

Anthony Comegna: [00:00](#) I think it's safe to say that few political subjects are quite so widely taken for granted today as compulsory public education. Virtually everyone seems to think, and perhaps it's because government schools have shaped us to think this way, that without the state forcing everyone into it, none of us would ever teach our kids to read, or basic numeracy, let alone things like astrophysics or Latin. But despite all that wide political agreement, maybe, just maybe kids don't even need to learn Latin. I mean, really, how would we ever know, though? We don't have any real price mechanism to work with. There's no real way to measure the value of an education and no idea how truly free markets would provide it. The IHS recently hosted one of our advanced topics colloquia sponsored with The Liberty Fund, and joining us to talk about education compulsion in this state is Professor Tawni Hunt Ferrarini.

Anthony Comegna: [01:21](#) Professor Ferrarini, I want to start, since you are the expert on education here, I want to start just with a bit of commentary on how to lead one of these discussions, the Socratic Liberty Fund IHS-style discussion colloquium. What's kind of some of the philosophy of education that you bring into a role like this?

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [01:47](#) Well, the method itself, the Socratic method, is one that is a dialogue around a civil topic that's intended to bring people from all over the spectrum that have may have differing views, but they want to approach a topic, and in a cooperative fashion look at the different arguments in order to expand each other's knowledge. And we rely heavily on critical thinking skills, logic to just kind of draw out ideas and tease out some more expanded thinking.

Anthony Comegna: [02:24](#) Now, how do you handle it in a group like this if there are some pretty sharp divisions? Even in a room with a bunch of IHS folks, there's going to be some pretty sharp divisions of opinion and some pretty tense disagreements from time to time, especially when you have a reading list that includes firebrand figures, from the too little-known Auberon Herbert, who is just fantastic, way too little known, people from Auberon Herbert all the way up to Charles Murray, the famously de-platformed Charles Murray. So how do you handle those moments of sharp, intense disagreement?

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [03:03](#) Well, and then the topic itself was education compulsion in the state, and so we brought in people from various disciplines, philosophy, theology, public choice, public policy. Economists of course are in the room, along with some political scientists, and I think we had one historian. But what we do is we just put

some interesting probing questions in the middle of the table, and what usually happens is that the people, from their various disciplines, given their scholarship and their knowledge, will advance the favored, or the arguments that they have researched deeply and broadly, and they have observed and supported, and they'll bring those to the middle of the table and they're keenly focused on them. And so in order to stimulate broader thinking and to expand the critical thinking around these controversial topics, it's the role of the discussion leader to raise questions that cause people to pause and think about what it is that their discipline is saying about the topic, and then to relate it to what the people on the other side of the debate have to say about it.

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [04:22](#)

And so it's a lot of pushing and pulling and teasing and tugging, and it in the end it's not about defending your discipline or your scholarship's position on this. It's about expanding it. And you either come away with a firmer idea of what it is that you're thinking about the topic or you come out of it saying, "Hey, I can borrow and learn from these people who have opposite views." And in the end you end up improving what it is that you do within your discipline.

Anthony Comegna: [04:57](#)

Yeah. You know, true to the Socratic method, I think I usually come away from these events realizing how little I know about the topic at hand. That there's always so much more to cover, and everybody brings a bit of extra knowledge to it that makes you realize that there is so much more to be studied here, and you can go and comb through the footnotes and follow up with everybody and figure out so much more about the topic at hand.

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [05:24](#)

Well, and it's great, because you can go back to Socrates and look at some of the way that he teased and challenged his students and his colleagues by asking these continual questions. And sometimes you're asking the questions not to seek knowledge, but just to really help somebody be sharper in answering or responding to some pushback against what he or she is thinking.

Anthony Comegna: [05:50](#)

What do you think was the most challenging reading in this set?

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [05:54](#)

Well, you know, it depended. I'm talking from an economist's perspective, and so those that I found challenging weren't challenging from the public policy perspective, so I think it's relative. It depends on what it is that you have to offer and what you bring to the table. I found the readings not challenging

leading up to the actual session. I found them challenging during the session because of the wonderful insights of people who brought new thought and new interpretation and a new perspective on the very same words that I read, and that excites me. I could tell that it excited other people in the room. That came out actually during the networking sessions, the breaks, and in evening, and at breakfast. So that's my perspective.

Anthony Comegna: [06:51](#)

Let's turn to the subject at hand a bit more here then. I think it's safe to say that the vast majority of our audience here is probably classical liberal, and very few of them are actually in favor of compulsory education, let alone compulsory state education, but let's go ahead and survey some of the opinion out there about the value of these things. Why do people say that we absolutely need compulsory and state education?

