



DISTRIBUTIVIST EDUCATION

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for education than for religion, they
begin to care more for ambition than
for education.” —G.K.CHESTERTON*

BY RYAN GRANT



WE ARE OFTEN TOLD MORE FUNDING IS NEEDED FOR EDUCATION and that we are not investing enough in our schools. The United States, however, spends more money per child than any other country in the world and performs poorly in overall performance.

The solution is the perpetual growth of regulation of schools and federal money per student. When the results fail to impress, more money is spent, and rather than support education in a proper sense, the consequence for the student not meeting the government’s set target knowledge levels is to be “left behind”—of course, we cannot have anyone neglected on the road to educational utopia. Further laws requiring more standardization and stricter oversight are put in place in order to make certain everyone is going in the same direction, despite all the talk of diversity and free thought the educational establishment prides itself on. Although a certain degree of standardization is necessary, this ought to vary according to the real needs of the individual, the family, and local society, not according to the arbitrary determinations of the state.

There is an emphasis on math and science now paramount in all discussion of education. The arts, literature, Latin, logic, and philosophy



belong to the patrimony of the culture from which we inherited our civilization; they are the handmaiden to math and science that help to form the whole individual toward his final end. We have made the gross mistake instead of minimizing the arts for the sake of math and sciences. Everything is reduced to practicality, love of learning has evaporated, and increasingly, what is produced, is a technocratic group of people who consider themselves superior to the previous generation because they have the Internet and an iPod. Unfortunately, the same teachers and students who enjoy the material superiority of modern man probably could not work out the propositions of Euclid, who lived 2,300 years ago.

In this we see the divorce of education from tradition as something handed down, without which there is no science, there is no math, literature, or any other subject. Throughout his ministry St. Paul declared, *Tradidi quod accepi*: “I handed down what I received.” The divorce of tradition from education also brings the divorce of a coherent philosophy concerning the purpose of education. We see this in the dogmatic assertion that the Church must be so separate She cannot be mentioned in a state school. As Chesterton put it:

“Given the modern philosophy or absence of philosophy, education is turned against itself destroying that very sense of variety and proportion which is the object of education to give... the moment men begin to care for education than for religion, they begin to care more for ambition than for education. It is no longer a world in which the souls of all are equal before heaven, but a world in which the mind of each is bent on achieving unequal advantage over the other.”¹

The concept of society has fallen out completely from the school environment, and now it is focused on the needs of the individual only in the sense of what kind of comfortable white collar job he might be able to attain. “What college are you going to?” or “Well, if you want to go to college you need to take these classes.” “You could do that

¹ *The Collected Works of G.K.Chesterton: Illustrated London News, 1929-1931.*

but you won't get into a good college." A certain level of excellence and achievement in basic things is necessary for a functioning educational system, but after a certain level of knowledge, which ought to be common to the majority of men in society, the traditional focus of education shifted to what the individual could *do* and educating him in like fashion. He might be apprenticed to a trade and put in a position at a young age to provide for himself when he is older by owning his own labor. Students who did not fall into this category still received a good education in many of the basic arts and sciences so that when he went to university he could enter any of those fields. Our educational system at present, however, is worn out, overtaxed, and underperforming. It is focused on material ends for the purposes of tax contribution and not the eternal end for which the individual himself is journeying. As Pius xi noted in *Divini illius magistri*, education neglecting man's final end is no education at all. The state's educational system has fallen into what Chesterton once called "the madness of bigness." In an attempt to be large enough to meet all needs, it has become mean and narrow; the real needs and the future of the individual student are left out of the equation.

In their educational systems, ancients and medievals concentrated on studies of grammar, rhetoric, and logic so they could explore the world around them. Arithmetic and geometry followed because they taught delightful truths and were useful for everyday life. Algebra was unknown to them, yet today's student with years of algebra under his belt is the same grocery clerk unable to figure out the change without the use of a register. Do algebra and calculus reveal truth and arouse wonder, or are they merely problem-solving techniques that train students to think and respond like computers? In general it seems as though it is the latter, which should not surprise us because that is the overall attitude of society and the increasingly common function of the worker within the framework of big business.

