

Why unschooling is better

[Business](#)



To start, I realize that an article about school seems out of place in midwinter.

However, I think that — given the aim of this particular article — this is actually better timing. For most American readers at least, the first semester is ending: 20 long weeks of drudgery, culminating in a gauntlet of tests, finally drawing to an exhausted close. This little break seems to me to be the perfect retrospective moment. Most of you fellow high schoolers reading this article: you probably don't know exactly what you want your career to be yet. But I'm sure you've hashed out some of your interests by this point; maybe you enjoy writing poetry, for example.

On the other end, there is almost certainly at least one class that you loathe with a passion. Studying and doing homework for this class is extra painful and you are invariably bored during class, wishing that you could instead be writing a haiku or reading Neruda. Or, let's say you have thought about your future, and decided that your future is in (I'll use the example of a friend of mine) linguistics. Translators and interpreters need to have a solid command of the language, culture, and politics of a specific country. Academic linguists generally have a more theoretical focus; their knowledge base encompasses the historical evolution of language, the process of forming models of what speakers naturally know about their language (linguistic competence for fellow language nerds), and neurological processing of speech and text. No linguist needs to know that the formation of chemical bonds is an exothermic process, or that World War I occurred between 1914 and 1918, or how to convert logarithmic expressions to exponential ones.

(Poets don't need to know these things either.) So if you've decided that you want to be a linguist or a poet, why can't you just dig in and learn more about languages or writing instead of being forced to take trigonometry? If you have any specific interests, you're probably wondering why you have to spend only 40 minutes on those interests before being forced to set them aside, and why you have to then spend the remaining five hours on topics of no interest or use to you. There is no good answer to that question. The only time anyone has bothered to address that question — since education isn't, apparently, for or about the people being educated — the answer has been, “ It's because kids need a broad liberal arts education.” I say this as a firm believer in “ learn[ing] something about everything”: having an enforced liberal arts education in high school is pointless.

The reason is simple: everyone develops at different rates. Most high schoolers don't have a wide variety of interests; some have one or two, but many are still completely unaware of what they want to do. A very small sliver of high schoolers will have a wide variety of interests and will pursue and cultivate all of them outside of school. So, the only people who actually find value in a liberal arts education don't need it, as they already provide it for themselves. The rest of the students are alienated from learning by ridiculous workloads and/or by being forced to study things that don't interest them. There are many forward-looking solutions to this problem which seek to allow students the time to develop their own interests and provide them with a strong foundation in critical thinking in the process.

The ideal solution would be to have schools group students according to intellectual development and interests rather than by age and follow a <https://assignbuster.com/why-unschooling-is-better/>

coherent K-12 Montessori/outcomes-based model, focusing on conceptual exploration and self-critiquing rather than memorizing facts. But this is unrealistic and unhelpful; such a model would cost billions if not trillions of dollars to implement, would make a lot of traditional parents very angry, and would cause serious problems regarding what to do with students already along the traditional path. Hence, a new educational philosophy that many Americans, including myself until a few months ago, have never heard of: “unschooling” or “natural learning”. Unschooling, basically, is homeschooling without the school — instead of telling students what to learn and when, the unschooler allows their child to pursue their own interests without restraint. (A good introduction to unschooling can be found [here](#).) Ultimately, I believe, this is better than any half-hearted “reforms” which heavily burden the taxpayer and result in little net benefit; this way, we can achieve the desired result — someone who is self-directed and loves to learn — with less cost, not more.

Finally, there is the issue of work versus learning. The traditional school model rarely, if ever, teaches us to think. My views have been challenged only a few times in high school, and then as a result of an exceptionally good teacher rather than an exceptionally good state curriculum. When you factor in the hours of homework every night and the hours of note-copying and memorizing every day, it quickly becomes clear that school is really about teaching us to work obediently and follow directions. Parents sometimes offer the feeble argument that this is actually a good thing, since we would be “cheating our children out of employment opportunities” if we didn’t pre-package them for the job market.

But anyone living outside of Pyongyang can see quite clearly that America's economy is now based on knowledge and not auto manufacturing. Being able to follow written directions and fill out worksheets just isn't going to cut it anymore (see #9). I would also argue that, in not focusing on creative thinking and problem solving rather than rote "learning", we are actually cheating our children out of the growing number of self-employment opportunities. Science writing, small web startups, and tech consulting, among other things, are quickly becoming really great ways to make a sufficient amount of money and maintain your creativity. So not only is traditional education leaving students disillusioned with learning, it is also threatening to leave us completely unable to cope with the Information Age economy. By adopting the unschooling philosophy we can establish a generation of problem solvers and free thinkers who love learning, just in the nick of time — and it won't cost anyone a cent.