

The political future of American education

B. D. Colberg — Corvallis, OR, USA — 2025-03-15

America's current education system—compulsory free public secular Prussian K-12 schools, then college for large swaths of the middle class—came to maturity in the mid 20th century.¹²

Since then, politico-social opinion regarding education has (approximately) quinquefurcated:

- One alliance of thought, tracing its popular origin back to John Holt's writings³ in the 60s/70s, concludes that schools are a structural mistake and seeks to abandon them entirely. Commonly lumped as “homeschooling” (and successful in legalizing that practice!), it is a “barbell” coalition of those who object strongly to schools, often for contradictory reasons.
- “Liberation” homeschooling (which fades into anarchist-adjacent “unschooling,” and is re-institutionalized through e.g. Sudbury schools) builds its rationale on a fundamental skepticism of central authority. It emerged earlier, from 60s anti-Vietnam countercultures.⁴
- “Religious” homeschooling rose out of concerns around the increasing secularization of American schools, and therefore culture, starting in the 60s and gaining steam in the 80s. A key part of the Republican coalition starting with Reagan, it constitutes the majority of all homeschoolers and provides political muscle to defend the legality of homeschooling.
- “Academic” homeschooling⁵ is niche and very quiet, largely composed of university professors, the ambitious, the wealthy, and everyone else who is frustrated with the pace and low expectations of even the best schools.⁶ It's still small, but growing since COVID.
- A different group (the “school reformers”) seeks to hyper-optimize the system that we have. This group technocratically tinkers with standardized tests, curriculums, budgets, teacher incentives, etc etc. They run nonprofits and government, and haven't had much success.⁷
- A third group (the “computer lovers”) has been transfixed by the possibilities of personalized AI-driven education literally since computers were first theoretically hypothesized. It is commonly underrated, imo, the extent to which personal computing and the Internet were developed to their current maturity with this “killer app” use case as an explicit inspiration.⁸
- There is arguably a coherent fourth group, explicitly leftist/revolutionary, focused on taking over society by taking over culture by taking over the means of cultural propagation. See e.g. modern Schools of Education, “wokeness,” “CRT,” “deconstructive pedagogy,” etc. Their mutually-recognized archenemies are the religious homeschoolers. I won't really talk about them much because I think of them as a political movement using schools as a tool. They have a surprising amount of philosophical overlap with liberation homeschoolers.
- There is certainly a coherent fifth group, the teachers' unions, with a vested interest in the status quo modulo higher/maintained teacher pay. Their mutually-recognized archenemies are the school reformers. Similarly, I think they are first and essentially an economic bloc.

¹ high school driven by Progressive Era (union activism, educational theory [Dewey etc], compulsory attendance / anti-child-labor laws, more funding) (c1920s), widespread by 40s, certainly by Great Society (60s)

² college driven by Vannevar/NSF (1950-70), GI bill (c1950), draft evasion (c1970), student loans (c1970)

³ mainly through the GWS magazine, then a dozen books. very inflammatory style. he would have loved Twitter

⁴ this was Holt's movement, with the more explicitly pro-libertarian flag taken up by John Taylor Gatto in the 90s

⁵ I, very broadly, lump into this camp both private-school attendees and those who think even private isn't good.

⁶ the highest-profile person in this camp is Lazlo Polgar, the Hungarian father of repeated chess-training fame

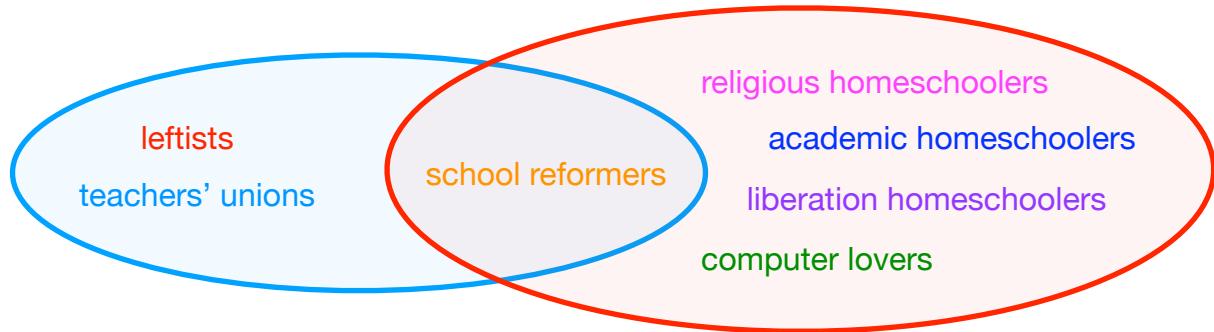
⁷ think Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Barack Obama, “A Nation At Risk,” Teach for America, Common Core, etc

⁸ endless examples here. Stephenson's “A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer”; Papert's “Mindstorms”; Steve Jobs

These camps are certainly not mutually exclusive, but I think they form the most useful basis of combatants for cogent analysis of the present and future political situation. In particular:

