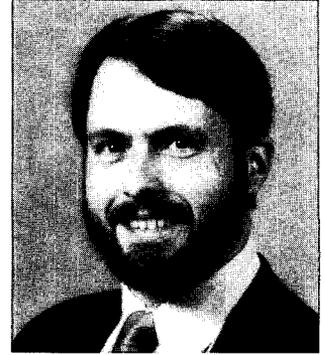


Replace the Monopoly, Not the Superintendent



There's a lot wrong and not much right with the Washington, D.C., public schools: Buildings aren't safe, kids are gunned down in front of their classmates, money is wasted, and precious little learning occurs. So the financial control board, created by Congress in effect to govern the city, engaged in a very public debate over firing the local superintendent. But blame for the failure of the D.C. system, and for government schools elsewhere around the nation, doesn't lie with a particular administrator. It lies with the public nature of education, and especially the monopoly enjoyed by the public school system.

After all, the District's problems merely reflect a larger national crisis. Average SAT scores dropped from 980 to 899 between 1963 and 1992, a period during which real per-pupil spending rose 160 percent. Over the last 20 years the number of top scorers on the SAT has dropped in half. And nothing has changed during the 1990s despite even more money and a panoply of "reforms." The 1994 National Assessment of Education Progress test found that 36 percent of 4th-graders, 39 percent of 8th-graders, and 57 percent of 12th-graders failed to meet basic standards in history. Students' ignorance of geography, math, and other subjects is legendary. The only thing American children excel at internationally is self-esteem: While scoring at the

bottom compared to students in other countries, they rate themselves at the top.

But if suburban kids aren't learning as much as they should, city children aren't learning much at all. In 1988 the Carnegie Foundation declared: "The failure to educate adequately urban children is a shortcoming of such magnitude that many people have simply written off city schools as little more than human storehouses to keep young people off the streets." Half of urban kids typically fail to graduate. Those who do find their diplomas to be about as valuable as Czarist bonds. Unfortunately, the District's diplomas probably aren't even worth that much: Student scores on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills dropped again in 1996.

The tragedy is not simply that we are losing ground in education. We are losing ground at a time when companies elsewhere in the economy routinely provide us with better quality for less cost. Consider the advances in banking, communication, computers, and transportation. To merely stand still today is to be falling behind.

Money, of course, is not the answer to failed public schools. Inflation-adjusted per-pupil spending has been rising 40 percent a decade since World War II, without obvious effect on the quality of education. Washington's expenditure per student of \$9,400 is higher than that at elite Gonzaga preparatory school. Nationwide, private schools cost less (averaging less than half the per-pupil spending of public schools) and achieve better results. The late sociologist James Coleman's extensive re-

Mr. Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a nationally syndicated columnist. He is the author of several books, most recently, Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World.

search was recently bolstered by Sol Stern's survey, published in *City Journal*, of New York City's experience. Students in parochial schools—which mirror the socio-economic characteristics of public facilities—score better, suffer fewer expulsions, and ultimately earn more.

The basic problem is public monopoly. As Albert Shanker, head of the American Federation of Teachers, admits: "It's no surprise that our school system doesn't improve; it more resembles the communist economy than our own market economy." The solution, then, is parental choice, real choice in the private marketplace. Allowing students to switch from failing public institutions to private ones would have the same effect on education that it has everywhere. It would simultaneously put competitive pressure on existing schools and spur the development of innovative new facilities.

Choice means different things to different people, but every form of it is resisted ferociously by the teachers unions and their political allies. Yet many of the strongest opponents of choice personally exercise choice. The president and nearly half of the members of Congress send their children to private schools. One has to look far and wide to find members of urban education boards who place their kids in the schools they run. Moreover, controlling for income, public school teachers are four times as likely as private citizens to send their children to private schools. Over one-third of public school teachers in Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, Grand Rapids, and San Francisco put their kids in private facilities. So, too, did the head of the Jersey City teachers union, who threatened a boycott of Pepsi products when the company announced its plan to give scholarships to poor children for use in private schools.

