

Why We Still Need Public Schools

Public Education for the Common Good



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Table of Contents

Introduction 1

The Origins of Public Education 3

The Public Missions of Public Education—and Why They Still Apply 7

Maintaining Public Education While Improving Its Quality 15

Sources 17

Introduction

The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people and be willing to bear the expenses of it. There should not be a district of one mile square, without a school in it, not founded by a charitable individual, but maintained at the public expense of the people themselves.

— John Adams, U.S. president, letter to John Jebb, 1785

From the early days of the nation, public education has played a vital role in American democratic society. In addition to preparing young people for productive work and fulfilling lives, public education has also been expected to accomplish certain collective missions aimed at promoting the common good. These include, among others, preparing youth to become responsible citizens, forging a common culture from a nation of immigrants, and reducing inequalities in American society.

In recent years, however, some of these public-spirited missions of education have been neglected and are in danger of being abandoned. Most current efforts to reform public education have focused on increasing students' academic achievement—without a doubt, a central purpose of schooling. But the reasons given for why it's important to improve achievement often stress individual or private economic benefits (such as preparing youth for good jobs in a global economy), rather than public benefits (such as preparing youth for active citizenship in a democratic society). An emphasis on the individual goals of education is especially obvious in proposals to give families vouchers toward private school tuition—proposals that treat education as a private consumer good.

This publication from the Center on Education Policy revisits the “public” missions of American public education. It is an update of the Center's 1996 brochure, *Do We Still Need Public Schools?* The first section of this updated version briefly reviews how and why the U.S. system of public education came into being. The second section lists six public missions that public schools have been expected to fulfill, beyond what is expected of private schools, and looks at why these missions remain relevant today. The last section discusses why the nation must hold onto these missions while pursuing reforms to help all public schools live up to these ideals. Throughout the publication, quotations from the nation's founders and other historical figures illustrate how early advocates of public education linked public schools to the common good.

As used here, the term “public education” means education that is publicly financed, tuition-free, accountable to public authorities, and accessible to all students. It covers various types of public schools, including traditional schools, charter and magnet schools, vocational schools, and alternative schools.

The Origins of Public Education

Before Public Education

It is therefore ordred yt evry towneship in this jurisdiction, afrt ye Lord hath increased ym to ye number of 50 householdrs, shall then forthwth appoint one wthin their towne to teach all such children as shall resort to him to write & reade, whose wages whall be paid eithr by ye parents or mastrs of such children, or by ye inhabitants in genrall . . . & it is furthr ordered, yt where any towne shall increase to ye numbr of 100 families or householdrs, they shall set up a gramer schoole

—Massachusetts Bay Colony, General School Act of 1647

Before a system of public schools took hold in the mid-19th century, American children were educated through a hodgepodge of mostly private institutions and arrangements. These included church-supported schools; local schools organized by towns or groups of parents; tuition schools set up by traveling schoolmasters; charity schools for poor children run by churches or benevolent societies; boarding schools for children of the well-to-do; “dame schools” run by women in their homes; and private tutoring. These early schools were financed from various sources, including parents’ tuition payments, charitable contributions, property taxes, fuel contributions, and, in some cases, state support.

This disjointed approach to schooling resulted in many inequities. Often schools served only boys whose families could afford the tuition. Large groups of children—including African Americans, Native Americans, many girls, and some poor white children who did not belong to a church—were excluded from school by law or custom. In some places, it was a crime to teach a slave to read.

With limited options for formal education, boys sometimes entered apprenticeships instead of going to school, on the promise that their masters would teach them to read and write. Other children learned at home, church, or work. Still others received no formal education at all.

Access to education was limited by geography, too. Massachusetts had taken a step toward public schooling in 1647 with a law requiring towns of sufficient size to hire a teacher or establish a grammar school, to be paid for by the town’s parents, apprentice masters, or all of its residents. By the time of the American Revolution, public schools could be found throughout New England, but in many other colonies, private schools remained the norm. Some rural areas had no schools at all. Those schools that did exist outside the cities were often hard to get to, skimpily equipped, and overcrowded. Teachers were poorly paid, transient, and inexperienced. Sometimes they were undereducated themselves.

The curricula, school years, and grade levels of these early schools varied widely, depending on such factors as the values of the religious groups sponsoring them and the resources of the organizations supporting them. Few young people had opportunities to pursue education beyond the elementary level. Income and social class usually fixed a child's options. Children from well-off families often had access to a "classical" education that included instruction in Latin and Greek, grammar, philosophy, and other liberal arts. In striking contrast, children of farmers and day workers or students in charity schools were lucky to receive even the most rudimentary education.

The Beginning of Public Education

The good education of youth has been esteemed by wise men in all ages, as the surest foundation of the happiness of both private families and of commonwealths. Almost all governments have therefore made it a principal object of their attention, to establish and endow with proper revenues, such seminaries of learning, as might supply the succeeding age with men qualified to serve the publick with honour to themselves, and to their country.

