



Values-Based Education: How Education Savings Accounts Provide Options

by James V. Shuls, Ph.D.

Key Points

- We must recognize the obvious: schools cannot and will not be value-free.
- Public school educators are doing a great job attempting to instruct children in an environment where they are handcuffed. They attempt to meet the needs of all children while attempting to offend no one. An impossible task as you can't be everything to everyone.
- Education Savings Accounts provide a method for parents, teachers, and students to better align their values with the services they are providing or receiving.
- It is impossible for a government institution to package a particular set of beliefs and values to suit everyone. A lack of religion is simply not the same as a lack of values.

Summary

We must recognize the obvious: schools cannot and will not be value-free. The question is, what type of system is best suited for a pluralistic society where people of good conscience cannot agree on what or how children should be taught? All children are not the same; all families do not share the same values. The beauty of the market is that it provides options for all individuals.

Public school educators are doing a great job attempting to instruct children in an environment where they are handcuffed. They attempt to meet the needs of all children while attempting to offend no one. An impossible task as you can't be everything to everyone.

Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) provide a method for parents, teachers, and students to better align their values with the services they are providing or receiving. Critics often claim ESAs would undermine "public education." Nothing could be further from the truth.

Introduction

When I began teaching first grade, I was full of excitement. I could not wait to help my young scholars develop academically. Little did I realize that on top of reading, writing, and arithmetic, I would soon be teaching lessons in socialism to these impressionable 6-year-olds. When my students arrived at the beginning of the school year with their pencil boxes bursting with new glue sticks, scissors, and pencils, I had them put them all in the "community" bins. If they needed a new pencil throughout the day or the year, they could simply pick up a new one out of the bin. This simple policy, which a

veteran teacher told me would help my class operate more smoothly, was a powerful value lesson about collectivism.

I recall one incident where a student grabbed a new pencil out of the bin and began working on an assignment. His neighbor said, "That's my pencil." Unlike most of the other students who had purchased the bland, yellow pencils, he had purchased some uniquely designed pencils. They were distinct and he clearly knew they were the ones his parents had purchased for him. The pencil, however, was no longer his property and his classmate retorted, "It's mine now. I got it out of the pencil bin." The demoralized student had lost his private property to the collective.

This illustration is not intended to be an indictment of community school supplies, although you are free to read it as that if you like. I could just as easily share how I taught capitalism through my "Behavior Buck" reward system, patriotism through daily recitations of the Pledge of Allegiance, environmentalism through recycling programs, and respect for authority through my insistence that students refer to adults as Mr. and Mrs. My story about school supplies is just an example of how teachers and schools teach values. They do so intentionally and unintentionally because education is inextricably linked with values.

It cannot be helped. Whether public or private, schools invariably impart some values, morals, or ethics to students. They help children understand what they ought and ought not to do. Stephen Arons, an associate professor of legal studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, has noted, "Schooling is a form of communication between student and

culture that inevitably contains moral implications, assumptions about the nature of reality, and beliefs about the most enduring questions of civilization and human nature” (Arons). In almost everything they do, in their policies and their practices, schools impart a bit of what they value to others. This, in and of itself, is not problematic. Indeed most parents want their child’s school to impart values to their children; they simply want those values to be in accordance with their own. This is where the problem arises.

Our public education system was not designed for a pluralistic society where people believe in and hold very different ideals. It was built to promote the dominant orthodoxy. To understand this, we must understand how the system functions. In Texas, like most other states, students are residentially assigned to schools. Parents can either accept what their local school district is offering, move, pay for private school tuition, or homeschool. For most, this means parents are compelled to financially support their local public school district through taxes and they are compelled to send their children to those schools. One system is then tasked with meeting the needs and desires of all families who have been assigned to them.

Fortunately, there is another option. In this paper, I discuss how Education Savings Accounts can allow parents to choose what and how their children are taught. ESAs offer a new way of organizing public education whereby individuals are free to choose the educational options that best align with their values.

