

Liberating Education

By Marsha Familiaro Enright

“Discipline must come through liberty. . . . We do not consider an individual disciplined only when he has been rendered as artificially silent as a mute and as immovable as a paralytic. He is an individual annihilated, not disciplined.” Maria Montessori, *The Montessori Method*¹

If you’re familiar with two- to five-year-old children, then you understand what Aristotle meant when he said “All men, by nature, desire to know.” Very little will stop the young child from exploring the world and trying to learn.

The young child who carries into adulthood his restless eagerness to learn, create, and achieve is the fountainhead of human progress. Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, Benjamin Franklin, Emily Dickinson, Richard Branson—these are people that never lost the two-year-old’s passionate, internally generated drive to know and, consequently, change the world. These are the types of people who made Ancient Greece, Renaissance Florence, Enlightenment England, Revolutionary America, and our current technology-abundant culture possible. *This* is the state of mind that education *should* strive to achieve if we want a flourishing free society.

By nurturing this state of mind, a society would create a self-perpetuating future of creative ideas, science, technology, liberty, and art in the renaissance of a New Enlightenment. *This* is what real education reform should aim for if we want to see happy children and a bright future.

Creative autonomy is the crucial, common element among the innovators mentioned above. “‘Autonomy’ suggests, strictly speaking, that one gives or has given laws to oneself; that one is self-governing; that in essentials one obeys one’s own imperatives,” said philosopher Walter Kaufmann.² “Giving oneself imperatives” is a very active state, that of someone who knows how to take rational risk—exactly the state of the entrepreneur, no matter in what field of endeavor.

In thinking about the best form of education for a free future, consider this: The classroom is a micro-society in which the social order emerges through the exchange of ideas and values, explicit and implicit, and from the way in which participants interact with each other according to the classroom principles.

Is an autonomous state of mind nurtured in most of today’s classrooms?

¹ Translated by Anne Everett George (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1912), p. 86.

² Walter Kaufmann, *Discovering the Mind* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1980), p. 15.

From grade school to graduate school, U.S. classrooms have historically relied heavily on a single arbiter of knowledge, often in the position of lecturer, discussion leader, knowledge authority, and director of learning. The teacher is often considered the repository of truth, and the student taught limited lines of reasoning about the subject matter. Directed group lessons in traditional grade school and lectures in higher education are favored methodologies. Students listen to the directions or lectures of their teachers and receive assignments and, increasingly, standardized assessments that they must complete to prove they have learned those facts and ideas that the authorities deem valuable.

Students are expected to be filled with knowledge by the academic authority. The teaching paradigm encourages an authority to convey the “right answers” to the waiting student-receptacles. The student is the receiver of learning, not an initiator or active agent in the learning process. “Learning” is measured by the amount of instructor-proffered information that the student is able to reiterate on tests and in papers.

Can we tell if the student has deeply incorporated the information and ideas into his or her thinking? Whether the student can use this information in his or her life? Whether the student has an understanding of the information’s relevance to living at all?

Consider the psychological effects of the traditional methods of teaching in this paradigm. How does the student:

- learn how to arrive at truth himself?
- discern that there are multiple ways of approaching a problem?
- discover subjects of interest to himself, individually?
- engage the process of learning new material?
- develop skills for fruitful collaboration with others?

If students have no skills in these processes, how can they grow into independent actors, arriving at their own conclusions, discovering new ideas and processes, and navigating all the choices and opportunities needed to create new endeavors?

How shall a young person become an autonomous individual if he is treated merely as an empty vessel to be filled? What opportunities are students given to practice the skills of a self-reliant, independent, and self-responsible person? Where is the student’s agency in this process?

This top-down environment is counter-productive to conveying the ideas, values, and virtues of autonomy and a free society.

How did we arrive at this state of education?

From Freedom to Factories

"Above all things I hope the education of the common people will be attended to; convinced that on their good sense we may rely with the most security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty." Thomas Jefferson, letter to James Madison, Paris, December 20, 1787.³

Prior to the era of mass education, children were "homeschooled," ironically, something many look upon skeptically today. Yet the early American populace was remarkably literate and numerate for the times. Consider alone the fact that *The Federalist Papers* were published in common newspapers, fodder for debate in homes, local taverns, and church gatherings.

According to Jack Lynch, "[l]iteracy had been an American obsession since the beginning. As early as 1642, Massachusetts passed a law ordering the selectmen to monitor children's ability 'to read & understand the principles of religion & the capitall lawes of this country.'"⁴ Ninety percent of the white male population was literate by the end of the 18th century; nearly 100 percent of white women born in 1810 were literate. About 20 percent of late-18th-century American colonists were African-American, 8 percent of them free.⁵ While slave states kept their African-American slaves illiterate, by 1860 less than 8 percent of black Bostonians were illiterate.⁶

This obsession with literacy owes something, no doubt, to the legacy of the highly educated, principled, middle class Pilgrims who colonized New England in the quest for freedom of conscience. Harvard was established in 1636 as the first college—a seminary—with nine students, one of myriad educational institutions to follow in New England.

