

## School Inc.

### Discussion Questions

#### Episode 1: The Price of Excellence

1. Andrew Coulson gives several examples of material products that have been rapidly improved since their invention, e.g. waterwheels to turbines, blackboards to wall-sized blackboards to whiteboards, and Sony Walkman personal radios that evolved into cassette/CD players and then MP3 players.
  - a. Why do you think education has not advanced at anything near the pace that material goods have?
  - b. Is there a fundamental difference between the advancement of material goods, and education, which is more of a process?
  - c. Is technology the answer to making education better? Have we seen large gains in education since the inclusion of technology (computers, e-mail, PowerPoint) or have we only saved time?
  - d. There are Waldorf schools in Silicon Valley that eschew technology until 8th grade. No Luddites, the children are those of Silicon Valley's elites: executives at Google, Apple, et al. Is the advancement that needs to scale up perhaps human technology and not digital technology? (Source: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/23/technology/at-waldorf-school-in-silicon-valley-technology-can-wait.html>)
2. The history of American schooling was one of competition, until the late 19th century. Horace Mann (1796-1859) and John Dewey (1835-1927) are the two most responsible for leading the charge for public education over private schools.
  - a. Setting aside the differences between public and private schools, did consumers of education benefit from the competition of competing interests, i.e. public, private, large, small, Catholic, etc.
    - i. What are some of the benefits of having one standard system, such as public schooling.
    - ii. What are some of the benefits from having choices in a diverse system of competing schools?
  - b. Horace Mann (1796-1859) believed in the "perfectibility of man," the idea championed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), that humans have a near unending ability to improve themselves, to shape their environment – and perhaps most

importantly – to be shaped by their environment.

- i. Do you agree with Mann that, given enough schooling, appropriate laws, social conditioning, etc. we can reshape people?
- ii. Or is our nature, for the most part, fixed and flawed, capable of having a few dents hammered out and polished, but not fundamentally altered?

3. The rock star teacher Jaime Escalante (1930-2010) created a stellar program of Advanced Placement (A.P.) Calculus classes at Garfield High School in Los Angeles. At the end of the year, students get college credit if they score well enough on the A.P. exam, a national exam given by College Board. At one point in Escalante's career, 25% of all Hispanics in the United States who got college credit from the exam were students from Garfield High School. Escalante's students scored so high on the exam, that the Educational Testing Service (ETS) threw them out, presuming that it was not possible for that many minority students to have scored so high without cheating going on. If ever there was a teacher whose methods should have been replicated and scaled-up, it was Escalante. Tragically, this did not happen. Instead, envy, groupthink, and union protectionism combined to orchestrate a coup, forcing Escalante out as head of the math department.

a. Everybody claims to value excellence. Yet, if so, why isn't Escalante's experience unique? Anywhere you see high achievers, you will see many more claiming the achievers are cheating, the way they live is unrealistic, they have no life, etc.

i. Which is a stronger force in schools (or society), envy or excellence?

b. Do some people dress their vice as a virtue by claiming that their dislike for what it takes to achieve excellence is really a passion for egalitarianism or equality?

i. Which has done more to advance society, equality or excellence?

ii. In order to better the world, if you could push a button increasing one by 20%, would you pick equality or excellence?

1. (This author conducted this experiment in two classes, expecting a 50/50 or 60/40 in favor of equality. Instead, he got two classes of 100% in favor of excellence. The students argued that excellence benefits even those who don't/can't strive for it by faster societal gains.)

iii. F.A. Hayek (1899-1992) argued that if we want equality of outcomes, we will have to treat people unequally. If, however, we treat people equally, we will get unequal outcomes.

1. Which is more important/fair/ethical, equal treatment or outcomes?

a. California once proposed a bill (it failed) requiring colleges to graduate students based on race, in line with the percentage of the

population, i.e. if group X was 20% of the population, college graduates should be 20% group X each year.

