A Tale of Two Educational Traditions

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When we discuss education in America, we almost invariably refer to schools. The centrality of schooling to our concept of learning became all the more apparent this past fall, as families grasped for alternatives to schools shuttered during the pandemic. These circumstances, perhaps more than any we’ve encountered in the recent past, have pressed us to admit that formal schooling doesn’t exhaust the possibilities of education. And yet the school still represents our touchstone for considering and evaluating American education.

The bias at work here is understandable, since the journalists, policymakers, academics, and politicians who dominate the public conversation about education are nearly always the products of a long-standing tradition of thought that views the school — and especially the public school — as the institutional bedrock of a successful democratic republic. This tradition — which I will call the “republican tradition” here — can be traced from the founding generation through 19th-century reformers to the school-reform movement of the past 30 years. Those who embrace this thinking aspire to put high-quality public schooling within the reach of all families.

This is undoubtedly a noble aim — except when it devolves into the recurrent ambition to make public schooling the exclusive form of education in America. Such ambition dates back to our founding as well, when Pennsylvania physician and writer Benjamin Rush published a proposal describing how “the whole [nation] will be tied together by one system of education” that will “convert men into republican machines.”

At the time, there was no political possibility of effecting such a plan. But by the late-19th century, smaller-scale efforts — beginning

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with the creation of statewide school systems—had proven successful. Reformers then pushed to make attendance compulsory. Succeeding here, too, by the first decades of the 20th century, some reformers went beyond seeking to compel attendance at school to seeking to compel attendance at public school. By that point, all that was missing from the final fulfillment of Rush’s vision was national, centralized administration of American education. Fortunately the courts stepped in and, in Pierce v. Society of Sisters, put out that fire.

Today, embers of this totalizing ambition are smoldering again. New concerns about the role of private schools in perpetuating bigotry and exacerbating socioeconomic inequality have urged some to call for the state to regulate their curricula or abolish non-public educational alternatives altogether. Just as Covid-19 was forcing nearly all parents into educating their children at home, an article by Harvard law professor Elizabeth Bartholet arguing for “a presumptive ban” on home schooling went viral. The Democratic Party’s recent turn against school choice represents yet another flare-up of this periodically resurgent ambition to make standardized public schools the exclusive purveyors of education in America.

These arguments are usually grounded in contemporary political imperatives—concerns about rectifying socioeconomic inequality and racial disparity now, rather than any contention that compulsory public schooling has been a time-honored American ideal. Yet in Homeschooling: The History and Philosophy of a Controversial Practice, Shawn Peters and James Dwyer attempt to supply historical evidence for a long-standing American affinity for state control of education, and to put to rest once and for all the debate about whether parents or the state have primary authority over children. They insist that Americans have advocated universal compulsory schooling since the colonial period, while the anti-institutional animus that has motivated home schooling and other school-choice-reform movements is a recent innovation incompatible with our national genius.

Peters’s and Dwyer’s account—which draws on anachronistic texts, misrepresents historiographical sources, and, in a particularly bizarre section, invokes 19th-century protective statutes used to seize poor and indigenous children as evidence of broad support for the primacy of the state in child-rearing—falls far short of establishing anything like an age-old embrace of state educational control in America. The deeper problem with their thesis, however, is that the dispute between family
and state authority in American education cannot be put to rest as the authors hope. Indeed, the persistent ambiguity over who has educational authority in the United States, combined with the bewildering variety of educational practices we have adopted over time, may not be so much a conflict to resolve in favor of one party or the other — parents or the state — but a phenomenon requiring exploration. A closer look at our educational heritage reveals the story is far more complex than Peters and Dwyer suggest.

