

**Bill Wirtz | The Moral Case Against
Public Education**



The Moral Case Against Public Education

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ABSTRACT

By attributing the right to control education to government, we create a serious threat to ourselves and the coming generation. Historically, authoritarians have used this power to create obedient followers, but even today criticism of fundamental functions of the state are not endorsed by the public education system. Today, state-run education is held hostage by teachers unions who make the system unaffordably expensive and unreformable, providing biased education. But can education in a free society not also overestimate the responsibility of the parents and make children vulnerable to their tutors? What makes public education morally indefensible?

Keywords: Education; History; Government; Homeschooling; Indoctrination

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Damn I hated school, and I've never thought it'd take me this long to finally write about my disdain for primary and secondary education. In fact, I thought it was a phase, that it was normal to hate school because they make us work, and that the older and wiser I get I'd accept the irrefutable advantage public education has given me. Let's say that didn't turn out to be true so far. But it's much worse than that: not only would I say that the public education system has failed to provide students with any sort of necessary tools, it's also damaging to their personal development. Several points can be made that forcing young adults into the public education system is immoral from a perspective of a free society:

#1 The history of public education

There is a lot to say about the history of education in Europe. For the longest time, be that the scholars of Ancient Greece, the *ludus publicus* primary schools in Ancient Rome or the widespread presence of Catholic schools all around the continent, education was reserved for the upper classes. Not only because lower classes were too poor to afford such an education for their children, but also because the class mentality made it so it didn't elude to them and because the children's help was desperately needed in manual works (the latter was still the case for my grandmother who was born in the 1930s).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, not really the most classical liberal thinker of the times, was highly sceptical of the uniform system of education, a classroom with a one-size-fits-all method that would strip children of all freedom and individuality. He believed that the way education was conducted ignored children's potential development, instead he saw (and instituted through his followers) the teacher as a guide to children's natural development.



Figure 1

And then came the Prussians.

Despite providing one of the best mustached men and a name to call Germans for those suffering occupation under World War 2, Prussia has also been horribly authoritarian – and in its striving for power and control – fairly innovative. Indeed the Prussians reformed their education system via government after the beginning of the Napoleonic Wars and were ultimately the first to introduce state-run education. Now there might be some disagreement about if that statement can be made so boldly – since the mixture between church and state could arguably lead to the conclusion that Western Europe already ran education publicly – but what it meant in Prussia was that government deliberately and in no means with backdoor rhetoric, implemented state control over education for the purpose of nation-building. Minister of education Wilhelm von Humboldt, who today is still honoured by having universities streets etc. named after him, included people of all standards of income in the basic education system (secondary and upper education remained too expensive). The motives of that move were less of the nature of fairness than that of social cohesion in the most radical way. In fact children were expected to respect and accept authority, a drill that expected them to believe in the unity and superiority of the state. It also served as an improvement for the skills required in the wars Prussia was warring in Europe, as armed forces were exceedingly required to be able to read and write.



In the United States such a seize of power by government seemed implausible after the American Revolution. They feared that this could be a dangerous tool of tyrants to steadily impose an authoritarian standard on the nation. But by the middle of the 19th century both Western Europe and the US had changed their mind and course. Prussia's education system was seen as admirable, that it showed discipline and strength. Taxpayer funded state-run education replaced what had been the competition of different methods of education through philosophers of all kind. Education had become the responsibility of politicians.

What the American revolutionaries feared had become reality. 20th century history proves that the control of the education system is the most valuable tool of authoritarian governments with long-term ambitions. Obviously controlling the media has a positive affect for tyrants, but nothing could be more appealing than the continuous indoctrination of an entire generation. Be it the fear of 'fascist media' in East Germany, the fear of 'the greed of capitalism' under the Soviet Union, the impulse for the need of expansion in fascist Italy or the racial theories of Nazi Germany, governments – especially those which are the most authoritarian – love state-run education.

Which of these factors make us enthusiastic and morally convinced about handing over the power to influence the decision-makers of tomorrow to an entity that relies solely on force?