- c. For an excellent discussion on the limits we put on excellence, screen 2081, the 24-minute film adaptation of Kurt Vonnegut's short story, Harrison Bergeron (see trailer here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nL9zg7-rzPc>).
- d. 2081 portrays a society pursuing total equality, thus the smart have sounds blasted into their earpieces to keep them from taking unfair advantage of their smarts, the strong wear weights to disadvantage them, and the beautiful wear masks, so as not to gain unfairly from their looks.

- 4. Should teachers who produce excellence be paid more than "regular" teachers? While teachers like to claim that excellence in education is difficult to measure, certainly Escalante's was obvious to all.

- a. Should Escalante have gotten paid more? Or should teachers continue to get paid, as they are in most states, based on years of experience?
- b. What if the best teacher on campus is a third-year fireball, and the most experienced teachers is a burned out 30+ year teacher?

- 5. In Korea, the best teachers seem to be drawn to teaching in Hagwons, or after school tutoring. The public school teachers seem adequate, but not spectacular.

- a. Korean teacher colleges, not like American colleges, tend to draw from the lower end of academic talent in universities. In America, education schools at universities typically have among the lowest grade point average (g.p.a.) requirements of any field.
- b. Since talented students are drawn toward challenge, should we increase the quality of the teaching field by raising the g.p.a. requirements at education schools?
- c. Or will talent not go to fields that pay everyone the same, regardless of productivity?
- d. Does the fact that Hagwon teachers have only yearly contracts change their motivation compared to teachers who have continuing contracts or even tenure?

## Episode 2: Push or Pull

- 6. Private schools typically enjoy many benefits, often including selective admissions, wealthier students, and parents who value education at a high level. However, not all private schools serve the wealthy.
  - a. New York City is famous for Catholic schools that serve middle class and poor students so well, at such a lower cost, that many non-Catholic parents send their students there to be educated.

b. Similarly, the charter schools shown in the video cost \$3,500 less per year than the public schools.

i. In American public schools, to afford a better school in most states, you have to be able to afford a better house.

ii. Incentives differ when a school is freely chosen rather than assigned based on a student's address.

1. How might a student and her parents choosing a school create different motives for success?

iii. It is often said that public schools "have to take all comers" whereas private schools can be selective. While true, this is a dual-edged sword: private schools typically offer contracts, which can be "non-renewed" based on a student's performance.

1. How might a student and his parents' behavior change if they knew that causing trouble or not taking school seriously would keep them from being offered a contract the next year?

7. The Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) charter schools focuses on low-income students, rather than the wealthy. Instituting a longer day, focusing on skills and habits for college, they train the teachers to lead as well as teach. They have 183 schools in 20 states, serving over 70,000 students.

a. KIPP has a graduation rate 10% higher than the U.S. average of all public schools, despite focusing on low-income students.

b. Charter schools often require approval from committees dominated by public schools.

i. Uber, the car service, often is required to get approval from committees dominated by the taxi industry.

ii. To open a new hospital in most states, a certificate of need is required (<http://www.ncsl.org/research/health/con-certificate-of-need-state-laws.aspx>), a process dominated by existing hospitals.

1. Is it fair to ask entrepreneurs to seek approval from the very people/industry with whom they're trying to compete?

2. If such services were really worse, as taxis claim about Uber, and public schools claim about charter, would they really fight so strongly, or would they be content to watch them fail?

c. After hurricane Katrina, 60 private and 8 Catholic schools opened within months, but only 25 public schools.

i. Do the very rules designed to keep public schools "safe" and to ensure quality also

impede the flexibility necessary to a) open after a disaster, and b) change and grow with the times to better serve students?