**Republican Institutionalism**

Peters and Dwyer are certainly correct in observing that the republican educational tradition — which favors unity, uniformity, equality, and institutionalism — has deep intellectual roots in America. In fact, one can trace the prioritization of not just schooling, but comprehensive systems of public schooling, all the way back to the founding generation. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, proposed a statewide system of local grammar schools that would identify the state’s best students and channel them into district secondary schools, which would in turn send the best of their students to a state university. Benjamin Rush expanded Jefferson’s ambitions to the nation. Some writers, like Rush and Noah Webster, even laid out plans for separate school systems for girls. Although none of these visions came to fruition by the time of that generation’s passing, their writings inaugurated a distinct intellectual tradition that has always had a major influence on American educational thought and practice.

Republican theorists of the founding era tended to characterize schooling as a civic necessity, imparting to children the basic knowledge and vocational skills required to develop the two key aptitudes of a good citizen: political competence and economic independence. Institutionalized schooling was thought to be especially important in a free society, where widespread diffusion of knowledge and the cultivation of patriotic virtue provide a bulwark against abuses by governments and would-be tyrants. “Educate and inform the whole mass of the people,” Jefferson declared in a 1787 letter, “enable them to see that it is their interest to preserve peace and order, and they will preserve it… They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty.”

A strong republic, school proponents further contended, requires substantial uniformity in belief and conduct. Formal school systems would not only facilitate this in ways other learning arrangements
cannot, they would also forge the kind of lifelong friendships necessary
to hold together our extended republic. Children should be schooled
with one another, Rush insisted, because “young men who have trodden
the paths of science together, or have joined in the same sports…
generally feel, thro’ life, such ties to each other, as add greatly to the obliga-
tions of mutual benevolence.” Founding-era writers spoke primarily of
bridging sectarian and party divides, but partitions along racial, ethnic,
and socioeconomic lines have since become cause for similar concern.

Notably, all the major educational writings of founding-era America
presumed schooling would be both formal and state run. No one yet
spoke of compulsory attendance at public schools, but no one offered a
national policy of reliance on home schooling as a plausible alternative,
either. That education in America would take place at public institutions
was the operating assumption of the American Philosophical Society,
which offered a prize in 1795 for the best “essay on a system of liberal ed-
ucation, and literary instruction, adapted to the genius of the government,
and best calculated to promote the general welfare of the United States.”
The submissions, which have become canonical works of early American
thought on education, all followed the society’s lead on the matter.

Yet Peters and Dwyer seize on such arguments and others to conclude
that Americans have always believed the state was the sole rightful agent of
education. Edging further out on their limb, they insist that our law and
political philosophy always intended compulsory state-run schooling to
be the ultimate goal, even before we had the means of realizing it.

A more honest review of our history indicates that the republican
tradition hardly represents the lone understanding of education in
America. In fact, for all the evidence that Americans have long viewed
state control of education to be the ideal, there is equal evidence demon-
strating a prevailing skepticism of public educational institutions.

**Liberal Anti-Institutionalism**

Even as men like Jefferson and Rush were offering visions of state-run
school systems, a liberal counterargument was coalescing in the works
of John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Adam Smith. Though none
of these individuals were Americans, their writings had an undeniably
profound impact on American institutions and thinking.

Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* and Rousseau’s *Émile*,
two of the most widely read and influential 18th-century treatises on
education, claimed that education should aim toward cultivating freedom and virtue, as did the writings of their republican counterparts. However, neither Locke nor Rousseau saw how institutional schooling could possibly further these aims. The freedom they emphasized was not the collective freedom of the nation against tyranny, but the individual’s moral and intellectual freedom from custom, fashion, and prejudice. Schools, with their standardized curricula and petty, foolish masters, along with the numerical domination of other children, threatened the very competencies Locke and Rousseau wanted education to foster. Instead, the two argued that learning should take place in the home, under the guidance of tutors or, better yet, parents themselves.

