

What Utah's History Teaches Us About Vouchers

PART 5 OF 6

BY SUTHERLAND INSTITUTE

The State's argument in favor of public schools is intellectually compelling. Utahns have accepted several of the major premises in support of the progressive education model. To a very large degree, the State interest in education is our current identity.

There are several reasonable arguments in justifying State control of all education in Utah. First, freedom requires an informed and educated citizenry. Thomas Jefferson articulated this point well. His concept of education advocated a system of tax-subsidized schools to provide a ladder of opportunity for people of all economic classes. Jefferson believed tax-subsidized schools should be controlled by the local parents of the children attending each particular school, not by federal, state, municipal, or special governmental authorities. Schools were a resource to be made available on a wholly voluntary basis – compulsory education, compulsory attendance, legal coercion, and abrogation of parental custody or control of a child were utterly unacceptable to Jefferson. Any attempt to standardize education or obtain a uniformity of worldview in the population was also viewed to be inappropriate. Finally, Jefferson believed that education and law should operate through families and parent-child relationships, and not in subversion of them.

The second justification for State control of education is the need for a common national/state identity. The "melting pot" has been long used to describe America – a land of many races, religions, creeds, and colors. But it is

also a land that must function within prescribed bounds to maintain its freedoms. The public school system was devised in part to integrate immigrants and cultural aberrations into the "American way," educate them for labor, and relieve the State of any potential financial burdens. This is a fair claim upon its citizens. It is reasonable to presume that we have a national identity as well as our own individual ones, and it is more than reasonable to work for the self-reliance and autonomy of any person assuming citizenship.

We tend to define America by its innate diversity and how we all seem to be able to live together notwithstanding our differences. Public school advocates would argue that it's our public school system that is the primary, if not singular, reason today holding us together as a nation. If it is, it came with a hard price. Jean-Jacques Rousseau noted that people must be forced to be free and that is the role of the State and compulsory education. There are few forces in the universe more severe on the human spirit than government coercion, but that said, government coercion is exactly what built this nation and our public school system through the 19th century.

The final major argument in defense of aggressive promotion of public schools is that education is a right for all children. This "right" is a central part of the United Nations Declarations of Human Rights, its founding document. It is hard to argue against, especially here in Utah where our own State Constitution provides a free public education for any child seeking it.

While both "family" and "public education" are nowhere to be found in the literal text of our U.S. Constitution, the Court has found the existence of a very fundamental right of parents to control the upbringing and education of their children. The same fundamental right has not been found regarding a public school education.

As the voucher debate proceeds, the public will be bombarded with platitudes about the importance of an educated citizenry, the need for a common social identity, and the right to an education. Each claim has significant merit. Each claim is compelling and persuasive. Each claim has motivated generations of Utahns to support public schools.

For many Utahns, the prices paid to uphold these pillars of public education were all well-worth it, and the continued price of opposing all systemic changes to a system with such rich political, social, and cultural history remains well-worth it. Then again, other Utahns, especially Latter-day Saints who bore the brunt and insult of "progress," might wonder if it was and still is all worth it. The words "Forced to be Free" may yet be the epithet on the gravestone of public education. All would agree that would be a tragedy.

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(This excerpt from the Sutherland Institute's *Vouchers, Vows, and Vexations: The Historic Dilemma over Utah's Education Identity* is the fifth of a six-part series on the history of education in Utah. The full essay can be found at www.sutherlandinstitute.org.)