

Education for the Second Vermont Republic—Or the Current One by Robert S. Griffin

In preparation for putting together this article, I asked myself, what is at the core of this Second Vermont Republic movement? What are these people concerned about? What worries them? What do they want? I concluded that their fundamental concern is that the current political state of affairs in this country allows them too little control over their own lives, and that Vermont is losing its special quality. They see the federal government engaging in violence around the world for unacceptable reasons and they feel helpless to do anything about it. Wal-Mart and its like are invading the state and changing its economic and cultural character and they have no say in the matter. Anyone can come here at anytime, there is no control over immigration, and the Second Republic people contemplate what a population of two, three, four—ten, twenty—times the current number will do to the Vermont landscape and way of life. And, the topic of this writing, education: an unresponsive government in Washington is dictating how they are to school their own children.

Assuming that you are either a participant in this movement or in sympathy with it, consider this picture of how education could work in a Second Vermont Republic and see how it appeals to you:

You and other parents in your community get together and work out how you want to educate your children until they are ready for college or work. You decide the general direction you want the school program to take—traditional or progressive, or some mix of the two—and how much time during the day and week and for how many years you want your children to spend in formal education. You pitch in to help with the schools' construction to keep the cost down. The total community provides funds for the support of your school(s), and sets out minimal general guidelines—say, that the school you set up provides students with the opportunity to develop basic literacy and numerical competence and an understanding of our political system--but the community's control stops there.

The choice of studies, graduation requirements, and the selection and dismissal of administrators and teachers is left up to the parents of the children in school. This idea of giving parents the right to shape their own children's education is not a new one in

this country. Way back in 1839 prominent journalist Orestes Brownson advocated “placing the individual school under the control of a community composed merely of the families having children to be educated in it.”¹

If you like the ring of what I just described, there is nothing saying that schools couldn’t operate in this fashion within our current federal system, but of course they don’t. And the biggest reason they don’t is that since around 1850 the government has gotten into the school business in a big way. And whenever the government handles something, you don’t, simple at that. Not only does the government fund schools through taxation, they operate the schools. They set up the curriculum, they hire the teachers, establish graduation requirements, and so on. It’s called public education, although a more accurate term for it is government schooling. This country adopted the current arrangement from the system used in Prussia, hardly the prototype for a free society.

Very important, the government doesn’t just leave it that their schools are an opportunity for children and their parents; rather, their educational service is a legal requirement, compulsory education (unless you can afford to buy your way out by paying for a private school in addition to the money you have to pay to the government to operate their schools, or re-arrange your life so that you can educate your children at home).

The schools are politicized, part of the democratic process. Democracy, so we are told, gives us freedom and power over our own destiny. If that’s the case, why the problem with the way the public schools are being run, or, for that matter, with the way the war on terrorism is being conducted, whatever the complaint. The problem is with democracy itself, because while democracy gets very favorable play in this country, including and especially in the government schools most of us have attended--to the point that we insist that everybody in the world ought to adopt it--in fact, democracy is not so much about giving people freedom and control over their own destinies as it is about taking those things away from them. Democracy is about giving your power to decide something over to the collective. When you go along with putting something up to a vote, you are agreeing to do whatever the majority or plurality of the people who vote on that matter want to do, whether you agree with it or not and whether it is good for you or not. At its

core, democracy is about coercion. Once the vote comes down, you do things that way or you pay a fine or go to jail.

Despite the rhetoric, democracy and individual freedom and self-determination are antithetical. There are times when it is practical to put something to a democratic vote. We can't have one congressman for you and another one for me (I guess). But you have to keep in mind that whenever you have a democratic vote, up to 49% of the people don't want the result of the election, and probably a good number of people on the winning side wouldn't do it exactly that way if it were their call. So you can't assume that democracy is the best way to go, here, there, and everywhere. With schools having become politicized, democratized, don't be surprised if you feel out of control, because, ironically, democracy is about taking control away from you.

The Founders of this country were well aware of all of this and that is why they established not a political democracy but rather a *constitutional republic* within which there is a measured democratic element. The Constitution specifies what the federal government can and can't do, and its Bill of Rights underscores the sanctity of individual freedom. The federal government can't just willy-nilly take over anything, or put up anything up to a vote, and in the process squelch individual liberty and self-determination and run roughshod over local communities. There is nothing in the Constitution about a federal role in education, and yet there is a federal Department of Education, and in 2002 the federal government spent 108 billion dollars on education--and with all federal funding comes federal control, count on it.

In this country we pledge allegiance to the flag and to the *republic* for which it stands, but you'll never catch a politician talking about republicanism. The reason for that is democracy opens the door to politicians and government bureaucrats—and the interest groups that control them--getting their hands on everything and controlling it. A monstrous new baseball stadium? You want that? And you want to force other people to pay for it? Put a bond issue or a sales tax increase up to a vote. Democracy in action. Sell the idea hard, get the baseball fans to the polls, and even people who view professional baseball as cheapjack entertainment have to give over part of their income to pay for your baseball shows. And what is really good about the whole deal is the people who see pro baseball on a par with bingo parlors and strip clubs won't even

complain because they have been sold the system. The joke's on them.

It is important to reflect on the fact that this movement isn't called The Second Vermont Democracy but rather The Second Vermont Republic. If people in this country had paid more attention to the difference between a republic and a democracy it would have made it far tougher for Washington to presume that it could pass the No Child Left Behind legislation and extract your income to pay for it and compel you to abide by its provisions. That law isn't about educating the children of Vermont for greatness. It is about bringing children in Houston up to a bare minimum level of achievement. It is about politicians and political parties attracting Hispanic votes in upcoming elections. The joke's on you.