The Myth of the Value-Neutral School System

According to U.S. Census estimates, there are approximately 5.5 million children between the ages 5 and 18 in Texas.* James C. Carper, a professor of education at the University of South Carolina has said, “Education is inevitably a value-laden enterprise. . . . It deals with questions of the nature of the cosmos, of the moral foundation of right and wrong, and of the appropriate roles of men and women. People of goodwill differ radically in their answers to those questions, and so it’s extremely difficult for a government institution to package a particular set of beliefs and values to suit everyone” (Archer). It takes quite a bit of hubris to believe a monolithic, compulsory public education system could be sufficiently value-neutral enough to satisfy the wishes of 5.5 million students and their parents.

To accomplish this, some suggest public schools should be value-neutral or value-free. This goal is distinctly modern. Historically, it has been accepted that public schools were to impart the dominant values of society to students. In fact, the first public schools in the United States were formed to promote values as much as they were formed to teach students to read, write, or do arithmetic. Just 12 years after the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in 1642, the Old Deluder Satan law was passed (Adams, 46). The Puritan colonists believed it was the “chief project of that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from the knowledge of the scriptures.”† To combat that Old Deluder, children had to be educated so they could read the Bible for themselves. The law required small communities to have a dedicated teacher and larger communities to have a grammar school.

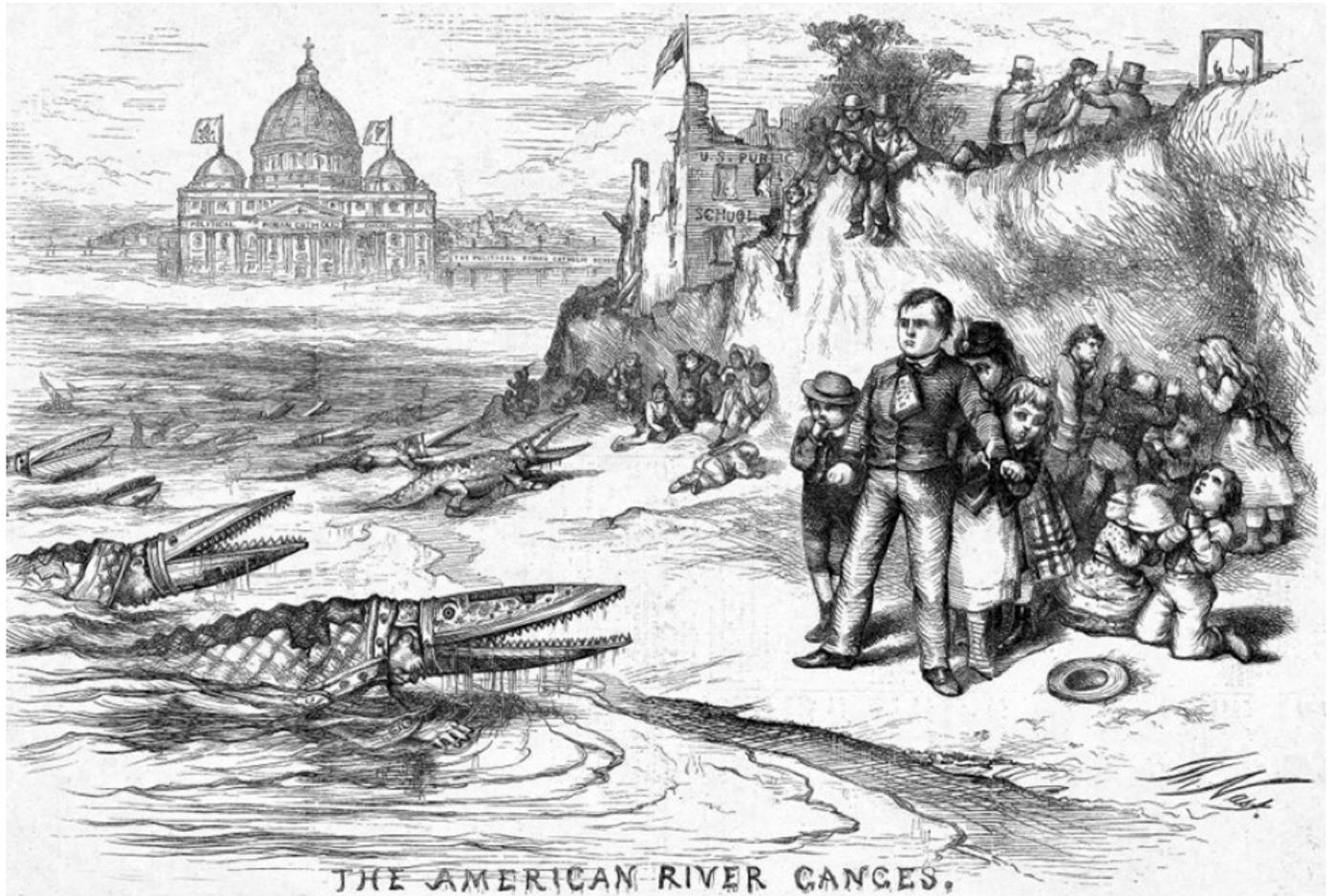
Examples abound of policymakers using public education to promote the dominant orthodoxy. In the 1800s, as waves of Catholic immigrants poured into the United States, education reformers pushed for Common Schools (Adams). The Common School Movement promoted free, public elementary and secondary schools throughout the nation and by 1875, every state had a public education system (Adams). The impetus for these schools, while partly educational, was also anti-Catholicism (Tyack). In *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, Anthony Bryk, Valerie Lee, and Peter Holland noted, “America’s social elite saw the common schools as socializing foreigners whose presence might otherwise be threatening to them. Public school educators thus saw their task as homogenizing not only religion but other aspects of culture as well, including language” (Bryk). In other words, the very basis of public education in the United States was to promote one set of values over another.