#2 Ineffectiveness in spending

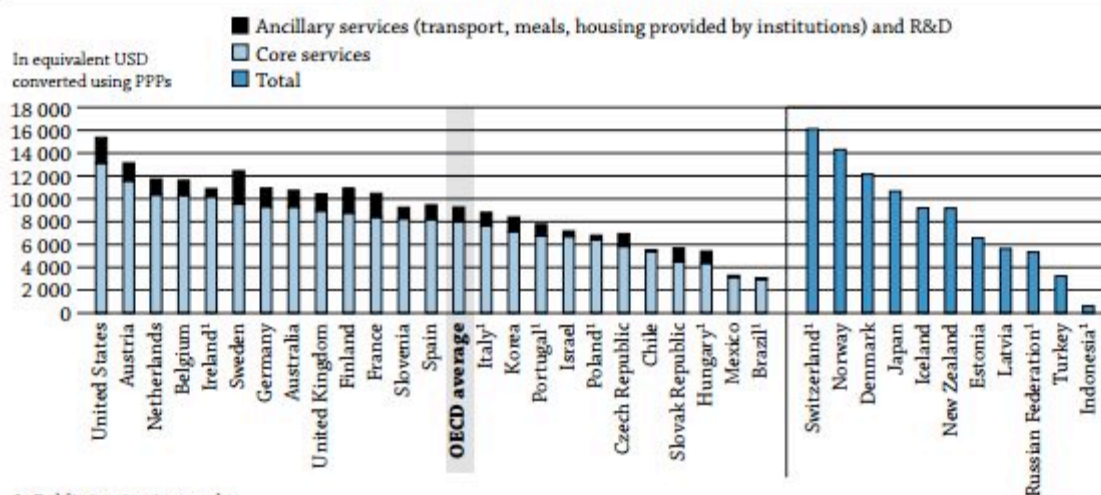
If there is one thing government is inherently good at, it's wasteful spending. In the [OECD report 'Education at a Glance'](#) of 2014¹, the average in expenditure of public education was over 9,000 USD per year (the United States crossing the bar of 15,000 USD, highest European spender is Austria with 13,000 USD).

¹ page 204



Chart B1.1. Annual expenditure per student by educational institutions, by type of service (2011)

In equivalent USD converted using PPPs, based on full-time equivalents, for primary through tertiary education



1. Public institutions only.

Countries are ranked in descending order of expenditure per student by educational institutions for core services.

Source: OECD, Table B1.2. See Annex 3 for notes (www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm).


StatLink  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933117060>

Figure 2

Studies show² that public education turns out to be twice as expensive as its private equivalent, but that factor is widely ignored by the general public, since primary and secondary education is free of charge.

The comparison even intensifies in difficulty as in many European countries, private schools turn out to be less private than they actually are. By implementing curricula worked out by government - which mostly implies teachers of public schools - private schools earn themselves generous subsidies. In my home country Luxembourg that can make up to 40% of the full per capita cost.³

² A Mackinac Center Report: The Universal Tuition Tax Credit: A Proposal to Advance Parental Choice in Education // 1997

³ International School of Luxembourg FAQ



[OECD data](#)⁴ shows that on average 82% of all schools are publicly held (in most European countries this percentage is higher than 90%). Letting public schools almost monopolise the marketplace - by which standard private schools online aim at costly high quality services - quite obviously makes the public opinion believe that public schools are the result of state benevolence and private schools the mere representation of wealthy elites. That of course is inherently wrong. Private schools have shown to be more careful with spending and more innovative when it comes to educational techniques, and that has to do with their employees.

Imagine in a private company a CEO/employer would be subject to electability through his employees. You would suggest that his margin of manoeuvrability would be small, since every change in working hours, salary or his view on work ethics would be a liability to his career. That's exactly what has happened to the public school system. When the cat's away, the mice will play. Teachers unions started to run the show, and through their power on the marketplace, managed to make their salaries a considerable part of expenditure in public education.^{5 6} They also run commissions determining school curricula, through which they managed to pin down how they want to teach and what they teach.

The dogma of paying teachers more in order to get better quality in education is self-evidently wrong, as is their ability to determine school curricula. Instead, a school should be evaluated on its success: the ultimate question might be, what the customer of this educational service got actually out of it. What is his performance in employability, acceptance and performance in higher education etc.

If you paid for services that deceived your expectations, then that is a personal loss you have to endure. But to instead insist that paying for these bad services should be mandatory for your neighbour as well, that I find morally rejectable.

⁴ <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/50110750.pdf>, page 20

⁵ EU Commission press release for 2013/2014

⁶ Eurydice Facts&Figures (page 13) My home country Luxembourg now is off the chart with over 10,000 euros



#3 Biased education

There are some things public education in Europe continuously teaches, that I have experienced myself, which are either questionably bold to make or factually untrue. In that category you may find things like "the 2007-08 economic crises was caused by 'too much capitalism' ", "hate speech is in no way a part of free speech", "WW2 ended the Great Depression", "public investment is the solution to the current crisis", "not participating in the democratic process is bad" and the like. You will also get a spinning mix of factually false arguments about drugs, the claim that anarchism leads to chaos and a good amount of unionist advertisement in the classroom.



