

BOOK REVIEWS

Public Education: An Autopsy

Myron Lieberman

Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993, 339 pp.

From the subtitle of Myron Lieberman's new book, I assumed that I would be reading about a public school system that is, as it were, stretched out on a slab. I was prepared to hear Dr. Lieberman's findings on what took the old boy out. As it turned out, however, the Lieberman report indicates that the patient is alive and up and about, and that while he isn't very chipper and his long-term prospects are bleak, the prognosis is for his continued if not exactly vital existence—his condition will fluctuate some, but overall it will deteriorate—for an indefinite period of time.

But if the patient is still alive, if not exactly kicking, what is this autopsy business? What has died? According to the author, a couple of things are indeed dead. One of them is the rationale that has supported government-operated schools, with three principle factors being involved in its demise. The first are major social and demographic changes, an aging population being one example. The second has to do with educational policies and practices that contribute to a loss of public support. For instance, school goals and programs dealing with sex education and religion lead to conflict and antagonize important constituencies. The third factor is the growing awareness, particularly in light of recent historical events in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, of the superiority of the market system. In Lieberman's view, it will become increasingly clear to more and more people that America has been prosperous and democratic not because of government provision of education but in spite of it. On this last one, I hope he is right, because, carrying over the health metaphor, the ideology of managerial liberalism is looking pretty fit to me these days.

So the rationale for public education as we have known it has died. What else? The hope that reform will save the system, that too has died, says Lieberman. True, adjustments here and there may help it stagger on for a while, but ultimately the public school system is a lost cause; nothing will rejuvenate it. Which is not to say that individuals and groups won't try. After all, many feel a loyalty and affection for it or believe that we couldn't do without it, and that the latest elixir will do the trick. Then too, of course, there are some, teachers unions and others, who see it as

their meal ticket, although of course they wouldn't put it so crassly. That wouldn't be politic, and besides, it is a fact of life that people come to sincerely believe in whoever or whatever puts food on their table and gives them a place in the scheme of things. Anyway, expect a flood of attempts from various directions to give a shot in the arm to government schools, whether it be through the formulation of new goals or testing procedures, higher graduation requirements, choice within public schools, school-based management, teacher empowerment, alternative routes to teacher licensing, peer review, parent involvement, textbook improvement, cooperative learning, mastery learning, whole language approaches to reading, merit pay, career ladders, moving away from age-grading, accelerated learning—you name it. Some of this will help a little, and some will actually make things worse, but Lieberman's point is that none of it will make a significant difference in the power structure of education, the way education is carried on, or student achievement. What it will do, however, is keep a system alive that ought to have the plug pulled on it, spread false hope that it can be saved, drain resources more usefully put elsewhere, and keep America from getting on with its educational life. Thus the image you get from Lieberman is of a decrepit old codger wheezing and limping along surrounded by well-wishers and hangers-on propping him up with crutches, handing him pills, and, not a few of them, rifling his wallet for money (money that he got from you and me, by the way).

Public Education: An Autopsy comes down to an argument for a market system in education: where new suppliers of education are able to enter the market to meet increased demand, where capital and labor can flow into and out of production in response to changes in demand, where inefficient producers must become efficient or go out of business, where buyers and sellers have accurate information about the service, and where no buyer and no seller can control enough of the market to set prices or quantities—needless to say, an arrangement that we don't have now. Lieberman's thesis is that only a market system will bring major improvements in America's schools. His contention is that schools for profit—schools set up like any other business, to return a profit for those who invest their money and effort in them—are essential to the existence of a market system in education.

The distinction between nonprofit and for-profit schools is a crucial one to Lieberman. As an illustration of its importance, many analysts assume that vouchers and/or tuition tax credits for nonprofit schools will create a market system. While Lieberman makes it clear in the epilogue of the book that when the issue of vouchers or tax credits presents itself, such as in the recently defeated California initiative, he stands with the choice advocates, he also cautions that these arrangements won't necessarily lead to the market system he finds imperative. In the coming years, Lieberman envisions a three-element educational industry made up of government schools, private schools, many of them denominational, and for-profit schools.

In this book, Lieberman demonstrates a keen and informed mind and brings to his writing the savvy and insider's perspective that comes from 45 years in education. He is the author of a number of books on education beginning as far back as 1956. He writes well, and with good humor, although the book is quite a long read.

Lieberman provides as much data and as many cogent arguments on this topic as anyone could reasonably expect—thorough is a word that applies to him. Nevertheless, I am left with some questions. For instance, assuming a market system in education is a good thing, is it enough to get us what we want? Is there more to it than that? Is a market arrangement but one necessary piece in the puzzle? How much do we also have to attend to, say, individual and collective values, or social and political realities, as well as markets? And if Lieberman is right and voucher plans won't necessarily lead to a market system, how enthusiastic should we be about them? Is there any chance that vouchers will get in the way of local control and take one more important responsibility away from people, in this case the education of their own children? Will vouchers or tax credits serve to lock in education as another product to buy and consume and thereby rob people of the satisfaction of creating something that reflects who they are? Will an unintended outcome of voucher plans be the government's getting its hands on private schools and imposing on them what it has already done to public schools, its usual number: bureaucratization, standardization, and "mediocritization" (also known as the post office syndrome), all the while steadily making pitches for more and more resources? Minneapolis is turning its schools over to a private company to run. How excited should we be about that?

Yes, I've got questions. But then again, a good book both informs you and gets you thinking—and Lieberman's book has done that for me.

Robert Griffin
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The Moral Sense

James Q. Wilson

New York: The Free Press, 1993, xviii + 313 pp.

James Q. Wilson holds that human beings share a common moral sense. Underlying the diverse moral rules and customs we find in different cultures and historical periods, he claims, are a set of dispositions and emotions that have a common ethical content. The purpose of his book is to describe that moral sense, to explain its sources, and—implicitly at least—to endorse it.

In content, according to Wilson, the moral sense prescribes *sympathy* (it is obligatory to avoid cruelty to others and admirable to extend them compassion and aid; self-sacrifice on their behalf is especially admirable); *fairness* (goods should be distributed equitably, favors returned, and