



Separation of School and State

The common [public] school is the institution which can receive and train up children in the elements of all good knowledge and of virtue before they are subjected to the alienating competitions of life. This institution is the greatest discovery ever made by man: we repeat it, the common school is the greatest discovery ever made by man....

Let the common school be expanded to its capabilities, let it be worked with the efficiency of which it is susceptible, and nine-tenths of the crimes in the penal code would be obsolete: the long catalogue of human ills would be abridged: men would walk more safely by day: every pillow would be more inviolable by night: property, life and character held by a stronger tenure: all rational hopes respecting the future brightened.

— Horace Mann, “Father of Public Education” (1841)

Our Nation is at risk.... The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.

— U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983)

Between the messianic promises held out by the early advocates of universal public education and the realities of our schools today, there is an enormous disparity. Even the most fervent supporters of tax-funded, government-sponsored education admit that the present system is failing fast. Dr. John I. Goodlad, former dean of the UCLA Graduate School of Education and one of the education establishment’s leading oracles, has stated:

American schools are in trouble. In fact, the problems of schooling are of such crippling proportions that many schools may not survive. It is possible that our entire public education system is nearing collapse.

The crime and disorder rampant in so many of our schools and the disastrous decline in academic achievement indicate that Dr. Goodlad’s assessment is not an exaggeration. When the National Commission on Excellence in Education published its much-heralded 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, it did not have much “excellence” to report; instead, it offered a litany of failures. These are but a few of its findings:

- International comparisons of student achievement, completed a decade ago, reveal that on 19 academic tests American students were never first or second and, in comparison with other industrialized nations, were last seven times.
- Some 23 million American adults are functionally illiterate by the simplest tests of everyday reading, writing, and comprehension.
- About 13 percent of all 17-year-olds in the United States can be considered functionally illiterate. Functional illiteracy among minority youth may run as high as 40 percent....
- The College Board’s Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT) demonstrate a virtually unbroken decline from 1963 to 1980. Average verbal scores fell over 50 points, and average mathematics scores fell almost 40 points. [Discouraging as these statistics are, the actual decline is probably much worse. In 1963, the math and verbal SATs represented the average scores of all students tested. Since 1967, the College Board has reported only the scores of college-bound seniors — the individuals



Written by [William F. Jasper](#) on September 29, 1986

presumably more academically inclined. Additionally, as reported by the educational testing service that administers the SATs, the tests have been made easier over the years. Thus, because the standards of measurement have been changed, the actual academic decline has been understated.]

The response from the public school establishment to these failures was predictable. A new reform movement was launched, complete with new commissions and new task forces. To placate angry parents and taxpayers, some states and school districts have enacted tougher academic standards for both students and teachers and inaugurated stricter disciplinary codes on campus.

But these “reforms” are not sufficient to remedy the defects in the government school system. “The underlying problem with public education,” says Dr. Dwight R. Lee, professor of economics at the University of Georgia, “is that it is public.” As long as education remains a service provided and controlled by government, all reform efforts are doomed to fail.

However poor its performance in academic matters, “free, universal, compulsory” schooling has, in two areas at least, been an outstanding success: in enormously expanding its own size and power, and in inculcating a popular belief in its own indispensability. The rise of the state school as a dominant institution in all industrialized countries has been one of the most significant phenomena of the 20th Century, fulfilling if not surpassing Horace Mann’s grandiose vision of universality.

Undergirding the foundations of public education are a number of widely-held false assumptions and corollaries:

- For civilization to survive, people must be educated, and without government providing this service, too many citizens would remain ignorant.
- Private education is elitist and divisive along economic, social, religious, and racial lines, while public education engenders unity.
- Government supervision is essential to guarantee that “proper” education takes place.
- Private schools are unhealthily competitive, while government schools promote cooperation.

To examine these assumptions properly, we must undertake a brief review of the historical development of our present government school system.

America’s Literate Beginnings

“The American faith in education,” write professors David Tyack and Elizabeth Hansot, “did not originate with the common-school movement of the mid-nineteenth century, nor did widespread popular schooling begin with what we would now recognize as public education.”