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [07:28](#)

Well, you know, we can go back to the writings of Horace Mann, and his background was law. He became a public figure. He argued quite effectively that it was "society," in quotes, you can't see that, responsibility to provide a universal education, especially targeting those individuals that may not have the means, the financial means or the family structure that permits students at the time, we want to go back to the 1800s, to leave the farm, leave what they're doing, during a time in which children were actually employable. And he advocated quite effectively in a number of circles that it was society's responsibility to educate young minds, because society as a whole benefited through the multiplying effects. You have more knowledgeable children that grow into more knowledgeable and skilled workers who contribute more productively to the workforce. They also lead more meaningful and secure lives, and the list goes on.

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [08:34](#)

What wasn't in the debate was, when you look at the institutional structure of providing public anything, when you have something like the government enterprise coming in and trying to provide services, and it can be state, and it exists at the federal level, you lose a lot of the communication and the ability to customize an education based on the needs, wants of the child and the desires, and you move to a one size fits all model of education. And we can see some of these shifts in our current school system, public school systems.

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [09:15](#)

And also what happens is you get this bureaucratic bloat where if you're going to provide a public service that's sponsored by the government using taxpayer dollars, you're going to need an agency to manage that, and you're going to need people

managing the agency. And it starts, in this case, we're talking about public education at the federal level, it's going to bleed on down and move it to the state level. So you lose that autonomy, you lose that ability to make decisions, whether it's a student or the parent, and the best need of the child based on disturbances or challenges that may be present in that child's life, because it becomes a very sterile environment and not one that's personal. And we've seen so many issues in the United States with our educational system, and some are claiming that we're broken and that we're in crisis.

Anthony Comegna: [10:10](#) Well, yeah. It strikes me that somebody like Horace Mann, while I don't really think he would properly be counted a classical liberal, he's more sort of this wig-ish Hamiltonian type from the 19th century, he was certainly not out there arguing for something like a federal department of education. And his standards of what a proper public education would look like is actually in line today with probably what most classical liberal people would agree to as well. You know, some very local, perhaps state regulated, but certainly not federally regulated system of common schools, so that every kid has the opportunity to go to school, and some sort of government compulsion against parents to ensure that kids actually have access to education. What are some of the classical liberal arguments out there in favor of compulsory education?

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [11:11](#) In favor of compulsory education? Let's see. I don't know where you're headed with this one.

Anthony Comegna: [11:18](#) Well, so I'm thinking, it has been argued in plenty of circles, maybe not in the more radical corners of classical liberalism that I like to occupy, but it has been argued that the children have a rights interest here.

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [11:33](#) Oh, you're talking ... Okay.

Anthony Comegna: [11:36](#) Yeah.

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [11:36](#) Because they don't have agency. Okay, now I know where you're going with this, but it's that society at large has a responsibility to take on educating the child, especially if there's a gap at home and you don't have responsible and accountable parents or guardians to help the child. And yeah, yes, I do see that in some circles. But then when you're looking at that, you ask yourself, "Well, do we want local responses to these gaps? Or do we want state, or do we want federal?" And it's interesting if you can localize these issues, and it's something

that the community can respond to, as the needs of children on average evolve, they develop and they can change quite rapidly. That's one argument for compulsion.

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [12:33](#)

Another argument for compulsion is that people believe that maybe the parents don't know best, that there's this ignorance of fact, and that the state or whatever agency may know better than the parents. Well, that's assuming that we don't learn and that other people won't surround those children and help them learn, or it also assumes that as the child grows older and becomes more responsible and accountable, he or she won't go out and fill the gaps him or herself because they see that they truly can make their world better by becoming more knowledgeable and more practical in their skills by serving others. And so it's an interesting controversy even within the classical circles.

Anthony Comegna: [13:23](#)

And now as I understand this history, and perhaps you could fill this in for us a bit, the public education system that we actually have here in the United States was more or less explicitly built to stamp out Catholic schools, especially things like Irish Catholic private education. Because the Protestant WASP-y culture of the late 19th early 20th century progressive movement didn't want to tolerate these old world Irish Catholic cultural institutions and movements. They didn't want people reading the Catholic Bible, and so they sort of came up with a plan to crowd them all out.

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [14:11](#)

Yeah. And it's kind of interesting, because when you look back and you look at which churches encouraged public education first, it is the Catholic church, but there was this movement to move against the Catholic church in fear that it was too patriarchal and hierarchical and that it was moving too aggressively into the lives of many people who wanted to move against what it stood for. And then the response was actually they ended up creating something that was in many ways like what they were pushing against, minus the Bible and the faith piece of it.

