

Separating School and State
Guest: Sheldon Richman
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Sheldon Richman is vice president of the Future of Freedom Foundation and author of numerous books, including Separating School and State: How to Liberate America's Families.

WOODS: This is a tricky issue for libertarians. Everybody's against NSA spying. That's a sexy issue that everybody loves to talk about, because we're all against it. But when it comes down to something like this, I think a lot of libertarians want to turn and run. They don't want to tell their friends they're against all tax-funded education.

So I wanted to bring you on, and, as devil's advocate, I'll throw some common arguments at you and see how you, somebody who's written a book on this, would parry them. Ready?

RICHMAN: Sure.

WOODS: I think the most obvious one would be that the poor won't get educated. So let's save that for a little bit later. Just about everyone agrees that there are problems with the government-run schools, and the kids aren't learning what they should be learning, but then come the excuses: this is because the schools have been deprived of funds, and we don't have the right priorities, and we favor basketball players over scholars. If only we could change this, then we could get our act together. Why would you think the solution would be getting rid of the whole system, root and branch?

RICHMAN: Well, the idea that they haven't spent enough money is laughable. They've been spending amazing amounts of money year after year for twenty or so years, in increasing amounts. I don't have those numbers right at hand. But they haven't shown any results. There's no improvement. We just had results released from an international test in math just last week of fifth graders, or fifteen-year-olds, I forget exactly which one. And it shows that once again the U.S. has fallen behind. It doesn't compute very well. Money doesn't seem to be making any change.

The other thing is that the worst districts in the country have the highest per-capita spending. In Detroit, or Chicago, inner-city schools, Washington, D.C., they are spending \$10,000 or more per student, and they have worse results even than other public school districts, government school districts, that spend less per capita. There is no correlation between the amount of money spent and the performance of the children. So that is not the problem.

WOODS: Well, what would, in your libertarian paradise—I'm trying to be like the average guy who's objecting here.

RICHMAN: Sure.

WOODS: In your Utopia, where there wouldn't be any taxes collected, public services would be suffering everywhere. The worst suffering would be in the educational sector, because how can you expect some working mom to be able to afford school tuition? Say what you will about government and its inefficiencies, but it gets those kids in the classroom, and it gets them learning how to read and how to get out there in the economy and prosper. And you want to take that away.

RICHMAN: Well, a couple of things about that. A lot of those poor parents are themselves products of government schools, and I think that's one reason why they're poor.

Government produces many obstacles to individual self-advancement economically. And one of the biggest obstacles is its schools. If you look at the inner-city schools, they are just sabotaging generation after generation. You set out to ruin generations of kids, you could not design a better system than the one we have. So that's one reason alone that parents don't seem to have enough money to educate their kids.

But there are lots of other ways to look at this. In fact, in the '80s, Marva Collins was a former public school teacher in Chicago who got sick of the schools and set up her own school using a spare room in a church, and she had some kids from some of the worst schools who could hardly read. She had them reading Shakespeare within a very short time. This was publicized on *60 Minutes*, and she wrote a book, which was quite celebrated for a while. She was not spending very much per capita, so, therefore, I'm sure the parents weren't.

Then we have the work of James Tooley to draw on, which is very, very important. James Tooley has spent, oh, I don't know how many years—the last ten years or more—traveling the world, going to some of the poorest places, like in Asia and Africa, and he finds in the cities of these countries for-profit private schools for poor people. You normally don't go into one of these towns and say, "Does anybody know of a private school for poor people?" And they laugh at them, and they say, "There are not going to be any private schools for poor people. They wouldn't be able to afford it."

In every case, he finds at least one school, usually more than one, where the teacher is usually from that community, who cares very much about the kids, who works very closely with the parents, and they have sliding-scale tuition, and sometimes are even just trading produce, stuff that they're growing. And these kids are getting a decent education. They outperform the kids in the public schools.

So, this is a bogus problem that people are somehow not going to be able to afford education. They are only judging that by the inflated prices, the inflated costs, that the government school system has. But we shouldn't be surprised that the government system has inflated costs.

WOODS: Well, I guess I would also say to the person who makes this complaint, try to imagine yourself in a situation in which there is no government funding of elementary and secondary-level education. Don't you think you personally would be more likely to make a donation or

contribute to the endowment of your own elementary school, your own junior high, your own high school, where you feel like you have a special connection from your own experience? Wouldn't you kick in?

The reason you don't kick in now is because you don't have to. But, don't you feel like there are enough nice people in the country, given that there are enough of you who are complaining about what life would be like under libertarianism? Don't you think you guys together could probably make a difference in people's lives?

I mean, they don't ever stop and think, "Maybe I could be part of the solution, instead of sitting around trying to figure out who else could do it."

RICHMAN: Tom, that's a really good point. A bigger way to look at that is the fact that, going all the way back well into the nineteenth century, there have been private foundations that gave money to help kids get an education. People care about education, and lots of people, when they amass a fortune, like to endow schools or endow foundations and give scholarships. It's happening today, as well.