In [*Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820-1980*](#) (New York, Basic Books, 1982), Tyack and Hansot describe education in our young Republic quite favorably:

One sign of the effectiveness of the many forms of education in the United States was that Americans were among the most literate people in the world. In the 1840 census, about 90 percent of white adults were listed as literate. A recent study of a sample of the 1860 census shows that 94 percent of free males were literate, and among these the older men were only slightly less literate than the younger ones, indicating that instruction had been widespread even early in the nineteenth century.

What was the pattern of education that produced such results? It was highly diverse. In the early nineteenth century citizens tended to have an attitude toward education that Americans today have



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toward religion: attend the school of your choice. The choices largely reflected differences of class, religion, ethnicity, race, sex, and regional tastes and needs.... Benevolent societies and churches, sometimes aided by governments, established charity schools for children whose families were too poor to afford schooling.

Earlier still, John Adams remarked in 1765, regarding our educational attainment: [A] native of America who cannot read or write is as rare an appearance ... as a comet or an earthquake."

By all the available evidence, early Americans did quite well without government schools. In Massachusetts, government-sponsored "common schools" existed primarily as a legacy of the Puritan colonists' concern for promoting Bible study, but they bore little resemblance to our current expansive system. At any rate, by the early 1800s most parents had abandoned them for the diverse, flourishing private schools.

When a small group of "reformers" in 1817 petitioned the Boston town meeting to extend the common schools to the primary level, a subcommittee was appointed, chaired by distinguished architect Charles Bulfinch, to survey the city's educational needs. The Bulfinch report, says education historian Samuel Blumenfeld, revealed that "an astonishing 96 percent of the town's children were attending school, and the 4 percent who did not, had charity schools to attend if their parents wanted them to. Thus there was no justification at all for the creation of a system of public primary schools, and Bulfinch reported as much to the School Committee, which accepted the sub-committee's recommendation" ([Is Public Education Necessary?](#) The Paradigm Company, 1981).

Since "public education" was obviously not necessary, it is logical to ask how and why it came about. The answer to that has more to do with politics than education. By and large, the individuals most instrumental in establishing government control over schooling were socialists and secular humanists who were more imbued with the ideas of Robert Owen (the "Father of Socialism") and German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Hegel (Karl Marx's major mentor) than with the constitutional principles and Biblical morality that held sway during our founding period.

Origins of Public Education

When Robert Owen came to the United States in 1825 to set up his utopian commune at New Harmony, he found a significant following among the American intelligentsia. One of those was the influential writer and editor Orestes Brownson, who later converted to Christianity and exposed the devious and conspiratorial methods by which the Owenites had fastened statist schooling upon America.

For the Owenites, wrote Brownson,

The great object was to get rid of Christianity, and to convert our churches into halls of science. The plan was not to make open attacks on religion although we might belabor the clergy and bring them into contempt where we could; but to establish a system of state, — we said national — schools, from which all religion was to be excluded, in which nothing was to be taught but such knowledge as is verifiable by the senses and to which all parents were to be compelled by law to send their children.... The first thing to be done was to get this system of schools established. For this purpose a secret society was formed....

Brownson elaborated further:

To this end it was proposed to organize the whole Union secretly, very much on the plan of the Carbonari of Europe, of whom at the time I knew nothing. The members of this secret society were



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to avail themselves of all the means in their power, each in his own locality, to form public opinion in favor of education by the state at the public expense, and to get such men elected to the legislatures as would be likely to favor our purposes. How far the secret organization extended, I do not know; but I do know that a considerable portion of the State of New York was organized, for I was myself one of the agents for organizing it.

Frances Wright, the indefatigable Owenite feminist, who campaigned relentlessly for public education, clearly stated her socialist bent when, in 1829, she called for “national, rational, republican education; free for all at the expense of all; conducted under the guardianship of the state, at the expense of the state, for the honor, the happiness, the virtue, the salvation of the state.” Statism became the secular religion of the reformers, and they advanced it with evangelical zeal.