8. In Chile during the 1990s, per pupil vouchers were issued to the schools, i.e. the money followed the student, not the home address. If the school enrolled a low-income student, the school got 60-80% more money.
  - a. Now consumers were free to vote with their feet and their dollars. Chile soon outperformed all Latin American countries, and achieved the lowest level of educational inequality in Latin America.
  - b. In 2011, Communist protestors demanded all schools to be free, choice to be eliminated and schools assigned by the state, no vouchers, banning tuition copayments (what economists call skin-in-the-game), banning private vouchers, and banning for-profit schools (which served 1/3 of students).
    - i. Which incentives are more likely to produce quality results, people voting with their dollars or the state assigning schools?
    - ii. What if grocery stores were assigned the same way schools are, and you could shop only at the one nearest your house?
      1. How would what you have access to purchase change?
      2. How would the behavior of your grocer change?
      3. Which system is likely to champion intellectual freedom for both students and teachers? Which system is more likely to lean toward indoctrination of students, based on the alignment of incentives?
      4. Are schools really any different than your grocery store when it comes to the incentives that force/prevent change?
9. Agree or disagree with Andrew Coulson's summary and explain why: the extent of improvement depends on how tightly funding is tied to attending schools.

### Episode 3: Forces & Choices

10. Schools, teachers and students respond to incentives, like anyone else. In Sweden in the 1980s, one teacher was selected for every 10 who applied. Now, they are taking what they can get. In the 1980s-1990s, Sweden deemphasized academics in teachers' selection, and shifted more control from teachers more toward students.
  - a. How do such changes affect:
    - i. Who applies to become a teacher?
    - ii. How teachers are motivated?

iii. How students are likely to behave?

11. Andrew Coulson argues that the profit motive determines whether a school “scales up” (expands). Are schools more likely to succeed if they pursue:
  - a. The profit motive?
  - b. The well being of students?
  - c. Are these mutually exclusive?
  - d. If profit has no role in schools, are there other industries that should not pursue profit, and why?
12. In India, researcher James Tooley found that the public schools were free, but mediocre to horrible. The one good network reserved 75% of the slots for children of government officials.
  - a. Despite public schools getting 3-4 times the funding, the private schools are outperforming the public. Again, even the poor find ways to afford the tuition.
  - b. Tooley argued that paying parents keep schooling accountable. While taxes are paid to fund schools, the process is very removed, to the point of being nearly invisible. When parents pay at least a co-fee, it changes incentives.
    - i. How does parents having “skin-in-the-game” change the behavior of:
      1. Students?
      2. Parents?
      3. Teachers?
13. India’s Right to Education Act of 2010 requires that 25% of slots in schools be reserved for the poor or members of lower castes. It is estimated that this regulation quadrupled tuition, leading schools to ignore it. Thus, the government began shutting down successful schools.
  - a. While their intent was noble, would these legislators have done more or less good by simply doing nothing?
  - b. Which is more important in legislation, intent or results?
14. In Philadelphia, the Bible Riots of 1844 erupted when Catholics objected to the state law requiring daily bible reading. The King James Version was the required text, and the Catholics preferred a Catholic version of the Bible. These riots ultimately cost 20 people their lives.
  - a. If the money followed the student instead of the school (voucher), how would incentives have changed?
  - b. Would people voting with their dollars at preferred schools been strong enough to affect a change in the required text?
  - c. Agree or disagree with this quote by Thomas Jefferson (1779):

- i. "To compel a man to furnish contribution of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves... is sinful and tyrannical."
  - d. Is Pennsylvania's Education Improvement Tax Credit a reasonable alternative, where businesses donate to charitable scholarship organizations that parents use at schools they choose, thereby bypassing the taxpayer? Why or why not?
- 15. If your state were to experiment with funding other than direct state funding, which do you think would be more effective and why?
  - a. Tax credits – private funding, voluntary, direct accountability.
  - b. Vouchers – public dollars; no direct citizen-say over how they're spent, politicians control how they're spent.
- 16. What do you make of the CEO of Netflix, Reed Hastings, wanting to improve education, but not wanting "people to think he was doing schools for money"?
  - a. Is it unseemly to have for-profit schools? What about at the college level, e.g. Harvard, Yale, etc.?
  - b. If education is "special" in that economic laws don't apply, are there other areas that economic laws don't apply?
  - c. Agree or disagree with economist Deidre McCloskey, who argues in *Bourgeois Dignity*, that the shift in the acceptability of making money (compared to elite landed gentry) was a fundamental shift in human well-being.
    - i. It is time to include schools in that dignity. Agree or disagree and explain why.