But you're right, it would be much more widespread if people had more of their own money, if they were able to keep their money, and if they couldn't fall back on the old excuse that, "well, the government is taking care of this, so there's nothing for me to do."

WOODS: Now another side of this coin, though, might be—maybe someone says, "What if I concede to you that, yes, the market may well be able to provide education, even for people who aren't that well-off financially. But you libertarians are also against compulsory attendance laws. So even if we establish schools that these kids' parents could afford, you won't force the parents to send the kids to these schools. Once again, it shows how anti-social and head-in-the-clouds you libertarians are."

RICHMAN: Well, I don't know what to say about someone who thinks it takes force to get parents to send their kids to school. Parents love their kids, for the most part. Poor parents are no different from other parents. One proof of that is when a government sets up a voucher program, often like a pilot program.

This is not meant to be an endorsement of vouchers; I oppose vouchers for reasons you might want to get into. But just to take it as a case, in a pilot program the government authority may say, "We have 300 slots, we have 300 vouchers to offer to parents." And 3000 people line up to get them.

So what does that tell you? It tells you that parents care about their kids. Parents know that their kids are getting a rotten education in government schools, particularly in the inner cities. And when they get a chance to do something about it, they grab it in great, great numbers.

So this idea that we need compulsory attendance, I think it betrays a lack of confidence in people. The other problem with compulsory attendance on the part of the government is the government is going to have to define the terms. In other words, if you have to send your kid to school, it gets to define what a school is. That way, they can crush private initiative by defining something as not being a school.

What's missing from the government system, and there's no way a government bureaucracy could ever put it into the system, is entrepreneurship, something I know you know a great deal about. We need entrepreneurship in education, and in order to have that, we need to have complete freedom on both the demand side and the supply side so that people can offer new ideas, and they can try things, and they can engage in trial and error, which is always a path to success, without a bureaucracy having the right to say yes or no, or the power to say yes or no, to any idea. That's what we are lacking, and government will never be held to bring that to its system.

WOODS: Let's go back to the subject of vouchers that you mentioned. I guess we should address this, because you often hear in policy-wonk circles that the correct approach is so-called school choice. We'll make sure that everybody gets some amount that may be somewhere in the ballpark of per-capita government spending on education, and just hand it to the parent, and they get to spend it at government-designated schools, and then this elicits the best from these schools, because now they have to compete with each other.

What's wrong with that model? Sounds like a free market in education. What's wrong with it?

RICHMAN: I think that most of the people that push it and the people that helped devise it—Milton Friedman may be the major person—I believe they had the best of motives, and I think they meant extremely well by that. But I think they simply underrated how much power that still gives the government.

If the government is going to be directing the money, via the parents' wishes, to a particular school, it's inevitably going to want to attach strings to that because the money, first of all, will always be perceived as taxpayer money. Even though you could say, "No, it's actually the parents' money, because the parent is going to get taxed," that's not how it's going to appear to the general public. It's certainly not going to appear that way to the special interests like the teachers, for example, the administrators.

So they are going to demand—and you hear this every time—"We can't have tax money, public money, going to unaccountable institutions." Well, the moment that prevails, and it always does prevail, that means then the government authority gets to set rules for so-called private schools. Even today private schools are under regulation. They have the power to regulate. The Supreme Court says they can do that.

The voucher would present even more regulation. For example, in Wisconsin, when they started to let money go to religious schools, they said—the Supreme Court said—"Well, you can

go to a religious school, as long as the religion is not integral to the curriculum, and the parents can opt their kids out of the religion classes." But there were some religious schools where religion is integrated through the whole curriculum. It's not a discrete class you can just opt out of.

In a voucher system, that school would not be permitted to accept vouchers, which puts them at a competitive disadvantage. Some parents will say, "Well, I won't go to that school, because they can't take the voucher." So there are going to be rules that will stifle educational innovation under a voucher system. While I would say, "Nice try," I would often follow it up by saying, "No cigar." It doesn't really create a competitive market. It creates sort of an artificial market.

WOODS: I can understand, though, even though I might not agree with them, why somebody might nevertheless say, "Since the Sheldon Richman solution is unlikely to occur, this is a second-best option."

Would you be willing to accept vouchers as a second-best option, or would you say, "It's just going so far in the wrong direction that I just want to think about the problem differently?"

RICHMAN: I don't agree that it's a step in the right direction. I mean, someone will say to me, "Well, don't you approve of transition steps in the right direction?" And, if I thought it was in the right direction, I might say, "Yes." The fact is, I don't think it's in the right direction.

My old friend, the late Marshall Fritz, was a great champion of separating school and state. He liked to put it this way: "The voucher is like attempting to bridge a ten-foot chasm with two five-foot planks. It just won't work." Right now we have 88 or 90 percent of students on the government dole. They are in public schools, with about 10 percent not on the government dole. What the voucher plan presumes to do is put 100 percent on the government dole as a way of getting to zero, and he wondered how the heck does that work.