The numerous teaching orders such as the Christian Brothers, the Jesuits, and armies of Immaculate Hearts or Sisters of Mercy filled thousands of positions in private education helping to keep costs manageable for the average family. By replacing these orders with lay faithful, the



increasing cost of salaries, health care, legal fees and other expenditures, have made running parochial schools expensive, if not cost prohibitive. Furthermore, parochial schools have often followed the demise of the state school by adopting the same curriculum and the same textbooks “dumbing down” education for the sake of nurturing student self-esteem.

Another possibility is for parents to run their own curriculum. What happens when they do? Scorn generally follows, with visits from social services, criticism from friends and neighbors, and there is, of course, media reaction. Homeschooled students tend to perform better on standardized testing and score very well. But even homeschooling has its pitfalls. Not every parent is competent to school well and in a world of two-income families, finding the time to homeschool can be difficult.

A homeschooling cooperative alleviates these time-constraints and also cuts the expenses of boarding or private school. Homeschooling cooperatives can function in this way, with a handful of teachers versed in subjects that provide elementary education while tailoring their services to the needs of growing children. In fact, homeschooling cooperatives are capable of serving as outsource to public or private schools without recourse to vocational education.

This practice harkens back to classical and medieval civilization, and provides opportunities for students at the discretion of their parents. In both cases, education was something handed down like an apprenticeship. Charlemagne’s ideal was to establish common education through the monasteries, which became the bedrock of medieval society and local medieval economies. Lacking Greek slaves (happily) in the case of the Romans, or monasteries in the case of the medievals, associations of accredited teachers could cut right through the “system” to pass on the educational patrimony of western civilization to the next generation.

This Distributist approach to education has additional advantages. Students in an educational cooperative offering the training and/or apprenticeship in mechanics, utilities, construction, or computer science, are attractive to many existing businesses seeking apprentices. These men and women can be trained, while in school, in exchange for free labor and the prospect of a job following graduation. Within the wider social outlook of Distributism, for the rebuilding of local communities

and government, these opportunities would both buttress and improve the mission of small, local and sustainable business models.

Any solution, however, hinges upon the recovery of direction and common sense in society, and that depends almost entirely on the restoration and preservation of the family, and the recovery of religion in the state. *Religio* in Latin, shares the same root with the word *legio*. Referring to the Roman legions, it means to bind together, or yoke together. Religion, as classically understood, is the whole basis for constituting society. Pope Leo XIII emphasized this point when he taught in *Sapientiae Christianae*:

“By nature parents have a right to the training of their children, but with this added duty that the education and instruction of the child be in accord with the end for which by God’s blessing it was begotten. Therefore, it is the duty of parents to make every effort to prevent any invasion of their rights in this matter, and to make absolutely sure that the education of their children remain under their own control in keeping with their Christian duty, and above all to refuse to send them to those schools in which there is danger of imbibing the deadly poison of impiety.”

Pius XI continues this point when he taught in *Divini illius magistri*:

“It is paternal instinct, given by God, that thus turns with confidence to the Church, certain of finding in her the protection of family rights, thereby illustrating that harmony with which God has ordered all things. The Church is indeed conscious of her divine mission to all mankind, and of the obligation which all men have to practice the one true religion; and therefore she never tires of defending her right, and of reminding parents of their duty, to have all Catholic-born children baptized and brought up as Christians. On the other hand so jealous is she of the family’s inviolable natural right to educate the children, that she never consents, save under peculiar circumstances and with special cautions, to baptize the children of infidels, or provide for their education against the will of the parents, till such time as the children can choose for themselves and freely embrace the Faith.”



Politically, some may argue that Distributist educational reform would never work and cannot be done, but naysayers also told Bishop John Hughes in the nineteenth century that he could not enact Catholic school reforms in New York. Yet, Hughes advocated for Catholics to vote for candidates that would support public school reform and allow the establishment of parochial schools, which Catholics did. The third party candidate lost that year, but because Catholics had supported him, the Democratic candidate also lost. Small communities do have the ability to influence large outcomes and it starts at the basic level: the family and the education of children.

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