

# School Is Propaganda

By Robin Hanson December 8, 2009 5:50 pm

From [Overcomingbias.com](http://Overcomingbias.com) I copied it here to keep you away from inappropriate comments.

Officials usually talk as if the point of school is to acquire useful skills and knowledge. I often emphasize instead school's signaling function; school lets us show off good features. But let's not forget another important function: propaganda.

Consider: why do we have public schools? Even if we gained from other kids' schooling, that only suggests we subsidize schools, not that governments run them. Strong local scale economies offer a plausible rationale for government-run municipal services like power, water, sewers, phones, and emergency services. But schooling scale economies are pretty weak.

Long ago private schools were more common, relative to public. But high immigration rates induced many to want to force immigrant kids, especially Catholics, to think more like [protestant natives](#): The common-school reformers argued for the case on the belief that common schooling could create good citizens, unite society and prevent crime and poverty. ... By 1918 all states had passed laws requiring children to attend at least elementary school. The Catholics were, however, opposed to common schooling and created their own private schools.

The idea goes [way back](#):

Aristotle believed that it is the responsibility of the government to create a public school system for all its citizens. Good virtues should still be key, strong leadership encouraged wherever possible, and excellent citizenship taught.

We can see similar forces in [Holland now](#).

Muslims in Slotervaart are often accused of harassing gay men. Even when such conduct doesn't rise to the level of illegality, it sins against the official Dutch compact of social tolerance.

Clearly many there want to somehow make immigrants to think more like the dominant culture. Alex Tabarrok tells me many voice such concerns when he talks on school vouchers: too many crazies would have their own schools and teach kids to be crazies.

If one of the main functions of public schools is to affirm our cultural beliefs against opposing beliefs, then we must be teaching more than just "obvious" things. For many things we teach our kids, substantial communities somewhere disagree.

While we give lip service to diversity and freedom of speech and thought, we in practice only allow such thoughts as can survive decades of mind-numbing public-school conformity. Yet we hardly ever discuss what our official school propaganda should be; we almost pretend it doesn't exist.

For example, professional historians are usually embarrassed by what passes for history in school, but they usually say little. And my guess is that we prefer not to instead subsidize private schools and require them to teach specific things because we'd rather not be that explicit about exactly what propaganda we want taught; we'd rather that happened behind the scenes.

But to me the honest approach would be the opposite: we should publish lists of specific beliefs we teach in schools, and our best arguments supporting those beliefs against critics. We can't say such topics are not important enough to bother arguing for, if we are going to all the trouble to teach them. And if we are too embarrassed by the quality of our supporting arguments, we just shouldn't be teaching such things.

**Added 11:30p:** [Supporting evidence:](#)

More totalitarian governments as well as those with larger wealth transfers make greater investments in publicly controlled information. ... Public educational expenditures vary in similar ways to government ownership of television stations.

- See more at: <http://www.overcomingbias.com/2009/12/school-is-propaganda.html#sthash.GFILzloj.dpuf>