On the advantages of formal schooling, Locke admitted it would make children “bolder,” “better able to bustle and shift amongst boys of [their] own age,” and that “the emulation of school-fellows often puts life and industry into young lads.” But he argued that these advantages were outweighed by the demerits of school:

For, as for that boldness and spirit, which lads get amongst their play-fellows at school, it has ordinarily such a mixture of rudeness, and an ill-turned confidence, that those misbecoming and disingenuous ways of shifting in the world must be unlearned…. He that considers how diametrically opposite the skill of living well, and managing, as a man should do, his affairs in the world, is to that malapertness, tricking, or violence, learnt among school-boys, will think the faults of a privater education infinitely to be preferred to such improvements; and will take care to preserve his child’s innocence and modesty at home, as being nearer of kin, and more in the way of those qualities, which make a useful and able man.

Rousseau also inveighed against schooling. “Take a young man carefully educated in his father’s country house,” he advised, “and examine him when he reaches Paris and makes his entrance into society, you will find him thinking clearly about honest matters, and you will find his will as wholesome as his reason.” But exposure to other young men, Rousseau believed, may prove fatal to his virtue. “[T]hey want to drag you down to their own level,” Émile’s tutor warned him of his peers in Paris, “and they only reproach you with submitting to control [by your tutor] that they may themselves control you…. They have only followed the example
of other giddy youths, as they would have you follow theirs. To escape from the so-called prejudices of their fathers, they yield to those of their comrades.” In short, liberal thinkers maintained that the moral authority of the peer group over the individual child was nearly omnipotent—and rarely wielded in the service of virtue or intellectual liberty.

Adam Smith, whose thoughts on the matter were influenced by both Locke and Rousseau, offered a more attenuated criticism of schools. His concern lay with the dangers—both moral and practical—of taking education too much out of the family’s control. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he warned against sending children to boarding schools because distant schooling diminished familial affection and the mutual improvement such affection encourages. “Respect for you [the parent],” he wrote, “must always impose a very useful restraint upon [your children’s] conduct; and respect for them may frequently impose no useless restraint upon your own.” Smith allowed that children “may, with propriety and advantage, go out every day to attend public schools,” but he insisted “their dwelling be always at home.” “Domestic education,” he declared, “is the institution of nature; public education, the contrivance of man. It is surely unnecessary to say, which is likely to be the wisest.”

Smith also cast doubt on public education in *Wealth of Nations*, noting that when teachers are given state salaries, they do their jobs poorly, since their pay no longer depends on their performance. “Those parts of education, it is to be observed, for the teaching of which there are no public institutions, are generally the best taught.” Smith, following Locke, did favor a system of charity schools to educate the poor, but these were to be a last resort. Education for everyone else, he believed, should be left to parents’ discretion.

Taken together, the logic behind such anti-institutional arguments is clear: Send a child to school, and he will be governed there not by upstanding and exemplary teachers, but by neglectful idlers and other children who are just as ignorant but, in numbers, much more vicious. Keeping children away from their peers and under the benevolent authority of parents—or tutors hand-selected by their parents—would permit them to develop their characters away from such corrosive temptations. It would also reinforce the virtue of parents as they and their children strive to be held in high regard by the other.

According to these thinkers, the threat of the larger society and, consequently, of the school, is a threat to liberty. In this sense, the school is
not a minor inconvenience, but a danger to the entire American project, which itself is consciously grounded in the political arguments of these same thinkers. This explains why statists like Peters and Dwyer cannot produce any coherent history of outright deference to state-run education in America. The rediscovery of public-school alternatives in the past half-century is thus not an aberration, but a recent manifestation of a much older skepticism toward formal schooling and a desire for counterweights to its influence.

**FRANKLIN’S COMPROMISE**

The most powerful argument against public schooling in America was never one that denied the need for schools or appealed to the isolated domestic education of Locke and Rousseau. Instead, it preserved the spirit of their individualism by accepting — indeed, even promoting — schooling, then turning around to deride and rebel against it.

This mischievous American compromise was first exemplified in the figure and writings of Benjamin Franklin. Franklin used his own life to model an education that admitted formal schooling but never depended on it. In its place, he elevated informal self-education outside of school and among friends as a quintessentially American coming-of-age experience.