The right form of choice is full privatization. That is, public education should be abolished and the money left with parents, who would have responsibility for their children's education. Such a prospect is, of course, seen as beyond the pale by the edu-

cational establishment. Professional educators don't trust parents, even affluent ones. And what about the poor?

Yet, today poor parents make incredible efforts to get their kids out of decrepit inner-city schools. Those sacrifices, if undertaken by people holding better jobs in a stronger economy (less burdened by high taxes and strengthened by better trained workers) and helped by charitable assistance, would expand the opportunity for quality education. Indeed, it would be hard to devise a worse system for poor kids than today's.

The arguments against choice are unpersuasive. One is that public money should not go to private schools. But the money ultimately belongs to parents, not the government; let them keep and use their money to better educate their children. Another is that we can't let the public schools fail. *But they already are failing.* Instead of holding them accountable, we now give them more money and students. Failing schools should close.

Finally, some people worry about the presumed democratizing role of public education. Yet most private schools are more integrated than public systems. Even with equally segregated systems, choice would increase diversity. In New York City, for instance, the public schools are 90 percent minority while the private institutions are 80 percent white. Choice, by allowing minority students to move from public to private schools, would actually promote integration.

In any case, the bottom line should be performance. Washington's schools, like those in so many other cities, don't educate. They don't even protect students and teachers from violence. Shoveling more money into failed institutions would only reward failure, guaranteeing more of it. The ultimate answer is to treat causes, not symptoms, by turning loose on education the same market forces that have had such a transforming impact elsewhere in the economy. Politicians must decide about whom they are most concerned: the children being cheated by the current educational monopoly or the interest groups being paid by it. □

Teen Smoking: The New Prohibition

by D. T. Armentano

The expressed goal of the Clinton Administration's proposed regulations on cigarettes and smokeless tobacco products is to reduce adolescent consumption by one half. Roughly three million American juveniles smoke and an additional one million young males use smokeless tobacco. Putting aside (for the moment) all of the other difficulties with the new regulations, can they possibly accomplish their objective?

The government proposes severe new restrictions on the advertising of cigarettes under the mistaken assumption that there is a direct relationship between advertising and the decision to begin smoking. But there is little reliable evidence in the literature to support this contention and plenty of evidence to contradict it.

Juvenile smoking actually increased in Finland after a complete ban on tobacco advertising was implemented in 1978. Norway, which completely prohibited tobacco advertising in 1975, has a higher percentage of juvenile smokers than does the United States. And black teens in the United States, presumably exposed to the same "persuasive" advertising as white teens, have far lower smoking rates.

It is widely acknowledged (outside of Washington) that the decision to start using tobacco products is influenced primarily by

culture, family, and peer pressure, not corporate advertising. So banning brand-name event sponsorships, or limiting cigarette brand logos on race cars and drivers' uniforms, will have no measurable effect on any ten-year-old's decision to light up.

FDA Commissioner David Kessler would have us believe that billboards near playgrounds and the use of cigarette brand names on t-shirts (which would all be prohibited under the new regulations) have created a teen-smoking health epidemic. Nonsense. The marginal increase in teen smoking recorded since 1991 is easily swamped by the longer-term steadily *downward* trend.

Listening to the FDA one would never know that the percentage of high school seniors who smoke daily has fallen from over 28 percent in 1977 to less than 20 percent in 1994. Heavy smoking (half a pack or more per day) among high school seniors had declined from 17.9 percent in 1975 to approximately 11 percent today. Yet the Administration now proposes to restrict tobacco advertising in teen-oriented magazines to a black-and-white, text-only format even though there is no evidence that such publishing censorship would impact teen cigarette consumption.

The bottom line is that these new regulations have little to do with changing cigarette consumption by teenagers. What they will do, however, is hurt certain advertisers, promoters of sporting events, tobacco manufacturers and their employees, and vending machine

Dr. Armentano is professor emeritus of economics at the University of Hartford.