—Benjamin Franklin, U.S. statesman, inventor, and diplomat,
Proposals Related to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania, 1749

Soon after the American Revolution, some of the nation's founders recognized that this haphazard approach to schooling was inadequate to educate the people of the developing nation and that a more formal system was needed. Believing that the survival of the new republic depended on citizens with sufficient education to govern themselves, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, among others, supported the creation of publicly funded schools. Jefferson submitted a proposal to the Virginia legislature in 1779 to create free elementary schools across the state for all white boys and girls, regardless of family income, and to educate the brightest boys from each school through adolescence at public expense. But the conservative legislature did not want to assume the burden of educating the poor, and the bill was defeated.

Still, Jefferson's ideas about the connection between education and democracy proved influential. In 1785, the U.S. Continental Congress adopted the Land Ordinance, based on an earlier draft by Thomas Jefferson. This federal law reserved a portion of revenues from land sales to fund public schools in the states that would be carved out of the Northwest Territory. During the 1780s, Vermont, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire enacted general laws to fund tax-supported schools. It would take another 50 years, however, before a broad system of tax-supported public schools became a reality.

Little by little, public schools took hold in communities, often because the local people, rather than the politicians, demanded them. In the 1830s, the push for public education gained momentum when reformers like Horace Mann, secretary of the Massachusetts board of education, promoted the notion of the "common school." These schools would be publicly funded and locally governed and would offer a common curriculum to all students. Inspiringly optimistic about the power of education, the common-school reformers saw

universal public education as a solution to a host of social problems. In their view, public schools would transform children into moral, literate, and productive citizens; eliminate poverty and crime; quell class conflict; and unify a population that was becoming more ethnically diverse. A public investment in education would ultimately benefit everyone, they maintained, and would make schools accountable to the American people.

The Spread of Public Education

It was in making education not only common to all, but in some sense compulsory on all, that the destiny of the free republic of America was practically settled.

—James Russell Lowell, poet, editor, and diplomat,
Among My Books: Six Essays, 1870.

During the mid-19th century, common schools took hold gradually and unevenly. By the 1850s, many Northeastern and Midwestern states had established systems of free public education, including some high schools. After the Civil War, public schools were created for African American children, and more girls began to attend school. By the late 19th century, public elementary schools were available to all children in nearly all parts of the country. And by 1918, all states had compulsory attendance laws requiring all children to attend school at least through the elementary level.

Public high schools began to spring up in significant numbers in the late 1800s, but high school attendance did not become commonplace until the 20th century. In the early 20th century, as the U.S. became home to larger and more diverse groups of immigrants, national leaders and education reformers called on the public schools to “Americanize” the new arrivals and make them literate in English.

Although access to public schools had become universal by the early 20th century, the education provided by these schools was far from equal. Schools for African American children were segregated and generally substandard. Schools serving the urban and rural poor often operated in dilapidated facilities with underqualified teachers and overcrowded classrooms. Faced with these realities, reformers turned their attention from access to equity.

Equity and Quality in Public Education

Of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and fought for 5,000 years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental . . . The freedom to learn . . . has been bought by bitter sacrifice. And whatever we may think of the curtailment of other civil rights, we should fight to the last ditch to keep open the right to learn . . .

—W. E. B. DuBois, civil rights activist and educator,
The Freedom to Learn, 1949

In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* ushered in a new era for public education, devoted to expanding opportunities for groups of students that had been inadequately served by public schools in the past. Civil rights advocates and other reformers recognized that securing the right to an equal education was crucial to achieving full equality in other areas. In the landmark *Brown* case, the U.S. Supreme Court declared segregated schools to be unconstitutional. It took more than a decade, however, for the decision to be fully implemented in the face of intense resistance in some states.

During the 1960s and '70s, the federal government enacted a series of laws aimed at improving education for poor children, migrant children, students with disabilities, Native Americans, limited-English proficient children, and women and girls. These laws brought additional funding to public schools, along with new requirements to meet the special needs of particular groups of students.

In recent years, the emphasis of state and federal reforms has shifted to improving public education for *all* students. The No Child Left Behind Act requires public schools to steadily raise achievement—and to close the test score “gaps” that exist for minority, poor, and special needs students—until 100% of U.S. students are performing at the same high level. Schools that fall short of these goals must undergo a series of interventions.

In summary, the growth of public education during the past two centuries has been fueled by high ideals about advancing the common good, but the realities of public schools have sometimes failed to live up to these ideals.

The Public Missions of Public Education— and Why They Still Apply

As the brief history above suggests, American public schools have been expected to fulfill certain public missions that go beyond the purely academic purposes of all schools, public and private.

These public missions can be characterized by six main themes:

1. To provide universal access to free education
2. To guarantee equal opportunities for all children
3. To unify a diverse population
4. To prepare people for citizenship in a democratic society
5. To prepare people to become economically self-sufficient
6. To improve social conditions

Most of these missions go back to the early days of public education, although the specific goals and means of accomplishing them have changed over time. Some of them are unique to public schools, while others apply broadly to both public and private schools but place special demands on public schools. Although some private schools are effectively addressing the missions discussed here, they are not required by law or expected by society to carry out these purposes as a primary mission.