Except for Massachusetts, education was private and mostly at home in the first colonies until the late 1700s. But Jefferson wasn't alone in his concern that the new republic have an educated populace; our publicly funded school systems arose in

³ The letter can be read online in its entirety at American History: From Revolution to Reconstruction and Beyond, <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/thomas-jefferson/letters-of-thomas-jefferson/jefl66.php>.

⁴ Jack Lynch, "Every Man Able to Read: Literacy in Early America," *Colonial Williamsburg Journal* (Winter 2011), <http://www.history.org/Foundation/journal/Winter11/literacy.cfm>.

⁵ Edgar A. Toppin. "Blacks in the American Revolution." Published essay, Virginia State University (1976), p. 1, <http://www.history.org/almanack/people/african/aaintro.cfm>.

⁶ Kimberly Sambol-Tosco, "The Slave Experience: Education, Arts, & Culture," *Slavery and the Making of America* on the Wisconsin Public Television website (2004), <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/education/history2.html>.

response to this goal.⁷ In 1647, the Massachusetts Bay Colony required the establishment of public schools in all communities over 100 persons.⁸ The next were created in New England towns in the 1770s.

Later, public schools became state-run bureaucracies; today they're over-lorded by the Federal Department of Education.

Barry Dean Simpson has pointed out the perverse economic incentives in government-funded education:

Between 1900 and 1949, teacher salaries rose 709% while per-capita income rose by only 513%...One benefit of compulsion to teachers was hinted at above—to increase their salaries. An increase in demand leads to an increase in price, *ceteris paribus*...And since the education system is being funded by tax dollars rather than by the demanders themselves, it becomes much easier to increase salaries (regardless of competence).

...[B]y making the school system public rather than private, teachers and administrators also insulate themselves from the wishes of students and parents—the ultimate consumers of education. This insulation from market forces solidifies the power of the elite group of educationists for years to come. The suppliers, not the demanders, choose the curricula, the textbooks, decide the certification process for teachers, etc. They run the whole show, and only have bureaucrats to please rather than consumers. Not only are bureaucrats easier to please since they don't spend their own money, but if the politician/bureaucrat needs information to placate angry demanders, to whom do they turn? The educationists, in the positions of power, have all of the “relevant” information.

“...Public education, with the added feature of compulsion, reduces the cost to politicians of making wealth transfers. The cost of making transfers is diminished by reducing the opposition to transfers. If politicians can reduce the cost of transferring wealth by reducing...opposition...then they can continue to authorize transfers to interested parties for a price.

“Public education reduces opposition to wealth transfers by teaching students that redistribution, public works, and democracy are the American way...Public education tells us we need government all the time. Public education introduces the mantras of democracy to the young. Democracy

⁷ “School: The Story of American Public Education.” Four-part PBS documentary series, 2001,

<https://www.facinghistory.org/for-educators/educator-resources/resources/school-story-a-american-public-education>.

⁸ John William Perrin, *The History of Compulsory Education in New England* (doctoral thesis, University of Chicago, 1896), pp. 19-20,

<https://archive.org/details/historycompulso00perrgoog>.

keeps the two major parties in power, keeps their spoils flowing in, and tells us that intervention is okay because the majority voted for it.

“The conclusion is that public schools and compulsory attendance laws benefit educators, administrators, and politicians more than citizens or their children.”⁹

It is difficult not to infer that the pecuniary benefits of public education are its venial sins; worse is its purpose to conform students to specific values and habits in order to make them compliant to authority.

Compulsory schooling is often couched in terms of insuring that poor children have the opportunity to be educated, even if their parents can't afford it or are too irresponsible to send them to school. Today, the attendance requirements vary in the U.S. by state, but the average compulsory age range is 7 to 16.¹⁰ However, there's a pile of evidence that the deeper motive of compulsion has always been to inculcate obedience.

Martin Luther instigated the modern practice of compulsory education in 1542, persuading the German state to institute it in order to “drive out the devil.”¹¹ John Calvin likewise demanded compulsory schooling to inculcate religious values—and obedience. The Calvinist Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony followed suit, becoming the first to require education of all citizens in 1642.

