

## 16. Education and Politics

Not a single day passes by without newspaper headlines warning about the decline of the educational standards in the nation—headlines emphasizing that a lot of other nations, industrialized or not, appear to be surpassing the United States in math and science test scores, not to mention the test scores in such “unimportant” topics as history, geography, and foreign languages. Not a single day passes by without claims by politicians—such as governors, the Secretary of Education, or even the president—that they are working very hard to deal with such problems. Whether such claims originate from “education governors,” or the “Education President,” through such initiatives as the widely publicized *No child left behind*, the painful *Johnny cannot read*, or the controversial *Educational vouchers*, in reality, such claims are seldom anything more than hot air, destined for public consumption, and as campaign tools rather than real attempts to solve the problem. The situation gets even worse when unscrupulous groups of individuals exploit such warnings about education and attempt to deal with them, trying to profit at the expense of poorly educated children.

Charter schools, for example, try to exploit such claims occasionally; although they promise to cure the problems of education, they are hardly a panacea for such problems. By and large, they often tend to ignore the problems they claim they are solving, while enjoying public financial support.

One cannot solve a problem by avoiding it. One needs to grab the bull by its horns. It is obviously very dangerous, but this is the only way one may tame the bull. Politics are so intertwined with the so-called solutions to the problems of education that people, in general, have a very difficult time separating the trees from the forest and fiction from reality. Exploitation and deceit become particularly acute when individuals do not use their own judgment, believe whatever they hear without questioning it, and, in general, see only one side of the problem.

In contrast with many European countries where education is controlled by the central government through an appropriate ministry of education, the situation is quite different in the United States. Due to their independence from the federal government, state governments have actual control over the education systems within their jurisdiction, whereas the federal government oversees aspects of education common to all states, such as common tests, graduation rates, federal support, and so forth. Private education is mostly, but not always, parochial, and since it is not supposed to be supported financially by the state governments or by local taxes—due to the strict separation of church and state—it relies heavily on tuition and on endowments by former alumni and benefactors. Because of their required financial independence from the state and federal governments, private schools are allowed to introduce their own graduation requirements, provided they are not lower than those imposed by the appropriate state.

The graduation requirements imposed by most private schools are, by and large, much stricter and much more extensive than those imposed by the state. In other words, parochial schools in a given state must meet or exceed a minimum set of requirements that are endorsed by the state for public school graduation. This obviously poses no problem, particularly for secondary education, because private and parochial high schools are college oriented schools with most of their graduates attending college after graduation; stricter graduation requirements guarantee the success of