- The **leftists'** cultural-seizure goals are *incompatible* with **religious homeschoolers'** values.
- The **leftists'** egalitarian focus is *incompatible* with **academic homeschoolers'** ambitions.
- The **leftists'** egalitarian focus is similarly *incompatible* with **computer-lover** individualization.
- (It is worth noting that the **leftists** do *not* have an inherent beef with **school reformers**.)
- (**Leftists**, personally/philosophically,⁹ actually jibe quite well with **liberation homeschoolers**!)
- The **unions'** need for job existence is *incompatible* with **computer-lover** automation dreams.
- The **unions'** desire for teacher autonomy has tension¹⁰ with **school reformers'** experiments.
- The **unions'** supply of jobs depends on school, and is *incompatible* with **all homeschooling**.

These alignments have coalesced into alliances, which have each chosen¹¹ a political party:



And these two parties have found a compromise that both can hold their nose and agree to:

1. **the left** gets to control the schools (but they can't have *everybody* under their thumb)
2. **the right** gets to leave schools if they really want to (but they still have to *pay* for them)

This arrangement, substantially but with asterisks, has been the status quo for a generation.

Before the narrative moves on, it is important to explicitly clarify and explore three points.

First: **leftists** and **teachers' unions** institutionally¹² **do not care** about students or quality. The left cares about schools as an efficient means to social dominance and revolutionary takeover. The unions care about schools as means for provision of millions of solid middle-class jobs. Because neither left bloc cares about school quality, in any situation where it trades off with (1) leftist indoctrination, (2) "equity," or (3) teacher pay / job quality, they choose to sacrifice it.

Second: **school reformers** **only care** about educational "quality" (as it can be measured). They are tied to schools because they see no large-scale institutional alternative. They differ from the left (and clash with them) insofar as they see leftism and unions as counterproductive, but are happy to work with them otherwise. They are institutionalists, trying to improve education for all society, so the homeschoolers' "screw it my kids are out" mentality isn't an option.

Third: "**tech people**" actually, subtly, fall into two different camps: most philanthropists are **school reformers**; pedagogical innovators are **computer lovers** and **academic homeschoolers**.

⁹ this alliance breaks down when you consider leftists' drive towards social dominance, which requires schools as a mandatory vector of mass indoctrination / reeducation for those who don't incline to the ideology naturally. leftists and liberation homeschoolers both dislike "the boot," but leftists dislike it *because they're not wearing it*.

¹⁰ unions are fine with reform as long as it doesn't fundamentally change teachers' jobs, or evaluate/control them

¹¹ pretty much everyone is aware of this alignment, except computer lovers, who until recent years didn't realize that they *need to be* Republicans because the Democratic education platform is solidly controlled by enemies

¹² obviously, many *members* of these blocs do care, and care quite strongly. but they can't fight the incentives!

In recent years, five secular shifts are taking place, *all of which* empower the right-alliance:

1. Schools' academic performance has aggressively deteriorated, which increasingly drives everyone who cares about their kids' learning into the **academic homeschooling** camp.
2. The leftist worldview has become entrenched and blatant in schools, which increasingly drives everyone who objects to any of its dogmas into the **religious homeschooling** camp.
3. COVID laid bare to many parents for the first time the authoritarian/babysitting nature of schools, which has driven more and more people into the **liberation homeschooling** camp.
4. The **computer lovers'** AI technologies are finally getting good enough that they present a credible alternative to standard-level K-12 instruction (and they will soon fully surpass it).
5. The **school reformers** are seeing that their top-down technological tinkering is unable to bear fruit against left-alliance opposition, and optimistic about computer lovers' progress.

The result is that the “educational right” is more numerous than ever before; more passionate than ever before; *has a credible alternative to the schools*; and has the reformers’ sympathies.

We are already seeing the resultant change: a secular move into universal voucher programs.

Here's how it's going to play out:

1. Universal vouchers start to get implemented, in the most right-leaning jurisdictions first.¹³
2. Curricular and logistical school alternatives get their legs, using vouchers as fuel.
3. School alternatives get better than schools, and start to show results.
 - Eventually (probably by 2035), the worst-performing red state will have better educational statistics than the best-performing blue state, and less educational expenditure.
4. The knives come out; there is a full-scale political war to universalize school vouchers.
 - The **unions** fundamentally depend on the existence of teacher jobs; *it's to the death!*
 - The **leftists** will have already lost strongholds in media and academia; *it's to the death!*
5. Eventually, results are unignorable and vouchers win. Public schools must now compete.
6. Public schools will be unable compete with modern-age alternatives built and honed for 21st-century technology and voucherized markets. Most will gradually go out of business.
7. Formerly-public school buildings will be bought up by private entities to run custom schools or educational “malls;” a thousand flowers will bloom; subpar education will no longer be able to exist; hallelujah, praise the Lord, an inhuman institution will be no more!

Right now we're at Step 2. Vouchers exist, the future is embryonic, and it needs to grow fast.

¹³ because they are the leftist/union weak points, and the right-coalition strong points