Horace Mann, who imported the Prussian education system¹² in the formation of both the Massachusetts and U.S. public school systems, admitted “the whole plan of education in Prussia, as being not only designed to produce, but as actually producing, a spirit of blind acquiescence to arbitrary power, in things spiritual as well as temporal as being in fine, a system of education adapted to enslave, and not to enfranchise, the human

⁹ Barry Dean Simpson, “The Common School Movement and Compulsory Education,” *Mises Daily Blogs* at the Ludwig Von Mises Institute, November 29, 2004, <https://mises.org/daily/1679>. In his article, Simpson cites George Stigler, *Employment and Compensation in Education*, (National Bureau of Economic Research, 1950), Appendix B; and William M. Landes and Lewis C. Solmon, “Compulsory Schooling and Legislation: An Economic Analysis of Law and Social Change in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Economic History* vol. 32, no. 1 (March 1972).

¹⁰ National Center for Education Statistics, Table 197: “Age range for compulsory school attendance and special education services, and policies on year-round schools and kindergarten programs, by state: Selected years, 2000 through 2011,” *Digest of Education Statistics*, 2012, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/tables/dt12_197.asp.

¹¹ Perrin, *History of Compulsory Education* (1896), pp. 7-8.

¹² Yehudi Meshchaninov, “The Prussian-Industrial History of Public Schooling.” Paper produced for the New American Academy, April 2012.

<http://www.thenewamericanacademy.org/images/the-prussian-industrial-history-of-public-schooling1.pdf>.

mind.”¹³ Regardless of any motive to use this system for good, such an effort was doomed to failure at the outset because it mitigated so deeply against the needs of free human beings.

One of many who followed the Prussian system, Archibald D. Murphey, architect of public schools in North Carolina, summed it up: “[A]ll the children will be taught in them...In these schools the precepts of morality and religion should be inculcated, and habits of subordination and obedience be formed...Their parents know not how to instruct them...The state, in the warmth of her affection and solicitude for their welfare, must take charge of those children, and place them in school where their minds can be enlightened and their hearts can be trained to virtue.”¹⁴

Obedience to the State is far removed from Jefferson’s original motive for public education—that free men be sufficiently knowledgeable and capable of thinking so as to be able to *govern themselves*.

And what has been the effect of this shift in motive on education itself? While serving as secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education after 1837, Horace Mann had cause to criticize one of the nation’s best school systems, noting “‘obvious want of intelligence in the reading classes’; ‘the schools have retrograded within the last generation or half generation in regard to orthography’; ‘more than eleven-twelfths of all the children in the reading-classes in our schools do not understand the meaning of the words they read.’”¹⁵

Further, in 1870, “William Franklin Phelps, then head of a normal school in Winona, Minnesota, and later president of the National Education Association, declared: ‘children are fed upon the mere husks of knowledge. They leave school for the broad theater of life without discipline; without mental power or moral stamina...Hundreds of our American schools are little less than undisciplined juvenile mobs.’”¹⁶

Do these criticisms seem familiar—as if you’ve heard them today? Hofstadter goes on quoting the same kinds of criticisms, decade after decade from 1837 on. Doesn’t this show that the problems we see today are *inherent* in public education? And isn’t it possible—even likely—that these problems are inherent because public education is a bureaucracy beholden to administrators, not businesses aiming to please customers?

¹³ E. P. Cubberley, *Readings in the History of Education: A Collection of Sources and Readings to Illustrate the Development of Educational Practice, Theory, and Organization* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1920), p. 488.

¹⁴ Archibald Murphey, *The Papers of Archibald D. Murphey* (Raleigh, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1914), p. 53-54.

¹⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), p. 302.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 303

Think of the difference between dealing with the IRS or with H & R Block?. Which tries to please you? Finds ways to serve you better? Is efficient?

At root, the bureaucracy of government-run schools has been a permanent detriment to their functioning.¹⁷ Recent, laudable attempts to leverage charter schools and vouchers to reform the public education system cannot overcome the fundamental problems inherent in government-run bureaucracies. Furthermore, many school reform advocates do not recognize the dangers of vouchers: once instituted, only the wealthiest private schools can avoid accepting them and thus remain economically competitive. Moreover, as in all government-run programs, corruption is inevitable. The consequence? Government oversight and regulation of private schools that accept voucher dollars, with the institution of government-mandated teacher certification and curricular programs. The result: the wiping out of independent schools and choices for students.

Returning to our history of public education: In the early twentieth century, psychologists and educators decided to apply principles of scientific management to education, focusing on exact measurements to assess outcomes.¹⁸ According to a respected resource of the day: “Our schools are, in a sense, factories in which the raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life. The specifications for manufacturing come from the demands of twentieth century civilization and is [*sic*] the business of the school to build its pupils according to the specifications laid down.”¹⁹

Can we expect much else from this approach than dull and obedient students? Pawns of the state and its cronies? Cogs of the exact same width, length, and breadth as John Taylor Gatto argues in *Dumbing Us Down: the Hidden History of Compulsory Schooling*?²⁰ Gatto sees schools as factories turning out compliant corporate robots. And William Derescewicz argues powerfully that the *elite* colleges are turning out “excellent sheep.”²¹

¹⁷ For a brilliant and thorough examination of the fundamental mismatch between bureaucracy and education, see Jerry Kirkpatrick, *Montessori, Dewey, and Capitalism: Education Theory for a Free Market in Education* (Claremont, CA: TLJ Books, 2008).

