Letting Education and Religion Overlap

Why expanding vouchers to include parochial schools is a good idea.

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Ironically, free-market, highly religious America is dominated by government-education monopolies, while social-democratic, highly secular Belgium has embraced school choice, including state-funded religious schools. Belgian parents can choose public or private schools, including publicly funded Catholic, Protestant, Muslim and Jewish schools, as guaranteed by the national constitution.

While comparing Belgium’s relatively small yet diverse population (11 million), with the U.S. is difficult, especially when it comes to social outcomes, there’s no denying that Belgian students have far outscored their American counterparts on international assessment tests.

What explains the differences in approaches to school choice? American and Belgian 21st-century education policies reflect 19th-century education politics, particularly the nations’ different responses to religious strife.

Some history is in order. The original American “public” schools were actually religious, frequently located in and governed by local churches. The first compulsory attendance law—Massachusetts’ 1647 “Old Deluder Satan Law”—was intended to make children literate enough to read scripture so that Satan could not delude them.

After the American Revolution, the mission of schooling broadened to preparation for citizenship in the new Republic; yet religion remained central. Common-school reformers like Horace Mann could not imagine moral education without a heavy dose of the (Protestant) Bible.

As Catholic immigration increased, Catholics protested the common school’s imposition of the Protestant Bible and the Protestant practice that individuals rather than clergy be trusted with biblical interpretation.

In response, Americans fashioned local accommodations that respected religious diversity. In 1842, New York City’s Public School Society and Catholic Bishop John Hughes gave control of schools to elected ward leaders, allowing different communities to teach the Bible they chose. Similarly, Poughkeepsie, N.Y., leased the city’s Catholic schools for a dollar a day, rehired the nuns who had taught there as public-school teachers, and continued operating the schools much as before, though with formal religious instruction limited to before and after school. The Poughkeepsie Plan soon spread to other cities.

This multiculturalism was not to endure. In the late 1800s, Republicans like Maine Congressman James G. Blaine opposed partnering with Catholic schools,
supposedly to prevent religious strife, though as Noah Feldman writes, “[t]he potential ‘strife’ Blaine claimed he wanted to avoid was exactly the controversy he hoped to produce nationally” to win votes. Blaine and other Republicans used “the school issue” as a wedge issue to divide Democrats and motivate Protestant Republicans to come to the polls.

The “Blaine Amendments” inserted into 29 state constitutions during this period, each motivated by anti-Catholic bias, ended public support for religious—that is, Catholic—schools, however popular or effective those schools might be. Later, the very existence of Catholic schools was threatened. In the early 1920s, under pressure from anti-Catholic groups including the Ku Klux Klan, Oregon lawmakers passed an initiative prohibiting parochial schools. In a ruling that a child is not “the mere creature of the state,” the Oregon law was overturned by the Supreme Court in Pierce v. Society of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary (1925).

Belgium suffered similar religious strife in the 1800s, but there the battles pitted orthodox Catholics against modern Catholics and secular interests. More important, while American Catholics were a small minority, in Belgium the two sides were more evenly matched, giving each incentives to compromise.

From the 1830s, Belgian mass literacy was facilitated by a mixed system of public schools and publicly funded Catholic schools. An 1870s secular government in Brussels terminated the church's role in the municipal public schools, prohibited public subsidies of private schools, required teachers to have credentials from a secular public school, and banned teaching of religious subjects during school hours.

In reaction, Catholics withdrew their children from public schools and rapidly expanded private schooling. Elections resulted in repeated legislative and budgetary U-turns on whether to fund parochial schools. The eventual compromise coalesced around a voucher-like system assuring Belgian parents their free choice of publicly funded public or private schools.

By the early 20th century, something like today's education status quo was institutionalized in both nations: local public-school monopolies in America and dynamic school markets including religious schools in Belgium.

While school performance is complicated, prima facie evidence suggests that the diversity of education options in Belgium does a good job serving the diverse needs of students. Americans opposing vouchers to religious schools should ponder this possibility and should know that their position has very unsavory historical roots.

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