

On private school and public morality

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Allison Benedikt's [anti-private-school manifesto](#) is pretty entertaining:

You are a bad person if you send your children to private school. Not bad like *murderer* bad—but bad like *ruining-one-of-our-nation's-most-essential-institutions-in-order-to-get-what's-best-for-your-kid* bad. So, pretty bad.

I am not an education policy wonk: I'm just judgmental. But it seems to me that if every single parent sent every single child to public school, public schools would improve. This would not happen immediately. It could take generations. Your children and grandchildren might get mediocre educations in the meantime, but it will be worth it, for the eventual common good.

Yes, this is a hyperbolic provocation. I agree with a lot of what Benedikt says, but I don't think that private-school parents—or, for that matter, the many private-school teachers I know—are bad people.

In fact, I don't see any reason to reject the moral legitimacy of trying to do what's best for your kid. This instinct is hardly limited to those suspicious of all social units larger than the nuclear family, lest we all end up on compulsory collectivist farms. It's pretty much part of being a parent. (Or so I hear; my first kid's still being gestated.) So while I think Benedikt is right that "if you can afford private school. . . chances are that your spawn will be perfectly fine at a crappy public school," I don't expect parents to be satisfied with that middling outlook.

Which is why I part ways with Benedikt here:

(By the way: [Banning private schools isn't the answer](#). We need a moral adjustment, not a legislative one.)

I think this point deserves more than two parenthetical sentences and a link. It's true: public schools would eventually be so much better if all the privileged kids—with well-educated, connected parents—went to them along with everyone

else. As Benedikt says, it would serve the common good, at the expense of some mediocrely educated privileged kids in the meantime. But is the goal really to get parents to stop prioritizing their own kids?

All of which is to say that I don't think parents who refuse to send their kids to public school should be scolded and shamed. But I do think maybe they should be ticketed and fined. Public education should be mandatory.

To be clear, I don't want to *ban* private education efforts, only to require public-school attendance. You want your kids to learn creationism or the catechism or the teachings of Rudolf Steiner? Great! Do it after school, or during the summer.

Not that the point is public vs. private. It's about [whether the common good is being served](#). And in education, it clearly is not. Because of the incentives individual parents have—understandably! morally!—it's hard to see how this gets solved in the realm of individual choice. But the government doesn't have the problem of caring way more about the education of these two or three kids than all the others, because the government doesn't make babies. So in this case, it's better situated to promote the common good.

I'm aware that such a proposal might raise the odd constitutional objection (though so would, say, abolishing the electoral college). And no, I don't think it's ever going to happen. I'm not planning to pester my representatives about this one.

Still, it's a good example of the importance of collective action, including (sometimes) at the level of federal law. Not because the government is always better or more efficient at doing stuff—though the opposite isn't true, either—but because the government has an interest in making sure all children are treated fairly. Perhaps some parents have a stronger impulse toward fairness than others, and perhaps some of us admire them for it. But parents can't be expected to value *all kids* more than *these kids*. The government can.

Benedikt actually makes two different arguments in her piece. It's mainly about the need to prioritize the common good over individual advancement. But she also argues that “what's best for your kid” isn't cut and dry:

Reading Walt Whitman in ninth grade changed the way you see the world? Well, getting drunk before basketball games with kids who lived at the trailer park near my house did the same for me.

There's a lot more to say about this, perhaps starting with the relative merit of exposing kids to lots of AP options and so on vs. exposing them to economic diversity. But however we define "good school," I don't think we can get around parents wanting their kids to go to there. To make schools better for everyone, we need a collective approach.

[[Elsewhere](#), Ben Adler points out that lots of affluent parents opt out of bad urban public schools by *moving*, not going private. A fair point—though [the suburbs are changing](#).]