¹⁸ Robert J. Marzano, Tony Frontier, and David Livingston, “A Brief History of Supervision and Evaluation,” chapter 2 in *Effective Supervision: Supporting the Art and Science of Teaching* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2011), <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/110019/chapters/A-Brief-History-of-Supervision-and-Evaluation.aspx>.

¹⁹ Cubberley, *Readings* (1920), p. 338.

²⁰ John Taylor Gatto, *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2002).

²¹ William Derescewicz, *Excellent Sheep: Thinking for Yourself, Inventing Your Life, and Other Things the Ivy League Won't Teach You* (New York: Simon & Schuster: New York, 2014). See also an extended interview of Derescewicz

The long result of this methodology, combined with failed education theories and approaches, faulty ‘self-esteem’ ideology, and false reforms such as No Child Left Behind leaves our schools, at best, far from ideal environments for young minds and spirits, at worst “soul-wrenching, mind-numbing, drugged-out catastrophes,” in the words of a friend who endured and barely escaped with his mind and ambition intact. Common Core is just the latest in a long string of such fads, drawing on the same failed experiments of past decades.

In a free society, children need to learn the virtues of independent judgment, self-reliance, justice, self-initiated productiveness, honesty, and hard work—all virtues needed to navigate a bustling cooperative and innovative society. Can the rigidities of factory-style education develop these qualities?

Let’s first consider another point Hofstadter makes. He insists that the American emphasis on utility of knowledge has continuously caused a problem with its quality as students, parents, and administrators demand that learning be of practical use. What’s a bit paradoxical is: learning *should* be of practical use—to live well—but not in the now common but narrow sense of obtaining a specific job. Life and circumstances change too frequently for that.

This context is *especially* true of American society. The very innovations that provide us with an ever-improving life—creative destruction—prevent us from knowing the most useful knowledge for the future. Anne Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, commented at a recent seminar that Americans will change jobs eleven times between the ages of 18 and 45, either between or within companies.²²

In a fully free society with an even more innovation-driven culture, students and parents would demand a very different type of education than we see today. But, in order to imagine what shape education would take, we must first define what we mean by “free society.”

The Shape of a Free Society—Voluntary Cooperation

Freedom, or liberty, is the ability of an individual to make his own judgments and choices, and implement them in action, as long as he does not use force or fraud against another.²³

²² Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Number of Jobs, Labor Market Experience, and Earnings Growth: Results from a National Longitudinal Survey News Release,” July 25, 2012, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/nlsoy.htm>.

²³ Force and fraud are the only ways someone can make another act against his own judgment and will.

Humans survive and flourish by the use and judgment of reason. Our ability to reason enables us to create what we need and adapt the world to our needs, rather than merely adapting to the world. In order to be able to live as well as possible, each person needs to remain free to decide what he needs and wants, what to do in his or her life, and with whom and how to interact, as long as no force or fraud is involved. These fundamental facts not only permit human flourishing, they are the foundation for insisting that societies should be organized to allow each person as much freedom as possible.²⁴ Their essence is a society of voluntary cooperation.

To those who object that many humans cannot manage their own affairs properly but need to be overseen and directed by a higher authority, most generally government, a question: If individuals cannot manage their own individual affairs, how can we suppose that they could manage ours? Why should we suppose someone else could do a better job?

In a society of voluntary cooperation, law ensures only enough government oversight to protect individual rights. Economic transactions between private parties are free from government restrictions, tariffs, and subsidies. In the English-speaking world, Adam Smith was the first to reach a wide audience with the remarkable fact that the choices and actions each person takes in rational self-interest result in the greatest benefit to everyone—flourishing, cooperative, and peaceful societies of spontaneous order.²⁵ An examination of history demonstrates that governments limited to protecting individual rights via the courts, the police, and the military result in the most freedom; the more limited, the better in terms of economic growth and human flourishing.²⁶

²⁴ Historically, this point of view has been called *classical* liberalism, and now, often, libertarianism.

²⁵ See Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. For a modern formulation of the philosophical justification for voluntary, cooperative societies, see Ayn Rand's essays "Man's Rights" and "The Nature of Government" in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*. For massive and detailed information and analysis of the economics of voluntary societies, their history and consequences, see the work of thinkers such as Carl Menger, *The Principles of Economics*, Frederic Bastiat, *The Law*, Eugene Bohm-Bawerk, *Capital and Interest*, Murray Rothbard, *The Mystery of Banking*, Frederic Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, and especially Ludwig Von Mises, *Human Action*. Henry Hazlitt's *Economics in One Lesson* is a powerful and informative summary of economic principles for the layman. These thinkers have, in turn, influenced other contemporary economists. Some of the most compelling belong to what is known as the Austrian School of thought, concentrated at George Mason University but also spread across the country and the world today.

