

# Imprimis

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## Education as a Battleground

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**IF YOU** want to see the problem with American education, look at a chart illustrating the comparative growth in the number of students, teachers, and district administrators in our public schools in the period between 2000 and 2019. (See the chart on page 3.) The number of district administrators grew by a whopping 87.6 percent during these years, far outstripping the growth in the number of students (7.6 percent) and teachers (8.7 percent).

In illustrating the difference in these rates of growth, the chart also illustrates a fundamental change that has come over our nation as a whole during this period—a change in how we govern ourselves and how we live. To say a change is fundamental



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means that it concerns the foundation of things. If the foundation changes, then the things built on it are changed. Education is fundamental, and it has changed radically. This has changed everything else.

One way of describing the change in education today is that it provides a different answer than we have ever known to the question: who owns American children? Of course, no one actually *owns* the children. They are human beings, and insofar as they are owned, they own themselves. But by nature, they require a long time to grow up—much longer than most creatures—and some-one must act on their behalf until they mature. Who is to do that?

Not many people raise this question explicitly, but implicitly it is everywhere. For example, it is contained in the question: who gets to decide what children learn? It is contained more catastrophically in the question: who decides what we tell children about sex?

Are these decisions the province of professional educators, who claim to be experts? Or are they the province of parents, who rely on common sense and love to guide them? In other words, is the title to govern children established by expertise or by nature as exhibited in parenthood? The first is available to a professionally educated few. The second is available to any human being who will take the trouble.

The natural answer to this question is contained in the way human beings come to be. Prior to recent scientific

“advances,” every child has been the result of a natural process to which people have a natural attraction. “Natural” here does not mean what every single person wants or does—it means the way things work unless we humans intervene.

In its essence, “nature” means the process of begetting and growth by which a mature, living thing comes to be. Not quite every human being is attracted to the natural process of human reproduction, but nearly all are—and when the process works to produce a baby, it works that way and no other way.

This process of human reproduction and growth works for two reasons. The first is that human beings, when mature, are capable of so much more than other creatures. Almost from birth we learn to talk, a rational function that indicates decisive differences from other creatures. Because of reason and speech we are *moral* beings, capable of distinguishing among kinds of things and therefore of knowing and doing right and wrong. Also because of them we are *social* beings, able to understand and explain things to one another that other creatures do not understand and cannot discuss. This draws us closer together than even herd or swarm animals.

We are unique in possessing these capacities, and it is in this specific respect that our nation’s founders declared that “all men are created equal.” This equality has nothing to do with the color of anyone. Its source is the unique, immaterial, rational soul of the human being. One of my teachers used to respond to the claims of animal rights advocates that one must not be cruel to any creature, but that only those who can talk are entitled to vote.

The second reason in nature that makes human reproduction unique is our especially long period of maturation. For months, human babies are simply helpless; without constant attention they will starve. For years afterwards they

**Imprimis** (im-pri-mis), [Latin]: in the first place

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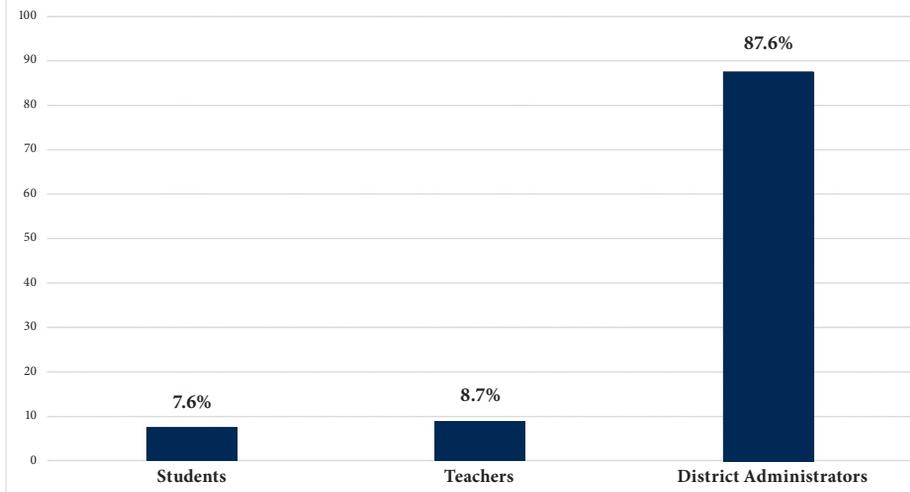
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### Percent Growth of Population in Public Schools, 2000-2019

Source, Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education



must develop the skills and knowledge that are uniquely available to the human being. Both the skills and the knowledge are natural, meaning all human beings can obtain them, but both take time. Each child does the work of obtaining them, but each child needs help. Modern educators often mistake the work of *helping* them to learn for actually doing the learning for them. The second is impossible.

The skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic are direct exercises of the rational faculty. They are in principle the same thing as talking, and in principle every child will learn much of them unassisted. Just watch a child grow up to the age of two. He or she begins very early to respond to things with comprehension. Words soon follow. Children copy adults for the use of words, but they are doing all the work of learning. Little wonder that human beings take a long time to mature: they have so much to learn.

Raising a child has always been difficult and expensive. With rare exceptions, it has always been true that the parents who conceive the child raise him the best. And throughout American history, it has been thought that the family is the cradle of good citizenship and therefore of free and just politics. Public education is as old as our

nation—but only lately has it adopted the purpose of supplanting the family and controlling parents.