The other problem is the voucher movement is a rather disparate group of people, that half of them think the voucher will strengthen the public schools, and even Friedman argued this because of the competition. They don't want to lose children to private schools, so they'll get better. And the other half of the movement think it will end up destroying the public schools and actually think that's a good thing. In other words, the competition will be so great that nobody will be interested in the public schools. Well both can't be true. You can't both strengthen and destroy the public schools. There's something wrong.

WOODS: It's funny. It kind of reminds me of the protectionist thing about international trade. International trade is terrible for the rich countries. But then they turn around and say international trade exploits the poor countries. Well, somebody's got to be benefiting from international trade somewhere!

I find it interesting that, in addition to raising the kinds of issues we would expect you to raise in your book, like what would happen without these sorts of schools, what are the origins of these schools, you also attack the kind of schooling that traditionally goes on in a K-12 environment. Can you elaborate on that? What's wrong with the actual approach that's being taken in the classroom, from your point of view?

RICHMAN: Well, it was an approach that was devised initially in Germany in the nineteenth century. American social scientists and educators spent time in Germany—Bismarck's Germany—in the later nineteenth century, and decided to bring that model here, although to some extent the model was already being pursued in the earliest days of public schools, which begins roughly around 1840 and spreads through the states.

It was a very regimented, authoritarian environment, if you think about it for a second. Kids, who are full of energy and want to move around, want to talk, they're ordered to sit still and be quiet for some period of time, and then when the bell rings, they're supposed to stop thinking about what they were thinking—math, let's say—and immediately turn to something else—geography—even though they might still be full of enthusiasm for math and want to keep talking about it, keep studying it, keep doing problems, but, no, that's not the way it goes. The bell rings, and it's almost Pavlovian. The bell rings, and then you switch. You turn your mind off one subject and turn it onto another.

It's a highly authoritarian system. Schools look like prisons. It's amazing when I drive around and see schools. They look like prisons to me. And it's an old-fashioned model that was mainly based on the idea that schools were needed to train factory workers, civil servants, and soldiers. In other words, they were serving the state, and also the state's allies in the world of big business. They wanted to make sure there was a nice flow of quiet workers and civil servants to work in the bureaucracies, and soldiers.

That's not what we need. Education should be about producing independent, thoughtful, innovating self-starters. And that's not what the schools are aimed at doing. People have recognized this for a long, long time. John Stuart Mill understood it. H. L. Mencken understood it. If you go through the world of liberalism—I mean that in the sense of libertarianism—you see this constant criticism of the government system that it's designed to produce conformity and things that we shouldn't be admiring.

WOODS: You have a chapter here called, "Why There Are Public Schools," and I just want to read this brief passage: "Despite their differences, the thinkers discussed in this chapter shared at least one principle: They believed that the school should be the mechanism through which the state, run by the intellectual elite, would shape the youth of the nation. In a word, the schools' business would be indoctrination."

This is not the usual version of things. The usual version is, "Education is a public good, and what's government for if not to provide public goods?" But you and I and others take a more

cynical view of what the state is up to here. When the state is giving us something for free, we want to look that gift horse in the mouth and say, "What exactly is going on?"

I'm going to ask you to put your prognosticator hat on. We can't anticipate what some entrepreneur is going to come up with, but obviously we are living at a time when tremendous change is possible in education because of the technology that's available. It could be possible now for more and more kids not to have to quit doing math because the bell rang and go on to the next regimented part of their day—and by the way, it would warm my heart if there were a lot of kids who felt so strongly about math that they wanted to keep doing problems. I almost was a math major, and that's really great even to think about that. But, it seems to me that both the technology and the falling prices, I mean you can very cheaply educate somebody now with Internet-based courses and stuff. Where do you think we're headed?

RICHMAN: Well, I hope it's going in that direction. There has been some slow and steady increase in home schooling, and a lot of that, I believe, is in discovering the World Wide Web, because there are curricula and different approaches that you can now follow through the Internet. So, I hope it's going that way.

All I can say is we need to spread the word, and talk about it, and let people know, because most people don't spend time thinking philosophically about these things, and they kind of do things the way they learned it. I mean, most people went to public schools, and they think, "Hey, I turned out okay, so it's okay for my kids."

The inner-city parents are wiser than other parents, I think, because they see it, and they are fully aware of the lousy situation their children are in. It's not only teachers who may not care very much—which is not to say there are no teachers that care. There are many. But, for the most part, there are some who leave something to be desired. Plus these schools are dangerous, and there are cops everywhere. It's just a stifling atmosphere, and I think people are looking for a better way, and they just seem to see that it can be done outside of the traditional framework.

We need to promote people like John Holt, who was a great philosopher of education. John Taylor Gatto. You can find his videos on YouTube talking about this. When Gatto and people like that talk, I mean, it's just so exciting what the possibilities are. And we don't need to put up with these dinosaur institutions any longer.

WOODS: Now, Sheldon, of course you write about many different topics. If people wanted to follow your writing online, where would they find it?

RICHMAN: Well, my primary writing is now occurring at The Future of Freedom Foundation, which is fff.org. And I also have a blog called Free Association, which you can reach at SheldonRichman.com.