²⁶ These are the principles outlined in political philosopher John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*, which was the philosophical basis for the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution. The Fraser Institute's Freedom Indexes summarize the evidence for freedom's superior ability to produce human flourishing. The indexes are available on the institutes website,

<http://www.fraserinstitute.org/programs-initiatives/economic-freedom.aspx>. Current

We have yet to see a government so limited as to have a strict separation of government and economics; yet, given the evidence since the industrial revolution, the results would be astonishing. Opportunities would abound; individuals, no matter how poor, would have the chance to rise through hard work and ingenuity, as they did by the millions in 19th-century America, one of the freest moments in world history.

But such a society would only be possible if its most influential ideas, and the consequent attitudes and practices of the people, were significantly different from today. A revitalized vision of the independent-minded individualism of previous eras would need to pervade the culture, along with a richer understanding of how to protect individual rights from those who inevitably want to use government power for personal gain.²⁷ A large minority of people would have to value reason, self-reliance, hard work, honesty, and fairness in their dealings with others and eschew the use of government for cultural change, personal gain, or power.

In other words, autonomy would be highly valued *and* needed in a free society. Let's explore what might happen to education in *that* society.

The Shape of Education in a Free Society

To consider the school as the place where instruction is given is one point of view. But to consider the school as a preparation for life is another.

*In the latter case, the school must satisfy all the needs of life.*²⁸

Maria Montessori, *From Childhood to Adolescence*

nighttime satellite maps of North and South Korea starkly dramatize the difference between freedom and control. While South Korea is far from a fully free society, it is yet ablaze with light—and activity. In contrast, the North is black but for a tiny point of light in Pyongyang.

²⁷ In her 1964 work, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism*, Ayn Rand argued: “Individualism regards man—every man—as an independent, sovereign entity who possesses an inalienable right to his own life, a right derived from his nature as a rational being. Individualism holds that a civilized society, or any form of association, cooperation or peaceful coexistence among men, can be achieved only on the basis of the recognition of individual rights—and that a group, as such, has no rights other than the individual rights of its members... An individualist is a man who says: ‘I will not run anyone’s life—nor let anyone run mine. I will not rule nor be ruled. I will not be a master nor a slave. I will not sacrifice myself to anyone—nor sacrifice anyone to myself.’” (New York: New American Library, 1964), p.129.

²⁸ Maria Montessori, *From Childhood to Adolescence* (Oxford, UK: Clio Press, 1994; orig. pub. 1948).

A free society requires not serfs to the state or “company men,” but capable individuals, entrepreneurs of their own lives, able to peacefully collaborate with others while creating remarkable and new solutions to human needs and problems. In a voluntary, cooperative society, responsibility for educating children would fall clearly to the parents. As part of the ideas and values that would form such a society, parents would largely tend to value and foster individualism and independence as needed characteristics to flourish in freedom. Many would recognize that their responsibility as nurturers would be to help their children develop into achieving, passionate individuals, whatever path they might choose. Constant, upward striving—*real* progress—would be the social bellwether.

Old WASP families in the United States historically imparted an ethic of responsibility and achievement in their progeny. Rather than becoming dissolute ne'er-do-wells who hadn't a clue about how to live up to or surpass previous generations, such heirs were encouraged to find their passion and use the family resources to achieve it. Children interested in the family business frequently became thoughtful stewards, adding to the family's achievements, including the delivery of products and services, the creation of businesses and jobs—even extraordinary philanthropic endeavors. On an episode of the popular TV show *Undercover Boss*, Dave Rife, head of the family-owned White Castle Corporation, expressed something of this attitude in his desire to improve the business his grandfather had started and make him proud. This ethic of achievement and pride is fostered not by dependence but by independence. It comes out of the opportunity to take risks and meet challenges—to use one's individual nature, perspective, intellect, and drive to do so.

Rather than protecting children by giving them everything, many parents would teach their children the joy of responsibility and work. A 2007 documentary, *The Call of the Entrepreneur*, includes a valuable example. Frank Hanna, one of the individuals featured in the film, is the son of an investment banker. Instead of taking his two sons to Little League, Hanna's father provided opportunities for the boys to work at various family businesses. The boys experienced achievement early—not a mere taste for making money but the analytic knowledge to understand how businesses work. After a brief stint as a lawyer, Frank joined his brother in opening their own investment banking firm, reveling in the joy of developing great, productive businesses by providing capital to fund their growth.

