

# Decoupling schooling from the state

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On July 27, I went to a forum hosted by [Americans for Prosperity](#), focused on fixing the deep problems in K-12 schooling. I had been asked to come and present my perspective by the organizer of the event, even though he knew I opposed one of the three proposals his organization was supporting. I very much appreciate his desire to allow consideration of a counter perspective. Sound ideas come from encouraging open challenge and debate, especially from within those who truly want to build a stronger society. Below are my remarks, with some clarifying changes.

I want to start by thanking the members of [Virginia Education Opportunity Alliance \(VEOA\)](#) for seeking citizen input for this difficult problem. We are here tonight because, as [a recent poll indicates 71% of Americans](#) recognize there are deep problems with the current state-funded model. My hope is that we address this in a way that generations to come will benefit.

If I was to frame the education paradigm I have come to embrace in a simple statement, it would be: Decoupling schooling from the state. While this is a foreign concept in our time, it is neither foreign to our nation, [nor to Virginia](#).

There was a time when public schools were locally funded and locally controlled. The Bible was actually a textbook. The focus was teaching students the tools for discovering and living life, not social experiments. The shift to where we are today was no accident, and that must be understood for us to create a true and lasting solution.

First, you cannot have a government by the people when the government shapes the thinking of the people. That was the point of the First Amendment that barred Congress from making laws that would control religion.

Just as with religion, schooling shapes the thinking. Hitler, Stalin and Mao understood that well. In America, in the 1930s, [John Dewey and his associates from the Marxist Frankfort School saw the great opportunity the public school system provided for pushing an ideology](#). They created a teaching college model that propagated throughout our universities, which has in turn trained almost all K-12 teachers.

If the framers of our federal constitution saw what we are seeing today, I cannot imagine them not including schools, with religion, in the First Amendment.

Second, we need to recognize that whoever pays for schooling controls the ideas and method of schooling. Just like anything else in life. Those paying the grocery bill determine the menu. The more schools the state funds, the less real education choice or freedom we will have. Even if a policy starts out with few strings, the opportunity to control will most certainly attract those who want to control.

Here is an example from Sweden; similar examples are in Canada, Australia and South Africa. This was taken from an [April 2023 article by journalist Alex Newman](#).

In 1992, after a couple years of clamoring for choice, Sweden passed universal school choice. Just like what is happening in Virginia today, it was pushing ideas like “money following the child” and

“creating healthy competition.” Even the American conservative-leaning Heritage think tank promoted the model.

But then two decades later it all came crashing down (Public money requires accountability):

- Private schools were ordered to teach radical government curriculum, including gender confusion.
- All schools had to participate in national testing, to ensure all schools taught what the government wanted taught.
- Even Christian private schools were ordered to stop all Bible reading and prayer during school hours. (That is very similar to what happened here in what were once locally controlled public schools. So, don't imagine the same thing would never happen here, because it has!)
- Homeschooling was completely banned

All genuine and meaningful “choice” was abolished in one fell swoop. The alleged effort to offer alternatives to government schools ended up turning all schools into government schools.

You might say, that could not happen here. But I will remind you that just a couple years ago it was the Virginia legislature that made it so Virginians are subject to California emissions laws. That is akin to taxation without representation. So, don't think for a moment that that legislature would not love to be able to mandate what is taught to every child in Virginia.

Another way to know what would happen here it to just look at how state-funding has impacted what is taught in our public schools, which once revered the Bible and held prayer times. There is only one reason state mandates are not as heavy on private schools and that is because their funding is not from the state, so the state is greatly limited in how much it can control them. If we really want different options, we cannot have a singular funding source.

That brings me to my third point, which is the more opportunity there is for government control, the more attractive that government becomes to the far left. It was the framework for state influence over the public school system that motivated John Dewey and his Frankfort School colleagues to use the education system to push their Marxist ideology. And we know all too well, Virginia is very vulnerable to the far left. From a purely political point of view, the last thing any elected Republican should do is provide an even greater incentive to attract huge far left outside money into Virginia politics.

So, not only would enacting the proposed ESA law ultimately hurt real school choice, it would be political suicide for Republicans. I learned this first-hand from serving two terms in the Vermont State Senate, which had a far left super majority. That was not always the case. Once upon a time, Vermont was actually the most Republican state in the nation. For 100 years no Democrat got elected!

George Soros and other wealthy socialist-leaning people invested in Vermont because they saw opportunity and now far left Democrats completely control public policy. Sure Vermont has a “Republican” governor (a senate colleague of mine), but he leans left and the Democrats have such a super-majority they can override anything he might veto. The once live-and-let-live state is now one of the most socialist-leaning states in the nation. They are actively now pushing gun control, something that was unthinkable to most even when I served because while Vermont was one of the least restrictive states regarding gun laws, it also enjoyed one of the lowest gun violence records. So, I ask Republican legislators to not sell Virginia down the same drain by adding anything that those who

live to control could use to gain power. Rather work to pull the state out of sectors it does not belong so Virginians can interact freely with one another.

All government powers are a product for sale to those who yearn for power and they will pay great sums of money to buy it. The only way to limit the selling of government power, is to not allow government to have such power to sell. That is the only real campaign finance reform.

As for the three policies presented, both parental tax credits and the Education Improvement Scholarships (EISTC) keep money out of the state education budget, thus help move toward decoupling and increase choice. By contrast, Education Savings Accounts (ESAs), if passed as proposed, would be funding private schools from the state education budget, thus increasing the coupling of schooling to the state. Even if in the short term if more schools are created, in the long run, once the state increases its mandate, real choice will evaporate.

We have been almost a century creating this mess; it will take hard work and a fundamental paradigm shift to get out of it. I believe that paradigm shift is to move away from state-funding / control and toward parents and churches, just as God's word instructs. Education is discipleship.

I very much appreciate the honesty from the [VEOA](#) team regarding the limits on what can get passed and that any future legislature has full freedom to pass any mandates on what prior legislatures create. The statement by one spokesman regarding the federal government outlawing homeschooling as a reason we need the ESA law, seemed very fatalistic. If anything, that proves we need to pull government out of education, not increase its reach into the private sector.

We can choose to resign ourselves to what people with government-power can and will do or we can do what our nation's founders did in 1776, when they came to terms with the fact that no good solution would come from King George, and take the responsibility of K-12 schooling back upon ourselves as parents and churches and work toward a free-market solution. How wonderful it would be someday to discover that there were no students left for the government schools because it became unthinkable for parents and churches to give their children to the state to train up and disciple.