Having attended school for only two years, Franklin owed little to institutional training. His first writings mock the educational institutions of colonial New England; of Harvard, he wrote that its students graduate “after Abundance of Trouble and Charge, as great Blockheads as ever, only more proud and self-conceited.” Yet Lockean tutorial or home education was not a possibility worth addressing. Though Franklin was influenced by Locke’s political and epistemological writings, for the youngest son of 17 children born of a Boston candlemaker, a private tutor was beyond imagining.

There is perhaps no more indelibly American education than Franklin’s as depicted in his *Autobiography* — the story of a poor but enterprising boy who, through hard work, gumption, and some unspoken genius, becomes one of the most important statesmen and scientists of his age. Despite being apprenticed as a printer at age 12, he studied during lunch breaks, scrimped and saved, and eventually ran away from his master to start his own business. Combining forces with similarly situated artisans, he pursued a breathtaking range of civic improvements that permanently shaped the city of Philadelphia. Having caught the
attention of influential and wealthy men who encouraged and assisted him, Franklin was ultimately able to prosper, retire early, and devote himself to scientific and political work—including the founding of the United States.

Franklin is the original self-made man, and his Autobiography the original American self-help book—a celebration of his self-education and an explicit template for others to imitate. The kind of education he espoused was intended to be within the reach of any young man, no matter how poor or busy, who could squirrel away a few hours from his obligations here and there (skipping Sunday services gains one an entire morning for study, Franklin noted) and find a few others curious and diligent enough to join him in the venture. Indeed, what Franklin called “the best School of Philosophy, Morals and Politics that then existed in the Province” was not any institutional school, but his Junto—an evening debating club made up of fellow small tradesmen.

Franklin’s model offered a workaround for an essentially democratic society of families too poor and too busy to educate their children themselves but lacking institutions to do it for them. He harnessed the freedom these children typically had and encouraged the intellectual independence that such conditions naturally promote. In emphasizing abstract study for its evident practical benefits and rejecting secondhand beliefs in favor of independent reasoning, Franklin’s was essentially a Lockean education without tutors, parents, or much adult authority at all.

Yet adults perform an essential function in Locke’s theory of education. After all, their approval motivates all the arduous self-discipline that Locke demands. Without adults whom one loves to please, why would the child deny himself the pleasures and comforts he desires? Franklin may have managed to do so, but he did not expect every child to be capable of reliably prioritizing a distant and abstract happiness over concrete and present pleasure. In fact, though his Autobiography upholds the virtues of self-education, Franklin himself was instrumental in founding the University of Pennsylvania and the grammar school attached to it, and he worked to build and fund schools throughout his life.

How could Franklin have derided existing schools while at the same time working to expand educational institutions? To understand this seeming contradiction, we can look to the fates of Franklin’s equally talented friends, who serve as his foils in his Autobiography: John Collins,
James Ralph, and the other “bookish lads” of Boston and Philadelphia whose financially constrained families left them unsupervised long enough for them to educate themselves. The independence that was a boon to Franklin turned out to be a curse to them. Notwithstanding their natural intellectual gifts—some of which Franklin ranked above his own—they succumbed to the temptations of the city, meeting premature ends in disgrace, debt, and drunkenness.

The problem with Franklin’s friends was not that they lacked his ability, but his discipline. Without formative adult intervention to set them on the right path early on, their potential was squandered. Franklin recognized the young country could ill afford to waste such talent, so while he touted the virtues of self-education, he also built schools. “For though the American Youth are allow’d not to want Capacity; yet the best Capacities require Cultivation,” he wrote in a proposed grammar-school curriculum. He may not have needed schools for his education, but he acknowledged that most Americans would need them for theirs.

The key for Franklin, though, was that we shouldn’t need them too much. His compromise was to accept that the new republic must have schools while at the same time denying that all, or even most, of what we understand as education would take place in them. The wayward John Collins might have been kept from “dramming” and even developed his considerable mathematical talents had he gone to school, but eventually—and far earlier than we would today think permissible—he would set off on his own to establish himself in the relatively open society growing around him. That process would mark his real education, as it did for Franklin.

