

[A vision of the liberal ideal in education](#) [1]

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To date, many of the arguments for increasing parental choice in education and allowing a diversity of provision have focused on a number of practical arguments such as the need to improve the performance of failing government schools, the need for additional school places and the general desire to ensure that all children can benefit from the best schools available, irrespective of income or location. These arguments originate from the 'what matters, is what works?' school of politics where ideological principles are no longer relevant.

However, while this evidence, results or outcomes-based approach can be very persuasive, it may not be sufficient if the proposed reforms are to win widespread support amongst both politicians and the general public. [According to Nobel Laureate James Buchanan](#) [3], evidence of 'what works?' must be supplemented with a vision of the liberal ideal that attempts to capture the minds of people.

Consider, for example, the suffragettes who were campaigning for the right to vote at the start of the twentieth century. Their case for reform was not based on any evidence which showed that extending the right to vote to women would guarantee a better election result than the existing voting system. In fact, many opponents of the reforms (mostly men, but not exclusively) warned of the perverse consequences and the chaos that would follow if women were allowed to vote on the important and complicated matters of national government. Instead the suffragette movement were campaigning for a fundamental freedom and a basic human right - the freedom and right of women to vote. A voting system based upon universal franchise was therefore deemed to be superior to one which was based upon a restricted franchise, irrespective of the results or outcomes of subsequent elections. In this example the evidence-based approach was clearly of limited use and, in fact, it could be argued that those who attempted to appeal to evidence had completely misunderstood the nature of the problem and the key issues at stake.

This same line of reasoning could also be applied to the current debate in education. An education system in which all parents have the freedom to choose would be deemed to be superior to the current system which continues to restrict these freedoms. Any appeal to evidence or what works would therefore be dismissed as irrelevant. Buchanan refers to the repeal of the corn laws in the 19th century as a successful example of when evidence was supplemented with a vision of the liberal ideal to help gain support for proposed reforms. If we were to heed his advice then a national campaign for the repeal of the school laws, which restrict freedom in education is now required.

A campaign for freedom in education would be based on the principle that it is parents and not politicians who are ultimately responsible for their children's education - a responsibility which can only be carried out if parents are free to choose the nature, form and content of education which their children receive. Parental choice or freedom in education therefore is not desirable simply because it may help to improve

the efficiency of failing government schools. Nor is parental choice in education simply the latest policy reform that will go out of fashion in a few years' time. Instead, it is important for the same reasons that religious freedom or freedom of the press are important - because they are both recognised as basic human rights or fundamental freedoms, which deserve to be respected and protected at all costs.

A vision of the liberal ideal in education would therefore recognise that the responsibility for educating children cannot be transferred to others; nor can it be side-lined or placed behind other considerations. Instead, it is the key principle upon which the whole education system is based. This means that governments must not in any way restrict, undermine or distort this important relationship between parent and child and the natural growth and development of education. As a result, it will not be the role of politicians to dictate which schools children should or should not attend or how much parents should invest in their children's education. This will, once again, be the responsibility of parents. Nor will it be the role of politicians to dictate who can and cannot set up and manage a school.

The liberty to teach and the freedom to educate must be respected and it will ultimately be parents who decide if a new school will flourish or not.

While politicians have previously argued that education was far too important to be left to ignorant parents and the chaos of the market, they must now be prepared to admit that education is far too important to be left to politicians. Politicians must have the humility to recognise that their own personal views on what works on education are completely irrelevant. After all, what does any politician know about the detailed and very specific circumstances of each and every pupil and parent across the UK?

Therefore, a future education sector where the rights and responsibilities of parents are both respected and protected will not be planned or directed by central government, nor will it be used to achieve any 'national' objectives. Instead, it will consist of a variety of different national and international private, independent, autonomous, for-profit and not-for-profit institutions, each with their own specific missions. The needs and desires of parents (and not politicians or governments) will be supreme and the government will be restricted to establishing a regulatory framework that will encourage a variety of different institutions to compete and flourish on a level playing field.

According to Buchanan a vision of the liberal ideal would also be based upon our desire to be free from the coercive power of others, combined with the absence of a desire to exert power over others. Another Nobel Laureate, Milton Friedman, helps to explain:

Willingness to permit free speech to people with whom one agrees is hardly evidence of devotion to the principle of free speech; the relevant test is willingness to permit free speech to people with whom one thoroughly disagrees. Similarly, the relevant test of the belief in individual freedom is the willingness to oppose state intervention even when it is designed to prevent individual activity of a kind one thoroughly dislikes.

Therefore, this provides a useful test to all those who continue to view parental choice or increasing diversity in the provision of education as an unnecessary evil. Do they have the discipline to place their personal views to one side and recognise that the rights and responsibilities of individual parents must always come first? If they do, then they should be willing to oppose the existing government restrictions which prevent profit-making companies from managing state-funded schools, despite the fact that they may not want their children to attend such a school. From this perspective, a vision of the liberal ideal should be seen as much less self-obsessed and instead much more compassionate towards the private beliefs and the opinions of those who are directly responsible for children's education - their parents.

For those politicians concerned with the 'vote motive', the fact that most parents are also voters might imply that reforms that increase parents' freedom to choose in education have a good chance of gaining electoral support if the case for reform is communicated and presented in the correct way. The time may also be right to launch a campaign for freedom in education because a vision which is based upon liberty and democracy is currently a common denominator of both the Conservative and Liberal Democratic Party. There can be nothing more liberal and democratic than extending the right to choose to all parents, irrespective of their income or location. The following advice from Bastiat should therefore appeal to both parties:

Away, then, with quacks and organizers! Away with their rings, chains, hooks, and pincers! Away with their artificial systems! Away with the whims of governmental administrators, their socialized projects, their centralization, their tariffs, their government schools, their state religions, their free credit, their bank monopolies, their regulations, their restrictions, their equalization by taxation, and their pious moralizations!

And now that the legislators and do-gooders have so futilely inflicted so many systems upon society, may they finally end where they should have begun: May they reject all systems, and try liberty.

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