Horace Mann, writing to his friend Henry Barnard, spoke of state education as a “beautiful and glorious development,” and “the greatest of earthly causes. It is part of my religion to believe that it must prevail.” Mann opined that the common schools would “create a more far-seeing intelligence and a purer morality than has ever existed among communities of men.”

“Educate the rising generation mentally, morally, physically, just as it should be done,” Senator Henry Blair told his colleagues in the capitol in 1882, “and this nation and this world would reach the millenium within one hundred years.” John D. Pierce, Michigan’s first state superintendent of public instruction, argued: “Children of every name and age must be taught the qualifications and duties of American citizens, and learn in early life the art of self-control — they must be educated. And to accomplish this object, our chief dependence must necessarily be the free school system.” Governor De Witt Clinton of New York claimed that “the first duty of a state is to render its citizens virtuous by intellectual instruction and moral discipline, by enlightening their minds, purifying their hearts, and teaching them their rights and their obligations.”

One of the most ardent apostles of state-controlled pedagogy and one of the leading education “reformers” of the 19th Century was Newton Bateman, the Illinois state superintendent of public instruction. Typical of the state schoolmen of the day, Bateman frequently rhapsodized in Biblical terms on the virtues of government education. “In the rapt visions that come to me, as they come to all,” wrote Bateman, “I sometimes seem to see the apocalyptic gate swing open, and far down the aisles of the future, brightly revealed in the soft clear light, there stands the incarnate idea of the coming teacher.”

In an address to the National Education Association, Bateman prophesied: “Through costly experiments, splendid failures, and baffled hopes, we make our way toward the Augustan age. As the Israelite awaits the readvent of the lost glory of his race, the Christian the dawn of the millennial day, and the millions the coming of that good time when the earth shall be greener and the skies brighter, so we believe in the golden age of schools and teachers.”

The experiments have indeed been costly — and continue to be so — but who would agree with Bateman that the failures have been “splendid”? And yet, Bateman went even further. To him the “minds and souls and bodies” of children were merely pliable resources to be administered by and for the collective:

The amount of latent dormant power; of wealth-discovering and wealth-producing energy; of beauty-loving and beauty-inspiring taste and skill that lie concealed and slumbering in the brains and hearts and hands of the keen, shrewd, capable, but untutored millions of our youth, is beyond



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comprehension. Now over all this unreclaimed but magnificent intellectual and moral territory, over all of these minds and souls and bodies, with their untold possibilities of good, the State has, in my opinion, a sort of right of eminent domain and not only may, but should exercise it in the interest of her own prosperity and dignity.

Dewey's Dismal System

This same messianic view of the school carried into the 20th Century. John Dewey, commonly referred to as the “father of progressive education,” and the most celebrated of American educators, was a humanist-atheist; yet he spoke of education in reverential tones. “The teacher,” he declared, “is engaged not simply in the training of individuals, but in the formation of the proper social life”; and “in this way the teacher always is the prophet of the true God and the usherer in of the true kingdom of God.”

The public school movement was motivated by the notion that the State — and not God — is the “savior” of mankind. According to historian Lawrence Cremin, these zealous missionaries for a new social order believed that, “once public schools were established, no evil could resist their salutary influence. Universal education could be the ‘great equalizer’ of human conditions, the ‘balance wheel of the social machinery,’ and the ‘creator of wealth undreamed of.’” Historian Henry Steele Commager, a firm supporter of public education, wrote: “To our schools went the momentous responsibility of inspiring a people to pledge and hold allegiance to the principles of democracy, nationalism, Americanism, egalitarianism.”

Roots in Prejudice

There was robust opposition to the establishment of a comprehensive government school system. As we have noted, there was no need for one: Most people were satisfied with the existing school arrangements. Additionally, there was still a healthy suspicion of government expansion and a strong sentiment against increasing the state’s opportunities for taxing. Undaunted, the common school lobbyists utilized what V. T. Thayer referred to as the “motives of fear” to sway the “unenlightened.”

“Anxious to wring support for public schools from propertied interests, then opposed to taxation for such a purpose,” wrote historian Merle Curti, “educational spokesmen warned them of the dangers to property rights from universal suffrage, Jacksonian democracy, and even, possibly, revolution — any of which might result if the masses were left undisciplined by education.” Crucial support was gained from certain Protestant ministers with dark warnings of the dangers of Catholic proliferation, and with beatific visions of new mission fields in the state schools.