Over time, public schools have almost been scrubbed of any hint of religiosity. As a result, today’s public schools are undoubtedly secular. This shift, however, from schools that were deeply rooted in religion to schools that bar religion at the schoolhouse door, has not changed the fact that schools promote values. A lack of religion is simply not the same as a lack of values. Schools impart values both explicitly and implicitly and today’s schools promote values just as much as the schools of the 1800s.

The ways in which teachers and school policies impact values are innumerable. For instance, nearly every public

* Author calculations based on data from: <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/48>

† [Old Deluder Satan Law of 1647](#).



This editorial cartoon was published in 1876 by Thomas Nast. The depiction of Catholic bishops attacking public schools while an individual resembling Common School reformer Horace Mann protects the children, is illustrative of the thoughts of the time.

school in America has some form of “Character Education” curriculum. And what is character but a relabeling of moral virtues that an individual demonstrates through his or her behavior? Moreover, schools have dress codes that impart social norms on students. At times, these values and norms can come into conflict with those of the students in a school. In Seminole, Texas, for example, a 5-year-old boy was prohibited from attending his first day of school because his hair was too long according to the school’s policies ([Millhisler](#)). The boy, a Native American, had long hair in accordance with his religious beliefs.

The push for value-free schools, while seemingly innocuous may have disastrous implications for liberty and the quality of public schools. In 1984, Stephen Arons warned, “Unless it is recognized that value-neutral education is a misleading, unattainable, and unworthy goal, we will increasingly see the forces of intolerance march under the banner of free-

dom and proclaim their program in the language of liberty” ([Arons](#)). He went on to write:

The myth of value-neutral schooling has had a devastating effect on politics as well as on the quality of schooling. Many families offended by blandness have sought to reassert values in the schools, and to impose them through majoritarian politics. The resistance they meet from professionals and from families with differing values has led to the ongoing struggles over curricula, textbook adoption, library content, and teacher attitudes that have been plaguing an increasing number of schools. In effect, the absence of school choice has created a repeating, polarizing cycle in which value conflict breeds blandness and blandness breeds a return to value conflict ([Arons](#)).

