



# Educational Freedom for Young People

A lecture delivered May 1, 2020 at “The Disinformation Campaign  
Against Homeschooling” conference hosted by Ideological Diversity, a  
student organization at Harvard Kennedy School

*by Brian Conner*

Working Paper No. 08-2020



**EFI**

*a not-for-profit organization*

*Working Paper Series*

[efinstitute.org/workingpapers](https://efinstitute.org/workingpapers)

---

*Editor's Note: This address was presented during a livestream event hosted by the Harvard Kennedy School titled: "The Disinformation Campaign Against Homeschooling" on 1 May 2020*

---

# Educational Freedom for Young People

by Brian Conner

I'm from the National Youth Rights Association. We're a civil rights organization advocating for equal rights for young people.

My take on this is that the whole way this is framed by Bartholet, and even a lot of advocates for homeschooling, is that it's a question of the rights of parents versus the government and we think that's unfair to the young people themselves because young people are their own human beings.

They have their own views their own opinions about things, their own personalities and they're completely their own people. So, really the focus of this should be on the young people themselves having the right to whatever kind of education whatever kind of life they want for themselves.

This was, at one point, acknowledged by the US Supreme Court in 1967 they said constitutional rights do not stop at the schoolhouse gate. So, that means that young people in school, in theory, should have the same rights that they do outside.

But, really the rights in both of these places are almost non-existent. They just don't have these fundamental constitutional rights and civil rights and civil liberties to make decisions for themselves.

Over the years this lack of rights in schools has gotten worse in a lot of ways and we believe that this is because of ageism—because of the prejudice against young people and the belief that they're not capable human beings.

We believe that the best way to grant them these rights and for them to learn how to exercise these rights in their youth and to grow into adults is for them to learn in an environment that emulates and respects these rights instead of one that disregards them, claiming that young people can't understand them.

Like Cevin kind of touched on parts of these rights violations in schools that would just be considered abusive if they were happening in pretty much any other environment. Students spend a majority of their waking hours in the classroom but they have no say in what happens in that classroom, including what they're learning.

Corporal punishment is legal in a lot of states. Most schools have some form of dress code which restricts what they can wear and it is often racist and sexist. They don't have the right to free speech and they're often forced to say the Pledge of Allegiance and the national anthem. There are all sorts of punishments that just wouldn't be considered humane in any other environment.

Since youth aren't choosing to be there in the first place, it's really not fair to be punishing them for not following these rules that they didn't agree to to begin with.

They don't have the right to their own property at the school. Their lockers and even their own bodies can usually be searched by school police officers. There are many schools that have often tried to block students from organizing and starting clubs. Students very rarely have representation on the school board or vote in those elections which determines the people who run this whole system.

Students, especially disabled students, are often put in seclusion which has, like Cevin mentioned, been deemed illegal for prisoners but we still feel like it's okay to put students in solitary confinement.

All of this comes from the idea that students are just too lazy to control their own learning and that their interests are trivial. They're controlled, threatened, and punished and learning in ways whether it's forming by others instead of themselves but it really doesn't have to be that way.

One of my goals is to expand academic freedom to all students, and this improves learning as well. Peter Gray is going to speak after me; he's done all sorts of studies on this that show that home schooling is more educationally beneficial to students than public schools.

Specifically, with regard to self-directed education where students are making all of these decisions for themselves (Peter can speak more on this), a large majority of the time, these students are happy with the way they learn and report as adults that they're happy with what they've learned. These include students in pretty much every disadvantaged group. Women, people of color, LGBTQ+ folks, and disabled students who 'unschool' or go to democratic schools—almost all of them, as Peter's studies have shown, have said that this is beneficial and they're happy about it.

The very few who said that they'd rather not have unschooled said that they would have chosen to go to school themselves. Their parents pressured them to 'unschool' which means that they would have made that decision themselves. We can really trust young people to make the right decisions for themselves. These could even be things that break down the barriers of the differences between being in school and not being in school. If you really just trust each individual person to make their own decisions, the possibilities there are endless.

Next, on the subject of all of the related research, I'll turn it over to Peter Gray.

---

Brian Conner is President of the National Youth Rights Association. Follow his work at [youthrights.org](http://youthrights.org) and on Twitter [@youthrights](https://twitter.com/youthrights).

*(Edited for clarity)*