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [14:50](#)

So we've got something now in the public educational system that is hierarchical. It's not necessarily patriarchal in the same way that the Catholic church is, but when you look at the state and how it governs from the top down, and it's not really getting a feel for what's happening at the bottom, especially when you communicate with teachers and they have their boots on the ground and they see every day the impact of this one size fits all education on the children, and how the children

are responding as evidenced by test scores as evidenced by, and they're dropping, mental health issues are surfacing. We have an epidemic in teenage suicide rates, and they're starting to creep down into middle school and reaching as far as elementary.

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [15:39](#)

So it's really interesting. And I just attended and ran a panel discussion on morality, and as we've moved farther and farther away from the church or the faith thing, it's interesting to see how these children are responding to the somewhat sterile environments that are created in the public school systems.

Anthony Comegna: [16:04](#)

Now, do you think the problem is really that they are state schools, that they are public schools and that there is mainly an economic problem with that? Well, obviously other problems go along with it too when you have a monopoly, but is it mainly that it's state education or that it's compulsory?

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [16:26](#)

I think it's a combination of the two, because in order to get people to buy into the state system, which many would argue, because it's a monopoly and it's using force to get people in, the compulsion piece is, is that you're going to have to require people to consume this inferior good, which is the public education that we're talking about. And so I think it's a combination of the two, and by definition, anytime you have the state, you have the chorus of peace, which is compulsion in the school system. And if the product was superior and it was for the betterment of the individual and the families and even society, you wouldn't need the compulsory piece in it. People would just love to do it. They would move towards it as evidenced by some of these people, or even teachers. Look at some of the teachers. I mean, we've got this flight of teachers who are leaving the public education system to move into the private space, homeschool, charter, magnet schools, whatever. They're accepting lower wages. They're moving away from something. And unfortunately we have the compulsory piece. There's no exit for the children. They have to consume or be subject to the education that's there. And so I think they go hand in hand, to answer your question.

Anthony Comegna: [17:51](#)

Now, but you could have some sort of, presumably at least, you could have some sort of mixed system where there are state schools as an offer, but children are not or parents are not required to send their children to any school. And likewise, you could have no state schooling whatsoever, but parents are nonetheless compelled to send their children to school of some

sort, sort of like car insurance, right? There's no [crosstalk 00:18:19].

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [18:19](#) Okay, fair enough. And I was responding to your claim that it was monopoly.

Anthony Comegna: [18:23](#) Sure. Sure.

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [18:25](#) Yeah, and we're moving away from that strong characterization of the public education system, and now we're getting into what we call reality. And this is where the Socratic discussion moved by the end of our time together. And that is, in reality you're not at the two extremes. And when you look at heated debates, it's usually groups of individuals who are standing firm in their positions and they're not willing to look at these mixed models, at these, blended models, which take some of the best practices in each and then they bring them together for the betterment of the targeted audience. In this case we're talking about young people, young minds, and I think that's a great direction to go.

Anthony Comegna: [19:12](#) So take us back to some of the history here, because it seems like ... Well, okay. This is one of the very bizarre cases where you have progressive reformers, and then you have people like the KKK lining up together in support of public education. So tell us, how do you get a coalition like that together, and how do we so conveniently forget that it's that sort of combination that gave us the system that we take for granted today?

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [19:49](#) Okay. So I love your example, by the way, and I think that at the heart when we look at these two extreme groups that we would think have nothing in common, and actually they have much in common, and that is that there is this natural tendency to want to look at our young, because they are our future, and we want to take care of them to the best of our ability, and we want others to do the same. And I think that there's a general frustration out there with the state of education, because in many circles, education is not really taking place, because schooling and learning are two very different things.

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [20:42](#) And by schooling, I mean is that we have these students that are spending a tremendous amount of time in school with their butts in seats. The schools are being funded because they can guarantee that they're clocking so much time with these students inside of these school systems, but they're not paying attention to the overall performance as measured holistically to what's happening to the students as they advance from

kindergarten all the way to grade 12 and then possibly moving into postsecondary education.

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [21:21](#)

And something's broken in the system, because what's happening is these students are walking across graduation stages, they're getting these degrees, and they're not able to meet employers' needs. They're having trouble in the marketplace finding jobs, keeping jobs, moving into our colleges. The number of remedial courses is on the uptick across campuses in the United States. We're seeing grade inflation at high schools. It's moving into colleges. So the world's a very confusing place right now. And I think that regardless of where you stand on this position and what your cultural background may be, your religious beliefs, people know that something is at risk here. And that's our young people, those young minds, those young lives, and we're tied to them. I mean, we want them to prosper and to do great things, and just live comfortably and securely on their own, but we also have this invested interest because we look at them and we see our future. And that, I think, transcends color, race, religion, creed, and the list goes on.