By defending a place for radically anti-institutional and individualized education alongside institutional schooling, Franklin provided a counterargument against the republican case for universal—and eventually, compulsory—public schooling. His tradition accepts the necessity of schooling but retains the liberal suspicion of its stifling moral and intellectual effects, reconciling the tension between the two by promoting formal schools while denying that they ought to provide the whole, or even the majority, of a child’s education. The schools are still a necessary prerequisite in this tradition, but education, broadly understood, is a process that occurs against, or in spite of, the schools.

This was not quite the home education lauded by liberal philosophers overseas; it was rather a uniquely American innovation that
substituted self-education for home education in an effort to pursue the same goal—intellectual liberty—by different means. And it has remained a canonical part of the American education tradition, even after the advent of universal schooling.

**REPUBLICAN TRIUMPH?**

Public schooling in America became desirable largely because it was necessary. In fact during the years following the Revolution, the practicality of formal school systems, combined with the imperative of creating a unified republic, largely trumped liberal fears over schools’ threat to individual virtue and intellectual freedom.

The greatest advantage of public schools in the American context was their promised cost savings. The home education extolled in Locke’s and Rousseau’s treatises was directed at Europe’s landed gentry—families who were not engaged in day-to-day moneymaking and had the leisure to teach their children, or the means to hire someone else to do so. The United States had no such class. Samuel Harrison Smith, one of the winners of the 1795 American Philosophical Society contest, made this point bluntly: “If parents educated their children, the hours withdrawn from business would alone impoverish them.” However much Americans may have approved of the principles contained in the liberal treatises, then, they simply did not have the means to follow their recommendations.

Yet the liberal tradition never disappeared. Instead, it grew up alongside systems of institutional schooling—all while mocking, belittling, and rejecting them in the name of independence. The Americans who wrote in the liberal tradition after the founding were not practical reformers working to expand or improve public schooling; they were instead writers, artists, journalists, and directors—the creators of popular culture. And their works were saturated with positive, even heroic depictions of children rebelling against institutionalized education.

Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* represent two of America’s most iconic depictions of childhood revolt against the conformity of respectable institutions. Tom and Huck are both surrounded by well-intentioned schools and teachers trying to “sivilize” them, and they rebel in ways small (in Tom’s case) and large (in Huck’s) against these efforts. Their real education occurs wholly outside of school, in the woods and on the river. What they learn away from school is more true and more significant than anything their civilizing teachers
offer. Twain is apocryphally credited with originating the quip, “I have never let my schooling interfere with my education”; it’s easy to see why people might attribute this sentiment to him.

Emblematic of girls’ books that express this view is Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women, published about a decade before Huckleberry Finn. It takes place in the heart of republican school-reform territory—Massachusetts in the 1860s. Only one March sister, Amy, is still in school in the book, while the older two have presumably aged out. The fourth is deemed “too bashful” for formal schooling and is homeschooled instead. Amy’s experience in school is almost wholly taken up with status competition and vanity; school is shown only to exacerbate her moral weaknesses, just as Locke and Rousseau described. Whatever academic foundation their schooling may have laid for them, it is clear that the March sisters’ real moral and even literary educations took place at home, with each other.

Henry Adams—raised in quite a different milieu than Twain’s or Alcott’s characters and writing for an adult audience—depicted his schooling as equally defective in The Education of Henry Adams. Adams prefaced the book with a lament that “American literature offers scarcely one working model for high education. The student must go back, beyond Jean Jacques, to Benjamin Franklin, to find a model even of self-teaching.” Adams understood himself as updating Franklin’s model, and so tied himself directly to the liberal tradition, taking the same reluctant and ultimately resistant attitude toward school that Franklin pioneered. Although he dutifully attended school, he counted as his education only what happened to him after, and largely against, what he was taught there:

The dislike of school was so strong as to be a positive gain. The passionate hatred of school methods was almost a method in itself. . . . Indeed, had his father kept the boy at home, and given him half an hour’s direction every day, he would have done more for him than school ever could do for them.