And don't assume that if you rid yourself of federal control you'll get your life back. Even in a second Vermont republic you will have to guard against people who you have never met, or even heard of, presuming to dictate educational policy and practice to local communities. Right now, the Vermont State Department of Education has produced what it calls the Vermont Framework of Standards, a detailed and virtually endless list of what every school and every teacher in Vermont must do. One size fits all. Montpelier knows best. Even if this educational prescription doesn't align with your hopes and your children's needs and you didn't have anything to do with its creation, your job is to do what you are told.

You can't talk about government at any level without taking interest groups into account (James Madison called them factions). Where there is government, there too, hovering about, are interest, or advocacy, groups who see an opportunity to use government as a vehicle for furthering their particular agenda. You can't understand schools if you don't realize that various movements, organizations, and ideologues see them as places to sell their wares, if you will, to a captive audience, your children. Your children are learning about more than math and science in school. They are being taught how to view the world and themselves and how to conduct their lives in particular ways, and you need to factor that in when deciding what to do about their schooling.

I think it is fair to say that the victors in the competition to insert their perspective into school programs have been the egalitarians, collectivists, multiculturalists, feminists, gays, environmentalists, internationalists, secularists, and Holocaust

promoters. I understand that the membership of the Second Vermont Republic is drawn from across the ideological/political spectrum, so to some this will come as good news and to others it will be cause for alarm.

Remember in that scenario I sketched out at the beginning where you would hire teachers to carry out your wishes? You wouldn't get away with that now. Teachers these years are *professionals*. You don't tell them what to do. They, not you, will decide what goes on in your children's education. Those children are in the first instance their students, not your sons and daughters. Your responsibility as a parent is not to direct teachers but rather to support whatever they decide to do—that's what they mean by "parent involvement." The posture of professional autonomy has been instilled in today's teachers by the universities that train them, the state departments of education that license them, and the professional organizations to which they belong.

And you must realize teachers these days don't just teach subjects—history, literature, and so on—they teach the *whole child*. That means that anything that relates to your child in any way—and what doesn't?—is fair game for teachers to teach about, whether it's personal relationships, psychological well-being, gender identities, or conflict resolution. And they will teach it the way they want to teach it. They'll entertain your requests and suggestions, but they'll make the final call about what to do with your children.

So what do you as a parent or concerned citizen do about what goes on in schools? One way to view life is the creation of positive pictures in our heads and then making those pictures a reality in the world. Imagine something and make it happen. More and more, I'm thinking that life comes down to that. So a good first step is to create a clear picture in your mind of what you want to see go on in schools with your children or all children. Put words to that picture that describes it, and share those words with other people and get their reaction and help. You could start with the image I sketched at the beginning of this article and elaborate upon it and modify it. Perhaps you don't like the image I set out. That's fine; come up with something better—at least for you—than what I set forth.

Once you get an inner picture with words to describe it that feels right, use it to set up goals—tangible and realizable things that are worth accomplishing. And then, alone and with others, whichever makes sense, take action to accomplish those goals. The

goals can be big—starting a school, say—and they can be small—making sure that that good book the school isn’t using is available to your child. The key is to be moving in a positive direction. Not just talking about the world, but doing something to change it.

There are a lot of good things to read in education. As I was writing this I was inspired by Thomas Jefferson’s Bill for a More General Diffusion of Knowledge that he submitted to the Virginia legislature.² It provided for the decentralization of educational governance. Browse the education section of any bookstore. I sit in one of the easy chairs in Barnes & Noble and read sections of books that catch my eye. Ask friends what they are reading.

If you find that your inner picture of what ought to go on in education doesn’t square with what is actually going on and you have children in school, I’ll list some options of what you can do. I don’t have the space to go into detail, but I hope there is enough here to get you started on your own investigations.

You could check into private schools.

There’s homeschooling. One possibility is to start a collaborative home school. Four or five families go together and one or two of the parents takes on the primary responsibility for schooling the children and the other parents augment that.

If you have the money, you could hire a tutor, perhaps a live-in one.

You could become a educational support and guide and advocate for your own children. You can share your hopes for their education with them. You can work with school administrators to help them get with the best teachers. You can help them propose and modify assignments so that they are the most enriching possible. You can make your home a rich educational context, with a décor and books and activity possibilities that reflect your highest aspirations for your children. You can model what you most value in education—don’t just point the way for your children in education, *be* the way. Be a good adult learner. You can augment or counterbalance what the school does by providing your children with they aren’t getting in school. You could join with other families and set up after-school and weekend educational experiences for your children.

Voucher programs give public funds to families to use for education in the school of their choice. You could see if that is possible in your case.

You could lobby for legislation in Vermont—most other states have it—that would allow you to join with others in setting up a charter school. Charter schools are public but free of most of the restrictions and directives that public schools have to follow. Any group can start a charter school; it is not limited to professional educators.

Something good to do right away is to set aside some time to discuss education with your Second Vermont Republic comrades. Ask yourselves: What do we want schools to be like? What can we do now that will move things in that direction? And then, so important: take action.

Robert S. Griffin's book on education is *While There's Time: Individualism and Conservatism in Education*, available at the Xlibris web site. His web site is www.robertsgriffin.com.

Notes

1. Quoted in Stephen Tozer, et al., *School and Society: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, fourth edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002) p. 79.
2. See, Roy Honeywell, *The Educational Work of Thomas Jefferson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931) pp. 233-45.