In any event, through a combination of constant, energetic propagandizing and political intrigue, on April 20, 1837, the public school proponents succeeded in getting the Massachusetts legislature to establish a state Board of Education — with Horace Mann as Secretary. Still, the statists did not have an easy time selling their Common School ideas to the great “unwashed masses.” The writings of Mann and the other reformers are replete with exasperation over the failure of the people to avail themselves of these “beautiful temples,” as Secretary Mann fondly referred to his institutions.

In 1839 the *Common School Journal*, official organ of the movement, complained that there were so many private schools that the government schools were hard pressed to compete: “Our academies and high schools are, at the present day, by far too numerous; and in this, principally, lies the evil.” The *Journal* advocated that three-fourths of these schools be “annihilated,” and that the money and teachers from them be “put into our Common Schools.”



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From Massachusetts, common schools (or public schools) gradually spread to the other states. Opposition to the schools continued, however, and government education did not become “universal” until near the end of the 19th Century, when compulsory attendance laws forced children into the schools.

In summary, the record shows: (1) Government schools were not needed; (2) Government schools were not wanted; (3) Government school advocates were less concerned with education in the traditional sense than with advancing their social-political agenda; (4) Government school advocates had to resort to trickery, browbeating, and coercion to attain their goals.

The Case for Private Schools

Basic principles have not changed since America’s founding era, and any objective comparison between private and public education today would weigh heavily in favor of private education. The most extensive such comparison to date is the much-discussed “Coleman Report” (*High School Achievement: Public, Catholic and Private Schools Compared* by James S. Coleman, Thomas Hoffer and Sally Kilgore, New York, Basic Books, 1982) that came out of the 1980 survey of 1,015 high schools by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. Among its conclusions:

There are at least two important ways in which private schools produce higher achievement outcomes than public schools. First, given the same type of student (that is, with background standardized), private schools create higher rates of engagement in academic activities. School attendance is better, students do more homework, and students generally take more rigorous subjects (for instance, more advanced mathematics). The indication is that more extensive academic demands are made in the private schools, leading to more advanced courses and thus to greater achievement. This is a somewhat obvious conclusion, and the statistical evidence supports it. Second, student behavior in a school has strong and consistent effects on student achievement. Apart from mathematics coursework for seniors, the greatest differences in achievement between private and public schools are accounted for by school-level behavior variables (that is, the incidence of rights, students threatening teachers, and so forth). The disciplinary climate of a school, such as the effectiveness and fairness of discipline and teacher interest, affect achievement at least in part through their effect on these school-level behavior variables.

The Coleman study, which was based on a broad representative sampling of schools made up of students from diverse ethnic, religious and income backgrounds, indicates that private schools probably are also better at achieving some of the stated “social” goals of the public schools — for example, integration among different racial and income groups. The researchers found that overall “blacks and whites are less segregated within Catholic schools than are blacks and whites in public schools.” The study reported that “the other private sector (non-Catholic) is least racially segregated and the public sector by far the most segregated.” The survey also found “the public sector showing slightly higher income segregation than either the Catholic or other private sectors.”

Further, the private sector was far more successful in closing the academic achievement gap between students from “advantaged” and “disadvantaged” backgrounds. According to the study: “Altogether, the evidence is strong that the Catholic schools function much closer to the American ideal of the ‘common school,’ educating children from different backgrounds alike, than do the public schools.” Finally, the authors write, “The greatest difference found in any aspect of school functioning between public and private schools was the degree of discipline and order in the schools.”



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Private schools tend to outperform their government-sponsored counterparts scholastically and socially. And they usually accomplish this at half the cost, or less. There is a very simple reason for their superior performance: They are accountable to the marketplace; if they produce a shoddy “product,” they will not be around for long. The government schools, on the other hand, rely not on performance, but upon political muscle for their support.