These statements ring true in light of recent efforts to force transgender bathroom policies on public schools. The

public schools of today promote a number of social issues ranging from white privilege to sexual orientation and identity. These schools are not value-neutral; they are simply promoting a new orthodoxy.

The Current Education System Invites Conflict

The nature of our public education system is that individuals must fight about the issues they believe in. Throughout the country, parents—liberals and conservatives alike—attempt to use this system to their end, to promote their values. When individuals wish a school would take a desired action, they have only one course of action—they must petition the school board for the change. If the school board does not make the change, these individuals may then seek to replace school board members with others more amenable to their cause. To do this, a parent must rally enough parents to get the new board members elected. In other words, the only way for individuals to get the policies they want from their local school is to foist those policies on everyone, even those who do not agree. The system itself invites conflict.

One need only look at the existing charter and private schools to see the variety of schools that can arise when parents have choices.

Of course, ardent supporters of the traditional system of public education will argue that this system of democratic control is the most virtuous because taxpayers have a voice in school operations at the ballot box (Shuls). In most places after all, the school board consists of elected members of the community. This arrangement, stemming from the historic system of local control, gives citizens some say in how their school system is run. While the idea of local control of public schools is engrained in the American psyche, this form of democratic control coupled with compulsory attendance does have its downside.

In many instances, parents have successfully petitioned their school boards to change course on specific policies. This process, however, can be quite difficult. Parents typically are not politically organized. In contrast, other education groups, such as teachers unions, administrator associations, and the like, are organized and have political expertise to push for their desired actions. Our current education system favors those in the majority and the politically organized at the expense of minority group members. This system closely resembles the tyranny of the majority system warned of by James Madison in Federalist No. 10:

Complaints are every where heard from our most considerate and virtuous citizens, equally the friends of public and private faith, and of public and personal liberty, that our governments are too unstable; that the public good is disregarded in the conflicts of rival parties; and that measures are too often decided, not according to the rules of justice, and the rights of the minor party, but by the superior force of an interested and overbearing majority.

This is the nature of our current education system and people of all walks of life should be wary about what this means for minority populations or views.

I must pause here for a moment to state clearly that this is not an indictment of our public school teachers and administrators. They are doing yeoman work in attempting to instruct children in an environment where they are handcuffed. They must attempt to meet the needs of every student, while being cautious of not offending any other student. They simply cannot be everything to everyone. This is not their fault; it is simply a fault of the system.

Empowerment through Choice

Education choice through ESAs changes the nature of public education. When parents have options, they are no longer forced to fight for the values they want their school to impart; they can simply choose the school or services that align with those values. This is the only arrangement that allows individuals to seek out the type of public education they want for their children without imposing their values on other families. This is the beauty of the market—it provides options.

One need only look at the existing charter and private schools to see the variety of schools that can arise when parents have choices. In these sectors, parents could choose language immersion schools. They could choose a Mon-

tessori or a classical education for their child. They could choose a school that focuses on the arts or one that focuses on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). These options, however, only describe the instructional practices and philosophies of the schools. Education choice through ESAs allows for even greater customization where parents can choose the educational options that align with their values.

Critics of ESAs, and choice in general, might suggest choice programs undermine “public education.” This could not be further from the truth. These critics conflate “public education” with “public schools.” Public education is the idea that all students should be able to receive an education at public expense. The public school system is the delivery method. While this system may meet the needs of many students, it is incapable of meeting the needs of all students.

If we recognize the obvious, schools cannot and will not be value free; we must concern ourselves with education policy. The question is, what type of system is best suited for a pluralistic society where people of good conscience cannot agree on what or how children should be taught? The obvious answer is a system of educational choice. It is only through choice that each parent can get the values they want and it is only through choice that we will get the educational services we need. ★

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