

A conservative view of the purpose of education

Our children should aspire to being more than corporate and state workers

Washington Times, By Jay P. Greene, Dec. 29, 2022

Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona recently said the quiet part out loud when he tweeted, “Every student should have access to an education that aligns with industry demands and evolves to meet the demands of tomorrow’s global workforce.” At heart, progressives tend to view education as preparing a person to be a worker. Whether those workers serve the needs of corporate titans or the vanguard of the proletariat is but a quibble. The predominant understanding of education on the left is that a human being is a tool, and education should shape that tool to be productive and serve the needs of others.

Conservatives approach education very differently. They begin with the belief that all human beings possess dignity — are created in the image of God, if you will. The purpose of education from this perspective is to cultivate and develop human dignity to serve what is sacred.

Preparation for productive employment is part of developing human dignity, but it is not the entire or predominant purpose of education. If progressives want education to promote industry (whether collectively or individually owned), conservatives want education to promote virtue.

There are people who call themselves conservative education reformers, often with support from the captains of industry, who focus heavily on how we need to increase student skills in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM).

For example, Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchison led the push to require all public school students in his state to take a computer science course, saying that it “will increase the opportunity for our younger students to learn about coding and the opportunities in life that coding brings. ... The integration of computer science with all of our students’ studies will increase learning opportunities in reading and the STEM subjects.”

Big companies that hire large numbers of coders naturally want the education system to increase its supply of coders, but it is unclear why their desires should determine how we educate our children. This is especially true as companies frequently use the fresh supply of newly trained and cheaper coders to replace the older and more expensive people they are laying off. Corporate executives may similarly want there to be more finishing schools to increase the supply of trophy wives to replace their older spouses, but we do not cater to their every whim.

There are also people who describe themselves as progressive education advocates who objected to Mr. Cardona’s declaration that education should meet “industry demands.” As one put it: “Public education is not meant to serve the needs of employers, but the needs of students. Yes, students probably need a job. But a job training system is meager and narrow. Our children should aspire to more than being useful meat widgets.”

In their own way, this faction of progressive education supporters shares the conservative view that education should promote virtue. They differ only in their understanding of virtue. Conservatives may oppose the social justice version of virtue backed by these progressives and should fight the imposition of the social justice approach on everyone. But they should also recognize how we agree on the fundamental purpose of education. When parents are empowered with school choice and free of the coercion of government-operated schools controlled by education-school-credentialed

teachers, most families are likely to select an education promoting a traditional view of virtue rather than one promoting a social justice agenda.

The bigger threat to a conservative approach to education comes from the alliance of corporate interests with leftist ideology that has turned our schools into training institutes that aspire to serve industry demands. We should fight to expand school choice with the understanding that some progressives may choose social justice schools, but most families will embrace our understanding of virtue. School choice will at least free us from having social justice and corporate-focused approaches imposed on our children, whether we like it or not.

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