Anthony Comegna: [22:32](#)

Yeah, I totally agree. And I kind of want to focus in on those problems, those dangers really, now, because I think that fundamentally this is an economic problem brought on by the use of force, and that, as classical liberals, I think we recognize that the use of force always distorts the economy. It distorts people's values all the way across. So it's sort of like, on a rainy day, all the ripples on a pond, they blend together and they all interact with each other somehow to create the overall pattern. It's like, if a bully in school steals your lunch money, then this whole long series of people connected to that kid have to shift their value scales and their priorities and their resources around to account for the bully's behavior, you know?

Anthony Comegna: [23:26](#)

So I'm wondering when states force people to attend school, what are all the different ways that that affects children that we might not often take into account. Our public discourse about school systems seem to be loaded down with cost and with the value of different teaching methods, or testing and not testing, and things like that. But there are all sorts of problems created in children's lives that come about when they're forced to go into school that I think we really overlook.

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [24:01](#)

Well, in just the little example that you gave with some of the behavioral issues that are coming about in the classroom and they're being integrated into what it is that the teacher has to

manage, the teacher only has a limited amount of time, so much energy and knowledge, and now they're being moved away from ... They have to not only educate, but they have to manage all these behavioral issues, and because we're seeing some interesting things happening in the households of the students who are coming in, in many ways the teachers are now being asked to be parents too, and that's at the same time that they're being given what it is that they need to teach. They're teaching to the test. They are being told that they need to have those students in those seats for a certain number of hours, because that's how funding is being tied in some instances to what the school receives in order to keep the doors open, the teachers paid, and the list goes on.

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [25:03](#)

So you're doing so much more than educating. You're actually entering what we call that schooling space, where there's all this activity, a flurry of activity that's taking inside those school walls but has absolutely nothing to do with the education of the children are there. Teaching them how to add, subtract, read, write, do math, learn more about science, some of the incredible things. There's just so much. The teacher's being diverted away from actually educating the child, and on the flip side, as you mentioned there, the children are being asked to address many issues within the classroom that are distracting them away from learning how to read, write, and do arithmetic.

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [25:52](#)

So the classroom of today, especially when you bring in the social considerations, it looks very, very different than the classroom of 30 years ago, and it also looks very different in the public school compared to the private school. In the public school, there really isn't an active role for parents. The teacher, the principal, the school system determines what's going to happen in the classroom, and you may or may not have parents that are actively involved in what the student does, performance, conduct, and things like that.

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [26:25](#)

A lot of that is managed within that sterile school system environment, and when you move over to the private schools space, you see that parents are expected to be very active. There's a code of conduct that students adhere to in the private school or the nonpublic school systems that if they don't adhere to that code of conduct, there's an exit. You can always leave the classroom, so there's an expectation that when you shift into that alternative classroom that's not public, one size fits all, that there are codes of conducts, rules and regulations that simplify what's happening in a classroom so you can open up

space for actual learning, and that is where we want to bring our students.

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [27:15](#) Another thing is is that the public school system, many of these kids are going to schools just because they live in a certain zip code, and when I bring this to college campuses or workplaces, I ask how many of the people would have liked to have gone to the college that was determined by their zip code, and people are, they're taken aback. "What do you think? That's crazy. We wouldn't do something like that." Well then why are we letting it move down into the K through 12 system as well? And there are alternatives out there. We see some interesting things happening in local communities and states as well that are trying to bring back the education to the child, and addressing the child's needs and focusing on learning versus dealing with some of these other issues, and learning that's connected to living a comfortable and secure life that includes acting and interacting in the workplace.

Anthony Comegna: [28:10](#) Yeah. You know, I've noticed that your defense of a sort of private and non-compulsory education regime, it's not been based in these sort of Cold War metrics of productivity and contribution to GDP or the national wellbeing, or something like that.

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [28:30](#) No.

Anthony Comegna: [28:31](#) You're not focused on test scores. You're giving a very humanistic defense of private education.

Tawni Hunt Ferrarini: [28:37](#) That's a true classical liberal, my friend. It's not just about the quantifying of the accomplishments of the person, it's about that inner development, whatever it may be. It's self-discovery, personal development, and at the end of the day, as long as we don't bring harm or hurt intentionally to others, we live in a diverse world and we celebrate that diversity. And when you bring people into the space of the public education system, your ultimate goal is learning and educating and not just on schooling, it becomes very crowded, and we know that something's broken, and that's why you see these groups starting to merge on a topic that one point in history, you would have never thought you would see them in the same place at the same time, addressing the same challenges in fighting the cause, so to speak.

Anthony Comegna: [29:37](#) There is part one of our great education shows with Professor Ferrarini. Check back in next week for more. We'll survey the

current state of the education crisis. We'll talk about both viable alternatives and long-shot fixes, and in the meantime, drop us a rating and review and keep the progress coming.