The problem with his schools, in Adams’s telling, was that they tried to assimilate children into the world of the previous generation even as that world was unnoticeably passing away. He worried that the new “machine age” brought forth by science, secularization, and industrialization
would re-organize society in nihilistic and dehumanizing ways, and that traditional educational methods would be of no use in such a culture.

Indeed, American society was undergoing a profound transformation toward the end of the 19th century. The novels of Twain and Alcott depicted a time when schooling was available but not yet compulsory; escape was still possible and largely free of serious consequence. No truant officer ever shows up at the Widow Douglas’s door asking after Huck’s whereabouts or demands of Mrs. March an official diagnosis of her daughter Beth’s bashfulness. In contrast, the Industrial Age’s concern with “social efficiency”—regimentation to both manage and profit from the chaotic array of new people, products, and processes that industrialization brought into being—made rebellion against prevailing customs both costly and difficult. In a more centralized and regimented society than either colonial America or small-town New England, childhood was being put to more efficient use, and its errors were less easily forgiven or left behind.

At the time, progressive reformers all over the country had set to work standardizing, centralizing, and bureaucratizing schooling in their quest for “the one best system,” as David Tyack has called it. They modernized school buildings, disseminated textbooks, introduced oversite boards, instituted standardized examinations, and established graded classes in the American education system. The adoption of compulsory-schooling laws represented a high-water mark for the republican educational tradition in America. Compulsion meant that putting on plays in the attic or running away down the river instead of reporting to school every week could only survive in the form of a bored student’s wistful daydream.

Against these enormous transformations in everyday educational experience, the liberal tradition seemed only to offer nostalgia for a simpler, less-restrictive time of schoolchildren playing hooky and getting into scrapes in the woods. Given the new realities of mass schooling—and particularly urban schooling—these stories and their heroes offered little. The broad consensus, as Adams so well understood, was that the country had turned decisively away from its early liberal patterns, and school was now necessary to train effective and efficient citizens and workers. If the liberal tradition was to have a future in this new America, charming tales of rebellious children would no longer suffice; it would have to find a grounding in the new ideas through
which political life was coming to be understood — the burgeoning social sciences and the evolutionary theories of state and society — and to be re-interpreted through these methods.

Its rescue came from an unlikely source. Psychologist G. Stanley Hall, in his landmark 1904 study *Adolescence*, injected the truculence of Tom and Huck into a respectably social-scientific conception of the “normal” childhood. Hall turned the tendency toward individualistic rebellion into a bona fide stage of human development, defining adolescence by its opposition to institutions and authorities and lending scientific credibility to the propensity of American children to hate school. Worse still, he turned parents into accomplices — and sometimes even cheerleaders — of their children’s aversions, since a failure to rebel might signal some dreaded abnormality in development. By clothing the liberal tradition in the trappings of science, Hall and his successors effectively licensed a continued popular skepticism of institutional schooling during the decades when it underwent its most ambitious and rapid expansion.

The 20th century closed not with the grudging acceptance of adolescent acting out, but the cultural elevation and embrace of the teenage rebel. Perhaps the most iconic late-20th-century installment of the liberal tradition was the film *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, in which school is embodied by an economics teacher played by Ben Stein. Droning in perfect monotone about New Deal monetary policy, Stein’s character pleads for a response from his nearly comatose students: “Anyone? Anyone?” No one speaks up. Meanwhile, our eponymous hero is spending the day cutting classes and carousing around Chicago, having the time of his life with his friends while evading the hapless school dean. In making light of his own adolescence in Chicago’s north suburbs, John Hughes set out a defining late-20th-century depiction of American adolescence. The result was nothing short of a valorization of the kid who doesn’t let his schooling get in the way of his education.