Honest Competition

The 19th Century English philosopher Herbert Spencer wisely observed, “In education as in everything else, the principle of honourable competition is the only one that can give present satisfaction or hold out promise of future perfections.” A more contemporary scholar, professor Dwight R. Lee, explained another important political-economic aspect of government schooling:

As long as education is provided publicly, it will be controlled by, and for the benefit of, public education professionals. The reason for this is straightforward.

As opposed to market decisions where each consumer exerts direct and decisive control over the services he chooses to purchase, no one individual has decisive control over the political decisions which determine the publicly provided services all consumers are required to “purchase.” Seeing no advantage in becoming informed and active in pursuit of objectives over which he has no direct control, the typical citizen-consumer quite rationally devotes little effort to influence public education policy. In contrast, suppliers of public education have significant political influence over public education policy by virtue of the fact that they are organized through professional associations, have a concentrated interest in decisions affecting public education, and are widely perceived as education experts....

As long as education is funded publicly, decisions on educational policy will be made politically, the interests of consumers will remain diffused and unorganized, and dominated by the focused and organized interests of the public school professionals [*The Freeman*, July 1986].

Amazingly, one of the most common refrains of Horace Mann and his cohorts was that public schools would “put education above politics.” This, of course, was — and is — absurd. Economist Hans F. Sennholz explains why:

Public education is necessarily politicized: its very existence depends on the political process. This explains the enormous rigidities that characterize government education. Any change or adaptation involves the cumbersome political apparatus. An elementary adjustment of teachers’ salaries, for instance, which in private education is a simple matter for a board of trustees, becomes a political controversy in public education. Such decision-making by the bureaucrats is enormously inefficient, time-consuming, and may require a political campaign, log-rolling, and pressure tactics. While private education remains inconspicuous, and little is ever heard of our progressive private schools, the public schools continue to make headlines with racial riots, teacher strikes, and student boycotts. This is because public education has become a matter of politics.

David Tyack, professor of history and education at Stanford University, describes some of the school issues that have politically divided communities since the advent of state education:

A common cause for argument was the location of the school. “To settle the question of where one of the little frame schoolhouses should stand,” wrote Clifton Johnson about New England, “has been known to require ten district meetings scattered over a period of two years,” and to draw out men from the mountains who never voted in presidential elections.... In tiny Yoncall, Oregon, feuds



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split the district into three factions, each of which tried to maintain its own school.

Which School of Thought?

The long-standing and heated political debates — over whether the schools should emphasize vocational or classical curricula, structured or flexible learning environments, phonics or look-say approaches to reading, creationism or evolution, forced busing or the neighborhood school concept, or religion or secularism — would cease to be issues if government were divorced from education. Parents would be free to choose the school they believed would best serve the needs of their children. This would be certain to engender not only a flourishing diversity in education, but the more important benefit of greater parental involvement in, and responsibility for, the child's schooling.

Dr. Frank E. Fortkamp, who has himself had a long and distinguished teaching career at public high schools and colleges, has written angrily about this absence of choice in education:

Surrendering our schools to the government is a surrender to socialism. The essence of socialism is the closed loop of government control. The essence of capitalism is free enterprise in the open marketplace.

What sense does it make to educate our children in the virtually socialist Public Education System when these same children must grow up, find jobs, and function in the capitalist free enterprise system? Our present Public Education System, tied to bureaucratic government control, is Exhibit A of the waste inherent in the socialist largess that insists on educating everyone the same way....

Right now in the small town where I live, I have a mind boggling number of options when I go to purchase wallpaper for my living room. But when it comes to how I would like my children to learn science, I either submit to the regimen of the public schools or — while continuing to support that public system with my taxes — I can opt for some struggling private school. That's the system, and that's dictatorial nonsense [[The Case Against Government Schools](#), American Media, 1979].

The rigidity, mediocrity, and stultifying conformity of the public schools may be maddening, but they are not surprising. These are the traits inherent in any government operation, and they are to be expected.

Government is a necessary evil. It is necessary for the protection of individuals from those unjust men in society who would violate the rights of others. Whenever government begins "to help" some of its citizens in the name of the common good, an alarm bell immediately should sound, for that is when the rights of all are gravely endangered. Henry David Thoreau once sagely remarked, "If I knew for certain that a man was coming to my house to do me good, I would run for my life." This advice is even more pertinent with regard to government "do-gooders."