Having lived with tax-supported, government-provided education as a major supplier for 200 years, many people can't imagine how most children could be educated otherwise. But in a cooperative, voluntary society, all education would necessarily be entirely private, mostly supported by tuition income, with help from a vast array of private philanthropies. There would be no “privatization” in which for-profit businesses take public money while remaining beholden to government-dictated standards, curricula, testing—and data-mining.

The U.S. already leads the world in philanthropy²⁹, especially for education, and has the most private schools, colleges, and universities. Imagine what people would do for those families and children struggling to get a good education if everyone could keep the lion's share of their income.³⁰ Voluntary help would dispense with both the problem and the fear that the poor could not afford education.

A long-voiced motivation for compulsory public schools has been to ensure that irresponsible parents educate their children. Yet, we know that carrots work better than sticks—that positive persuasion and incentives motivate people far better than punishment. In a free, cooperative society, concerned volunteers could form organizations to ingeniously motivate undependable parents to educate their children—with money, games, prizes, honors, opportunities. Who can tell what ambitious, free people might invent? Likewise, those concerned with the acculturation of children and new immigrants to a voluntary cooperative society would form educational and immigrant aid organizations and other philanthropic endeavors to convey the ideas, knowledge, and values important to freedom.

Another initial motive of compulsory public education was the equalization of opportunity for all citizens. Today, many continue to advocate the idea that, *somehow*, a society can enact laws and practices that will equalize differences in wealth, inborn talent, skills, family connections, and other advantages. Yet, the *only* way to “equalize” what people are born with is to handicap those with more talent and skill, bringing everyone down to the lowest level. Ironically, in “equalized” societies, the most disadvantaged are *worse* off, because the talented are not permitted to create and build.³¹

Putting aside the injustice of forcibly taking from some to give to others by the decree of government bureaucrats, realistically, there is no way to give everyone equal advantages, no matter how much money is spent—even if it were entirely private money. Human beings are individuals with hugely varying talents, abilities and interests.³²

²⁹ Elizatheth Eaves, “Who Gives the Most?” *Forbes*, Dec. 26, 2008.
http://www.forbes.com/2008/12/24/america-philanthropy-income-oped-cx_ee_1226eaves.html

³⁰ Right now, combined federal, state, real estate, and sales taxes take more than 50 percent of the average person's income. If every individual in the United States were able to keep all but perhaps 3 percent, we'd all be more than twice as well-off. What would we be able to do with that money and the free choices that would accompany it, not least in the realm of educating our children?

³¹ The fictional society in Kurt Vonnegut's *Harrison Bergeron* paints a clear picture of how this formula works. Of course, such scenarios aren't pure fiction: Soviet Russia, Communist China, and Pol Pot's Cambodia all illustrate the results of attempts to equalize individuals.

³² Individuality is the source of the advantages of a division-of-labor economy.

Human beings enjoy changing the world for the better; helping others is a large part of that enjoyment. This was recognized at least as long ago as ancient Greece. Aristotle, for instance, described the Great Souled man who delights in using his wealth and ability to help others. In a voluntary and cooperative society, private individuals and organizations could find ways to help those with less talent, skills, wealth, and family advantages—and they'd have much more of their own money to do it with than today. The government's only role would be to insure the *equal protection* of each individual's freedom to act on his own judgment, leaving him free to pursue all the opportunities they could create or that others would offer.

The Shape of Schools in a Free Society

Based on the principles by which cooperative societies operate, and upon my years of experience in psychology and Montessori education, here is a picture of how I think schools might be affected by a freer society.

While public schools, by their very nature, are not in a position to respond nimbly to differing needs and wishes, market competition would provide a myriad of choices, with a buffet of prices, quality, environments, methodology, and locations sensitive to the real customers for education, parents and students. This would include a significant offering of schools for all circumstances and income levels. The large and growing number of inexpensive private schools in remote and poor areas of India illustrates how the market could fulfill parental demands.³³ Parents and students would be treated more like customers of a service business, with schools competing to do the best job possible for each individual. Everything could be run more efficiently with little or no bureaucracy—actually *responsive* to those customers.

Let's compare the market for education to the lively and innovative market for smart phones or computers, one of the least regulated markets in the U.S. Smart phones are ingeniously customizable to suit the needs, purposes, and tastes of the individual. The companies that make them furiously scramble to offer the latest and greatest innovations to keep their customers. Entrepreneurs likewise race to create more and better application for these tools. Apps that find you the cheapest gas, that scan a bar code on a "home for sale" sign and yield all the information you could want about that property, that keep track of your health data and teach you the latest, scientifically-validated preventative measures to take—all on top of the phone's function as a phone, camera, calculator, internet browser, library of online books—the list is practically endless.

³³ Vikas Bajaj and Jim Yardley, "Many of India's Poor Turn to Private Schools," *The New York Times*, December 30, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/31/world/asia/for-indias-poor-private-schools-help-fill-a-growing-demand.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

Can we imagine what people might invent for schooling, if it were free and fueled by competition? What life-changing differences for children, parents, and teachers might follow?