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The political successes of Governor Ron DeSantis in Florida, Governor Glenn Youngkin in Virginia, and many other politicians in other states have largely been won on this battleground of education. One can look in history or in literature to see the danger of where the idea of supplanting the family might lead. Study the education practices that existed in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany and that exist today in Communist China. Or read the terrifying account in Orwell's *1984*. They tell us that children, by distorting their natural desire to grow up and end their dependence, can be recruited to the purposes of despotic regimes, even to the extent of denouncing their parents to the state.

We do not yet have this in America. But we do have children being turned against their country by being indoctrinated to look on its past—of which all parents, of course, are in some way a part—as a shameful time of irredeemable injustice. We also increasingly have children being encouraged to speak of their sexual proclivities at an age when they can hardly think of them.

To cite just one example, Christopher Rufo has discovered, on the website of the Michigan Department of Education, detailed instructions for how teachers should open the question with students of their sexual orientation—or maybe I should say sexual direction, since “orientation” implies something constant, whereas children are now being taught that sexuality is “fluid” and can take them anywhere.

Also on the website are detailed instructions on how to keep this activity from the parents. And as we learned last year, when parents get angry and complain of things like this, the FBI is likely to become interested.

ANY CRITICISM OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IS IMMEDIATELY STYLED AS A CRITICISM OF TEACHERS. BUT AS THE NUMBERS SHOW, THE PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM WORKS TO THE DETRIMENT OF TEACHERS AND FOR THE BENEFIT OF BUREAUCRATS. THE TEACHERS UNIONS THEMSELVES, WHICH CLAIM TO BE DEFENDING TEACHERS AND CHILDREN, ARE IN TRUTH DEFENDING AN ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM THAT HAS GROWN BY LEAPS AND BOUNDS WHILE THE NUMBER OF TEACHERS HAS GROWN VERY LITTLE.

Who “owns” the child, then? The choice is between the parents, who have taken the trouble to have and raise the child—and who, in almost all cases, will give their lives to support the child for as long as it takes and longer—or the educational bureaucracy, which is more likely than a parent to look upon the child as an asset in a social engineering project to rearrange government and society.

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The revolutionary force behind this social engineering project is a set of ideas installed in just about every university today. Its smiting arm is the administrative state, an element of

America’s ruling class. The administrative state has something over 20 million employees, many of them at the federal but most at the state level. Directly and indirectly, they make rules about half the economy, which means they affect all of it.

Most of the bureaucrats who staff the administrative state have permanent jobs. The idea behind this was that if they do not fear dismissal and have excellent pay and benefits that can’t be reduced, then they will be politically neutral. Today, of course, the public employee unions that represent this administrative state are the largest contributors in politics and give overwhelmingly to one side. They are the very definition of partisanship.

The fiction is that these bureaucrats are highly trained, dispassionate, nonpartisan, and professional, and that therefore they can do a better job, of almost anything, than somebody outside the system can do. They proceed by rules that over time have become ever more hopelessly complex. Only they can read these rules—and, for the most part, they read them as they please.

Judges have up to now, for the most part, given deference to the bureaucrats’ reading of their own rules. It is a rare happy fact that this judicial practice is under challenge in the courts. If it should ever become settled doctrine that the bureaucracy is constrained by the strict letter of the laws made by elected legislators and enforced by elected executives, that will exercise some restraint upon the administrative state. That explains why, after decades of defending judicial supremacy, progressives are beginning to question the authority of the courts

and speak openly about packing the Supreme Court.

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Public education is an important component of the prevailing administrative system. The roots of the system are in Washington, D.C., and the tendrils reach into every town and hamlet that has a public school. These tendrils retain some measure of freedom, especially in red states where legislatures do not go along automatically. In some red states, the growth of administrators has been somewhat slower than average. But this growth has been rapid and large everywhere. In every state, the result has been to remove authority and money away from the schools where the students learn. In every state, the authority and money drained from the schools have flowed toward the bureaucracy.

The political battle over this issue is fraught with dishonesty. Any criticism of public education is immediately styled as a criticism of teachers. But as the numbers show, the public education system works to the detriment of teachers and for the benefit of bureaucrats. The teachers unions themselves, some of the largest of the public employee unions, claim to be defending teachers and children. That cannot be more than half true, given that they are defending an administrative system that has grown by leaps and bounds while the number of teachers has grown very little.

Worse even than this is the tendency the system sets in all of us. Bureaucracy is a set of processes, a series of prescribed steps not unlike instructions for assembling a toy. First this happens, then that happens, and then the next thing. The processes proceed according to rules. It is a profession unto itself to gain competence in navigating these rules, but nobody is really competent. Today we tend too much to think that this kind

of process is the only thing that can give legitimacy to something. A history curriculum is adopted, not because it gives a true account of the unchangeable things that have already happened, but because it has survived a process. The process is dominated by “stakeholders”—mostly people who have a financial or political interest in what is taught. They are mostly not teachers or scholars but advocates. And so we adopt our textbooks, our lesson plans, and our state standardized tests with a view to future political outcomes once the kids grow up.

I have said and written many times that the political contest between parents and people who make an independent living, on the one hand, and the administrative state and all its mighty forces on the other, is the key political contest of our time. Today that seems truer than ever. The lines are clearly formed.

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As long as our representative institutions work in response to the public will, there is thankfully no need for violence. As the Declaration of Independence says, “Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes.”

The Declaration guides us in our peaceful pursuits, too. In naming the causes of the American Revolution, it gives a guide to maintaining free and responsible government. The long middle section of the Declaration accuses the King of interfering with representative government, violating the separation of powers, undermining the independence of the judiciary, and failing to suppress violence.

And in an apposite phrase, it says of the King: “He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people, and eat out their substance.”

So it is today. And so it is our duty to defend our American way of life. ■