George Washington aptly defined government as "force" and as "a dangerous servant and a fearful master." This description is particularly accurate with regard to education, which encompasses the forming of the mind and character. Free people should shudder at the mention of government and education in the same sentence.

Mind Control

English philosopher John Stuart Mill, in his famous treatise [On Liberty](#), written in 1859, saw the dangers all too clearly:

A general state education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another; and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the



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government, whether this be a monarch, a priesthood or an aristocracy, or the majority of the existing generation, in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body.

As one people after another have ignored the warning, despotism has been their lot. The state school system has become a cardinal feature of every totalitarian regime.

Mill's warning seems particularly prescient when one reads the occasional candid confessions of collectivist educators who lust after young minds to mold. Dr. Fred Gates, in charge of the Rockefeller Foundation's General Education Board in the early 1900s, wrote in the Board's Occasional Paper No. 1: "In our dreams we have limitless resources and the people yield themselves with perfect docility to our moulding hands. The present educational conventions fade from our minds, and unhampered by tradition, we work our own good will upon a grateful and responsive rural folk."

Another leading educator of the "progressive" era, sociologist Edward A. Ross, gave this vision of the state's role in education: "To collect little plastic lumps of human dough from private households and shape them on the social kneadingboard...." Yes, we are mere lumpen proletariat, to be molded by omniscient commissars.

Similarly the National Education Association stated in the January 1969 issue of the *NEA Journal*: "Schools [are to become] 'clinics' whose purpose is to provide individualized psycho-social 'treatment' for the student, thus increasing his value both to himself and to society."

Along with the academic, moral and social deterioration of the state schools, there are an increasing number of educators and public officials who share these collectivist views and who regard parental rights with contempt. As more and more parents in recent years have removed their children from the government education systems to enroll them in private schools or to teach them at home, public school authorities have reacted by utilizing the police powers of the state to stop the exodus.

Compulsory attendance laws, teacher certification requirements, accrediting regulations, health and safety codes, and a myriad of other restrictions are being used to intimidate parents, clergymen, and educators whose only "crime" is to seek a decent education for their children. Many of these fine, conscientious people are now suffering prosecution or are serving jail sentences with common criminals. This resort to coercion is a final admission of failure and a ringing indictment of the public "education" system.

Why Not Freedom?

What then is the answer to these problems? Twenty years ago, constitutional scholar and commentator Dan Smoot spelled it out. In the *Dan Smoot Report* for October 10, 1966 he wrote:

By substituting private financing for federal aid and school taxes, we would eliminate government compulsion which is not only unjust and (as concerns the federal government) unconstitutional, but is also the source of our major educational problems.

Then, people with no children in school would not be forced to pay for educating other people's children. Parents with school-age children could patronize the kinds of schools they want. Those who want church schools could support church schools. Those who want non-sectarian private schools, or trade schools, or special-purpose schools, or schools of classic instruction, or segregated schools, or integrated schools — could do likewise....

How about children whose parents could not pay tuition? The people of America voluntarily



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contribute enough money to maintain churches for millions of members; and they voluntarily support religious, educational, charitable, artistic, and scientific institutions all over the world. It is absurd to say they would not educate children of the poor without the force of law.

If the billions now confiscated in taxes for our extravagantly expensive government schools were left in the hands of the people, there would be enough money in every community to build and operate all necessary educational institutions. [Public education expenditures for the 1985-86 school year were estimated at \$214.2 billion by the U.S. Government's National Center for Education Statistics.]

And how will this come about? Smoot continued:

We will solve our major education problems when the people elect governors, state legislators, U.S. Congressmen, and a President who have the courage and good sense to say:

How dare a government, professing to be free, lay violent hands on children and force them to attend particular schools, study particular books, under particular teachers?

Whence does government derive the right to take advantage of my children and say when, where, what, and by whom they shall be taught? Whence does government derive the right to seize another man's money for the education of my children?

How dare a government, professing to be free, invade the domain of private duty and private right that God assigned to parents?



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