**SCHOOLING VERSUS EDUCATION**

Considering the durability of American antipathy toward school may illuminate the reasons why we always seem to fall short of creating the “one best system” that the republican tradition has sought from the country’s beginnings. Perhaps, in spite of all the earnest efforts by reformers and philanthropists and educators, we really don’t want to get it right. Or at least, not completely right.
We have come to accept the basic democratic necessity of schooling—of our regime’s civic and economic need for some reliable baseline of education. We want our children to succeed by conventional institutional standards—to earn good grades, to be liked by their teachers and classmates, and to acquire the skills necessary to obtain satisfying employment in adulthood. And yet we still harbor Locke’s and Rousseau’s fears of the tyranny of popular opinion and its effects on the young. We might call these fears by new names—“peer pressure,” “conformism,” perhaps “bullying” at the extreme end—but they are the same old threats to intellectual liberty and originality that the liberals of old warned against. Americans seem to instinctively understand that schools, despite the valuable service they perform in our republican democracy, facilitate a form of not altogether salutary submission. And so we continue, subtly and informally, to resist them.

Indeed, as much as adults appreciate compliant students, we also can’t shake our appreciation for the Huck Finns and the Ferris Buellers, for the class clowns and the cool outcasts. No doubt the rebel sometimes ends up, pace Merle Haggard, “turn[ing] twenty-one in prison doing life without parole.” But too much devotion to school might have an analogous intellectual result.

The broader history of American education shows that we are both republicans and liberals; we value equality and civic unity, and we fear its distorting intellectual effects. We have allowed our institutions to serve the republican end and our culture to serve a liberal one. We have, in effect, accepted Franklin’s bargain: We know we must have schools, but we do not allow them to monopolize education. In so doing, we recognize schools’ usefulness. We even want our educational institutions to be good—to instill the universal literacy and numeracy required for subsequent self-education. We just don’t want them to become too good—too totalizing, too powerful, too effective. We want to preserve a sphere of independence for children to be skeptical of authority and received opinion, and to inoculate themselves against it where possible.

As with all unwritten intergenerational compromises, sustaining the balance over time is not easy, especially as the political and economic conditions that engendered the compromise appear to change beyond recognition, much as Adams predicted they would. The republican tradition has the advantage under such conditions, elaborating its position on the importance of more and better schooling as the best solution
to every new challenge—geopolitical rivalry, economic globalization, technological changes to production and work, and the ever-present fear of civic decline. Even moderate republicans like Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz persuasively argue that although the loose approach to education served us well enough in the past, it can no longer keep up with the pace of technological change. Formal schooling, they assert, must be substantially expanded and reconfigured to face the challenges of the 21st century. The republican tradition reasonably asks of its liberal critics: How are Tom Sawyer and Jo March going to help us do that?

Yet the temporary collapse of the schools that accompanied the Covid-19 pandemic should give us pause before we pronounce the liberal tradition dead. It was wonderfully ironic that at the very moment when Peters, Dwyer, and Bartholet published their arguments against home schooling, nearly all American parents were forced to homeschool their children. When put to the test, most of the largest and wealthiest districts in the country responded with a solution—virtual learning—that is quite clearly less educational for most children than running off with their friends to play pirates in the woods. The flexibility required to continue educating children during this public-health crisis has thus come not from the public schools, but from families, private schools, and non-traditional alternatives. It has come, in other words, from people who could imagine education beyond the conventional institutional framework. The republican tradition, therefore, does not hold all the answers.

The plague year demonstrated the continuing relevance of the liberal educational tradition. Even in a sophisticated, globalized world—or maybe especially in one—institutions can fail. Sometimes this occurs slowly and imperceptibly, but sometimes it happens all at once, forcing us to call once again on our uniquely American capacity for self-education. Yet it shouldn’t require crises to awaken our skepticism of schools. A clear-eyed appreciation of the insistent message contained in our literature and film can remind us of school’s less-salutary intellectual tendencies while keeping us appropriately skeptical of what even the best schools can accomplish.