Variety and Choice: The staid rigidity of traditional education would be overturned. Schools of every ideology and methodology could pop up around the country in response to the needs, desires, and interests of parents and their children. Big, medium and small schools, urban and rural, could offer a variety of programs, from “unschooling” arrangements, which have no curriculum but many opportunities to explore, all the way to strict programs with carefully selected and implemented curricula that every student was required to follow—along with everything in between. Some schools could offer only classic books to study, others faith-based programs, or modern studies; some could emphasize science and technology, others business, the fine arts, or crafts and the trades. Entrepreneurs could also find new ways to help children with special physical conditions, specific learning differences and difficulties *or* talents, physical and mental. The possibilities are as numerous as the individuals who would attend.

Teachers would be free to practice their craft rather than constantly adapt to the wishes of bureaucracy with piles of paperwork and mandated yet unworthy experimental approaches that they know are failing or even damaging their students. Overfull classrooms would be a thing of the past as education entrepreneurs respond to the desires of parents, and teachers and parents would have more direct dialogue.

Like innovative technology businesses of today, many, many schools would give teachers a wide platform for their creativity, leaving them much discretion for implementing curricula, programs, and school goals. Currently, this happens in private schools, which is one of their allures to teachers, despite much lower pay and benefits. In a voluntarist cooperative society in which people retained most of their earnings, the market could reward teachers more powerfully, as it is doing today in South Korea: “Kim Ki-hoon earns \$4 million a year in South Korea, where he is known as a rock-star teacher—a combination of words not typically heard in the rest of the world. Mr. Kim has been teaching for over 20 years, all of them in the country's *hagwons*, private, after-school tutoring academies. Unlike most teachers across the globe, he is paid according to the demand for his skills—and he is in high demand.”³⁴ Of course, not everyone would earn \$4 million, but compensation in a free market would closely reflect ability, creativity, hard work, and perseverance, like it does in today’s technology labor market.

Physical Environment: School buildings could be of every shape, size, and location, to fit each school’s outlook and purposes, with one school building more beautiful and luxurious than the next, even for the most inexpensive schools. Doubt it?

³⁴ Amanda Ripley, “The \$4 Million Teacher,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 3, 2013, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887324635904578639780253571520>

Just think how much more attractive Dunkin' Donuts stores have become since the spread of Starbucks; how many more offerings you have at your local grocer since Whole Foods came to town.

Schools could be exciting, attractive environments in which to explore the world and oneself. In many schools, students would not be confined, since the classroom can't provide enough experience of the world to become sufficiently educated. Because knowledge is practical, students could go out to explore the places in which they live, learning to shop for themselves, camping, and working in local businesses. Their responsibility and independence would grow with their age.

Creative building designs such as those used by Apple or Google or Pixar to foster innovation and collaboration could abound. The playful intermixing of students and staff, along with the freedom to work by oneself or together—at a table or desk, lying down, standing up, walking around, taking breaks to play games—would allow individuals to follow their own needs and paths to learning, creating, and problem-solving.

Schools could be well-integrated into natural landscapes or cleverly designed in highly urban environments to keep children in touch with nature and spontaneous opportunities to observe and experiment. The layout would make it easier to incorporate physical activity into every day, aiding the connection between mind and body.

Assessment: Monolithic testing regimes would be dead. Entrepreneurs would compete to discover tools of *authentic assessment*—whether a student has mastered knowledge and can implement it in his life. Tools such as optimal-experience researcher Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's Experiential Sampling methodology could be adapted to determine the actual attention and engagement students give to various ways of teaching, thereby testing the teaching's effectiveness.³⁵ New tools of psychological evaluation and growth derived from the discoveries of researchers in the psychology of high functioning, happy individuals would also be used to craft better in-class processes.³⁶ Rich use of data analytics would aid this entire process, as it is doing for some of the most innovative educational programs today.³⁷

³⁵ Mihalyi, Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991).

³⁶ In a free society, all such research would be transparent and voluntary; students would not be captive subjects of psychological, psychometric, or biometric data-mining as they are sometimes today. The latter would be a violation of rights and therefore prohibited.

³⁷ Doug Gurthrie, "The Real Disrupters: The Innovators Who Are Truly Transforming Education," *Forbes*, March 18, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/douggurthrie/2014/03/18/the-real-disrupters-the-innovators-who-are-truly-transforming-education/>.

Technology: Technology could be used for information delivery and rich simulations through which to practice all kinds of skills, from sports, to governance, to running a business.

