthen a social institution they believe damages their children. Their "social obligations" are placed in conflict with their parental responsibilities. No such conflict exists. Parents who use their own judgment and money in educating their children deprive no other parent of that same right. If public schools, with all their advantages, cannot compete with free market options, then they deserve to weaken because children [deserve better](#).

The second criticism is that educational alternatives harm children.

In the '80s, when homeschooling appeared on the social radar, it was closely associated with the Religious Right. Homeschoolers were viewed as extremists and unqualified amateurs. As homeschooling entered the mainstream and a generation of homeschooled children scored well on tests, [public suspicion](#) faded.

The accusation of harm shifted. Homeschooling is now said to mask child abuse. This was the message clearly implied by an Oct. 14 CBS News two-part report entitled "[A Dark Side to Homeschooling](#)." The report created a furor of protest in the homeschooling community; it also encouraged politicians to call for anti-homeschooling legislation.

Conservative columnist [Michelle Malkin](#) examined a push for legislation in New Jersey. Four adopted boys were found to be starving although child welfare officials claimed to have visited the home no fewer than 38 times. Rather than condemn the bureaucracy, politicians blamed the fact that the foster parents had homeschooled. Thus, all New Jersey homeschoolers may be subjected to indignities like criminal background checks and obstacles like health regulations more stringent than those imposed on public schools.

Malkin concluded, "God forbid children be taught by their own parents without oversight from the all-knowing, all-caring, infallible ... child welfare-public school monopoly!"

With apprenticeships, the concept of harm often draws upon the specter of "child labor" even though [modern apprenticeships](#) bear no resemblance to the 19th century images that arise at the sound of that term. Apprentices entering programs in the U.S., for instance, must be at least 16 years old. Moreover, apprenticeship as alternative education was established as a matter of parental and religious liberty by the court case [Wisconsin v. Yoder](#) (1972).

The case addressed the Amish and Mennonite tradition by which children were employed from age 14 to 16 on the family farm or in a family occupation, like carpentry, instead of going to school as the law usually requires. The court found that such employment did not constitute harm. Today, these apprenticeships remain a de facto exception to child labor laws and open the door to other exceptions.

My purpose is not to dispute with parents who send their children to public schools. I believe the system is a brutal failure, but parents must decide for themselves. I advocate extending alternatives far beyond the typical private versus public school debate, and even beyond homeschooling.

Apprenticeships, experiments like Montessori and the [School of Living](#), self-guided education, mentoring ... The cost of public education is not measured in tax dollars alone. A universe of educational possibilities has been obstructed by the attempt to enforce a government monopoly over how, where, when, and what children learn.

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