Figure 37

⁷ <https://www.flickr.com/photos/impactthyworld/5068974889/in/photolist-8HVPCM-4ckJBL-9fEA6-5qqg5d-5qqfm9-5qkWJT-5qkWng-dFhEtt-5qkWLB-5qkW6P-5qkW2K-5qkVsa-5qkVFt-5qqg1q-5qkWDi-5qqfQf-vnGMFc-8Q5K9r-dUwB97-8Q8QLS-cnC8vY-jkVU2f-8Q8TtU-8Q8TGs-5SVQV1-8Q8SMG-9GUqei-6pvc8r-cJHMPN-oBDSSg-4VNsBu-fzviyT->

Though I'm not claiming that today's governments entirely follow the Prussian dogma of indoctrination, since that would manifestly overestimate the intelligence of those who serve in it, I would say that the drill to a law-abiding citizen whose range of sceptical mindset doesn't overcome certain limits of acceptance of government intervention, is now achieved by maintaining the status quo and through attributing an enormous power of self-governing over the employees of institutions of public education.

It turns out that a government institution has a pro-government bias. Who could have known.



Figure 4

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#4 Dealing with bad parents in a free society

There are certain issues that reveal themselves to be subject of great debate in the model of a free society. Rational individuals should have the right to make their own choices, to benefit from property rights. Those on the other hand, who do not come with the capacity of human interaction, as do human adults, are a whole other story. It's safe to assume that there can be an agreement on the fact that children are not a material property of their parents. Yet their self-ownership is limited through their own irrationality, which is why their tutelage is given to their parents.



Figure 5⁸

⁸ <https://www.flickr.com/photos/wondermonkey2k/14304873592/in/photolist-nN5dxA-6MbXqm-5R2khv-kqWYbY-31oyD-aYsPdM-71Kr2J-nyXG49-nHffBY-fhUbjp-2CwbS-6U7v28-dLgMc-ajrqZX-8GcWzL-2Cwdr-h9PZC-fJYeFd-2DdH6-5Vwbov-6T9H6u-c9mwxY-6Cgx7-5gZbNB-pzmWr-5PkD1L-o4cGj-6CgWC-7Z6qbe-rxBUk-wBdaJ-84YGY-dyn9kZ-2hdhR5-bAyYsa-rbyuGm-5fLGJg-o8WFKH-rxD8J-9d6YmX-PpA1Z-5kB5qf-52t3iH-4VYQCe-84YHu-7XLpr-55JVtG-fvtZRB-Cf2wA-7B2Mz>



Those who are sceptical of a free society often create imaginary scenarios to display how "it's not working". This is particularly the case if children are placed as an example. But what happens if parents are neglecting a child's education, or abuse of their educational power? Is the violation of a prima facie right legitimate in this case?

I find it hard to give a determinative answer to this question, maybe since I would pretend to have too much knowledge about the potential consequences of action or inaction in this situation. It's a fine line between guaranteeing educational independence to parents and protecting the rights of a third party, the child. So yes, the argument can be made that there are circumstances in which the right to raise your children as you see fit is not absolute. Being a parent means assuming responsibility for another human being, one that is not able to self-provide. It means teaching values of respect and decency and the intriguing trickiness of human interaction.

And don't get me wrong, I see the flaws in this point of view. If we authorise a centralised force to determine which values are the right ones and how they should be taught, then we just displaced the coercitive methods of public education. Being sceptical of government as such, I think a powerful non-violent alternative lies in social norms, in conformism after the threat of marginalisation. Many people will prefer educating their children conforming to a collective ideal then risking to be ostracised themselves.

#5 What's left?

When I started off in being a student representative in my secondary school I knew that the public school system had loads of flaws, but I believed that change was possible to implement. In order to do that I followed the bureaucratic way, joined commissions and councils, writing pages of reports in hundreds of meetings. I did this for three years. My reports hadn't changed anyone's mind, it had given me TV coverage now and then but I hadn't changed what I thought should be changed. I had followed the path that the administration had prescribed, to implement systematic change, and I got lost in it, to



the point that the details became the main talking points, when all the sudden the grading system or national holidays became key talking points. The 'change from within' logic had been a huge disappointment. In the midst of working with bureaucrats you effectively become one.

I sincerely believe now that homeschooling has beneficial effects, that even in the worst case scenario it would be as performant as the public education system, and that a privatised education system would offer more alternatives on schooling, price, specialisation or flexibility, than the rusty old institution that we have now.

To those in disagreement: I am sure I missed many aspects, that my case is merely scratching the surface of the issue. That for one side I missed the main issue, that for others I misread the facts.

To those I say:

Teach me.

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