We have a little taste of the innovations possible with the recent rise of online learning tools and games, programs such as Khan Academy, and the crowd-sourced information universally available on Wikipedia and other internet sites. Another example is MIT's physics program, which uses hand-held devices. The teacher broadcasts mini-quizzes during class to discover how well the students grasp the concepts he is teaching. When many students fail the quizzes, the teacher adjusts his pace, explains his concepts differently, and/or presents more illustrations.³⁸

Higher Education: There would be no government-generated push for “everyone” to attend college, a goal that has resulted only in the increase of unnecessary degrees and punishing debt. Rather, high school education could be far more challenging and deeper than it is today—so rich and thorough that students could be knowledgeable, engaged citizens without college.

With the emphasis on individualization, many students would be interested and skilled in non-academic areas such as crafts, trades, the arts, and business. Detailed, targeted technical education post-high school could flourish. People without an advanced degree would not feel like second-class citizens as they often do today, since the importance of non-college work would be honored for its excellence and importance.

Colleges would be free from government interference or help as well. The higher education market would be a hotbed of competition, as it was in the U.S. up to the last forty or fifty years. Many more small colleges could arise to give personalized guidance and service, allowing students to more easily know and connect to their teachers and other students.

Higher education could undergo a liberation and renaissance of striking proportions too.

Parenting and Child Development: Many parents would seek well-grounded programs that scientifically base methodology and curriculum in deep human needs and development processes. They would desire the best means to educate their children, fostering their autonomy, creativity, and ambition.

³⁸ Here, the technology is used to facilitate both better teaching and surer absorption of knowledge rather than measure “accountability” to the state, which places stress on students and teachers alike.

Competition could fuel exact scientific research and understanding of what human beings need to develop well. And *within* an institution, careful scientific observation and experimentation about the best means of learning would be *de rigueur*.

Montessori as a Resource for Liberated Education

The ingeniously designed, developmentally appropriate physical and psychological learning environments of Montessori schools point to the kinds of transformative, scientifically-based changes which could sweep education. University of Virginia researcher Angeline Lillard summarizes their starkly different results in *Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius*.

Business as well as Academia are beginning to take note. A study released in 2009 examined the way business executives think. Surveying 3,000 business executives over six years and incorporating interviews with 500 participants, the study uncovered that an unusual number of leading innovators had been Montessori students.³⁹ “A number of the innovative entrepreneurs also went to Montessori schools, where they learned to follow their curiosity... To paraphrase the famous Apple ad campaign, innovators not only learned early on to think different, they act different (and even talk different),” says Hal Gregersen, one of the lead researchers. Such luminaries included Amazon’s Jeff Bezos, Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales, Google founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page, and French cuisine guru Julia Child.

At root, the Montessori program nurtures autonomy and creativity *par excellence*. Imagine if students and teachers alike were able to leverage these crucial advantages, unencumbered by the control of over-weaning bureaucrats and “experts” who set themselves up through the force of government as the authorities and tell the rest of us what to do.

It sounds fantastic to us now, perhaps, because we are off the mark. But ultimately, the education practices of the free society would result in an unimaginable outpouring of excellence, energy, and creativity, far beyond even the imagination of science fiction writers. Because these practices would nurture the best within each individual, maximizing them would set the stage for a future of higher human fulfillment, amazing technology, inspiring art, and a host of other positive outcomes. Let us work our mightiest to see the creation of such a society in real life.

³⁹ Jeff Dyer, Hal Gregersen, and Clayton Christiansen, “The Innovator’s DNA,” *Harvard Business Review*, vol. 87, no. 12 (December, 2009), pp. 60-7 and 128, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19968057>. See also, Peter Sims, “The Montessori Mafia,” *Harvard Review Blogs*, April 5, 2011, <http://blogs.wsj.com/ideas-market/2011/04/05/the-montessori-mafia/>

“The greatest [obstacle for] an attempt to give freedom to the child and to bring its powers to light does not lie in finding a form of education which realizes these aims. It lies rather in overcoming the prejudices which the adult has formed in this regard.”

Maria Montessori⁴⁰ (1955, 48)

Marsha Familiaro Enright, M.A. Psychology, The New School for Social Research, B.A. Biology, Northwestern University, President of The Reason, Individualism, Freedom Institute.

A forty-year advocate of a free society, Marsha is an education entrepreneur, writer and speaker. She developed The Great Connections Seminars, an innovative educational program for high school and college students, implemented in Chicago, Buenos Aires, and San Jose. She co-founded Council Oak Montessori School for ages 3 to 15 in 1990 named one of the best private schools in Chicago by *Chicago Magazine* in 2009 and 2011. Her writing includes research papers on neuropsychology, psychology, philosophy, and education, reviews of novelists, political and historical commentary, and the editorship of *Ayn Rand Explained: From Tyranny to Tea Party*, which includes her own original material.

⁴⁰ Maria Montessori, *The Formation of Man* (Oxford: Clio Press, 1989; orig. pub. 1955), ??.