



Santorum's Stated Opposition to Public Schooling Doesn't Match His Record

Santorum is, of course, correct. “The American colonies had total educational freedom,” explained *The New American's* [Sam Blumenfeld](#). Even the local tax-supported common schools, he said, eventually began to give way to more efficient private schools.

“Government ownership of schools,” Blumenfeld wrote in another [article](#), “is a concept that was promoted by early socialists in America, namely by Robert Owen and his followers who created the world’s first secular communist community at New Harmony, Indiana, in 1828.” In the 1840s teachers and administrators, seeking guaranteed employment, began agitating for tax-supported schools. Around the same time Horace Mann, having observed the Prussian system of compulsory, state-run education firsthand, threw his support behind the movement. Thus, despite a lack of popular demand for government schooling — “education was already virtually universal in America before it became compulsory,” Blumenfeld noted — American education slowly but surely was taken over by the state. By the turn of the 20th century most American children were attending public schools.



Santorum is no newcomer to the notion that public schooling is a bad idea. Last March he advocated straight talk about education. “Just call them what they are,” he [said](#). “Public schools? That’s a nice way of putting it. These are government-run schools.”

He has also been an outspoken advocate of homeschooling for years, having homeschooled his own children. In his 2005 book *It Takes a Family* he [argued](#) that “mass education” is an “aberration” because it is “a radically narrow, age-segregated environment” completely different from life outside of school, where individuals interact with people of all ages on a daily basis. He added:

In a home school, by contrast, children interact in a rich and complex way with adults and children of other ages all the time. In general, they are better-adjusted, more at ease with adults, more capable of conversation, more able to notice when a younger child needs help or



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on February 19, 2012

comfort, and in general a lot better socialized than their mass-schooled peers.

Santorum even [suggested](#) last month that he would continue to homeschool his children in the White House, which, he said, “would certainly be a shock to the establishment.”

The former Pennsylvania Senator has also said he favors a smaller federal role in education and would reduce the size of — but not eliminate — the U.S. Department of Education if he is elected President.

Unfortunately, Santorum’s excellent rhetoric does not comport with his record. While serving in the Senate, Santorum voted to [increase federal funding for teacher testing](#) in 2001 and to [give the Education Department a \\$3.1 billion raise](#) in 1996. Perhaps most egregiously, he voted for the 2001 [No Child Left Behind Act](#) (NCLB), which vastly extended federal control over the education system and now has grown so onerous that the Obama administration is [handing out waivers](#) to states that cannot meet its requirements.

In a late-2011 campaign appearance in Iowa Santorum admitted that his vote for NCLB had been a mistake. “I know there was very good intention there,” he added, “but it has exploded the federal role in education.” But if Santorum were really the opponent of centralized government schooling and the friend of the Constitution that he claims to be, he would have refused to support that bill no matter how good its intentions. Passing NCLB guaranteed that education would become more controlled by Washington than local school districts, and it was patently unconstitutional since the federal government is not authorized to be involved in education. One can easily imagine a President Santorum signing similarly “well-intentioned” but unconstitutional legislation into law.

Even Santorum’s much-trumpeted homeschooling is not quite what it seems. For several years, beginning in 2001, the Santorum children were enrolled in the [Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School](#), a homeschooling program that is considered a public school and requires students to meet state requirements. Participating families get free computers and Internet connections, among other perks. The local school district in Penn Hills — which, of course, gets its money from taxpayers — was forced to cough up \$38,000 a year for the Santorum kids’ cyber education. (Parents educating their children outside the cyber school or other government schools, by contrast, have to bear the cost of both private and public education.)

The only problem was that the Santorum family no longer lived in Penn Hills, or even in Pennsylvania. While continuing to serve as Senator for the Keystone State, Santorum had moved his family to Virginia but retained ownership of a house in Penn Hills that he did not use so that he could continue to claim residency. When the situation came to light, the school district tried to force Santorum to repay the tuition money. Instead, he withdrew his kids from the cyber school, and the state — taxpayers again — reimbursed the district for just over half the tuition.

It would be nice to believe that a President Santorum would strive to end federal control of education and serve as an effective advocate of separating school and state. The reality, however, is that his record, combined with his unwillingness to call for an end to the Department of Education and of public schooling in general (his “campaign did not respond to multiple requests for an explanation of whether he was calling for an end to public schooling as it now exists,” according to CBS News), suggests that he might be just as likely to tighten Washington’s grip on the school system, thus making abolition of government schooling that much more difficult.

Photo of Rick Santorum: AP Images

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