1. To provide universal access to free education

[T]he fact remains that the whole country is directly interested in the education of every child that lives within its borders. The ignorance of any part of the American people so deeply concerns all the rest that there can be no doubt of the right to pass laws compelling the attendance of every child at school . . .

—Frederick Douglass, African American writer and abolitionist,
speech at the National Convention of Colored Men, 1883

Public schools were established to make education universally available to all children, free of charge. This mission remains as necessary today as it was two hundred years ago. Public schools educate the vast majority of U.S. students and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Public schools are accessible in all parts of the country, including areas where few or no private schools exist. Private schools, though important to many families, were not designed to be a universal system.

- Americans have not abandoned public schools. Public schools serve 88% of the nation’s elementary and secondary students, while private schools serve 12%. These relative shares have stayed roughly the same for a few decades and are projected to remain the same for the next several years.

Unlike private schools, which can be selective about whom to enroll, public school systems must serve all who live within their boundaries. By law, public schools must provide free education to students with disabilities and English language learners—two groups with special needs that private schools may choose not to enroll or may not be equipped to serve. Public schools must also educate students whose academic or disciplinary records might keep them from being admitted to a private school.

- Ninety-eight percent of students with disabilities are educated in public schools, while only 1% are educated in private schools. (The remainder are served in residential facilities or hospitals.)

The No Child Left Behind Act has brought a new dimension to the concept of universal public education. Not only must public schools educate all students, but they must also take steps intended to ensure that all students are taught by highly qualified teachers and achieve at high levels.

2. To guarantee equal opportunity for all children

A republican government should be based on free and equal education among the people.

—Susan B. Anthony, women’s rights leader, letter to a friend, 1900

Public education has long been recognized as a gateway to opportunity for people from all economic and racial/ethnic backgrounds. Early advocates of public education contended that only public funding would give schools the consistent support needed to educate children from poor families and bring a more standard approach to curriculum, length of the school year, teacher qualifications, and other characteristics. In later years, advocates for the rights of women and minorities saw public schools as the institution with the greatest capacity to improve people’s futures and change public attitudes.

Although public schools have become more inclusive, equal access to high-quality education is not yet a reality. Wide differences exist among schools, districts, and states in per pupil funding, the availability of experienced and well-qualified teachers, the effectiveness of leadership and teaching, access to advanced courses, and other factors affecting quality.

- Students in public schools with high poverty or high minority enrollments are more likely than other students to be taught by inexperienced or “out-of-field” teachers (teachers who lack specific certification or a college major in the subject they teach). For example, 16% of students in high-poverty public high schools are taught math

by an out-of-field teacher, compared with 5% of students in low-poverty high schools.

Disparities in education funding and quality continue in part because education in the U.S. remains primarily a state and local function. States and communities vary not only in wealth, but also in their capacity and willingness to tax their citizens. In recent years, government policies have tried to equalize resources among schools in wealthy and poor communities. In addition, major court cases have focused on whether states are fulfilling their constitutional obligation to provide all students with an adequate education.

Ensuring equal opportunity remains an essential mission for public education. Despite improvements over the past 15 years in the average achievement of African American and Latino students, achievement gaps remain between these groups and their white and Asian counterparts, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Similar achievement gaps persist between low-income and higher-income students. Under the No Child Left Behind Act, public schools are held accountable for closing these gaps, while private schools are not. Moreover, a higher share of minority and low-income children attend public schools than attend private schools.

- Forty-three percent of public school students are minority children, compared with 24% of private school students. Although family income information for private school students is sketchy, 44% of public school 4th graders come from families with incomes low enough to qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, compared with just 6% of private school students, according to NAEP.

3. To unify a diverse population

The most effectual, and indeed the only effectual, way to produce this individuality and harmony of national feeling and character is to bring our children into the same schools and have them educated together.

—Calvin Stowe, theology professor and abolitionist, *Transactions of the Fifth Annual Meeting of the Western Literary Institute*, 1836

For two centuries, public schools have been the main institution in American society responsible for transmitting a common American culture to a diverse population. Public schools have been the place where immigrants have learned the English language and absorbed American culture and values. Views have shifted over time about how best to promote unity while respecting diverse cultures. On the whole, however, U.S. public schools have carried out this unifying mission more successfully than schools in many other countries.

Part of building a common culture involves teaching students from different racial, ethnic, religious, and economic backgrounds to respect each other and get along. Early advocates of the common school believed that when children from different backgrounds shared in a common education, class conflict would disappear and people would interact with greater civility.

Public schools continue to be the chief institution that brings together young people from different backgrounds for a major part of the day. Although many private schools enroll a diverse student body, they are less diverse as a group than public schools and do not have the same responsibility to forge a cohesive society.

Today, the mission of promoting cultural unity is more crucial than ever. The U.S. population has become more ethnically and linguistically diverse at the same time the economy has become more international. And in a world torn with ethnic strife, the ability to understand other perspectives and deal with conflict are critical skills.

- More than 10% of public school students are English language learners—students whose first language is not English and who are learning English. About 19% of school-age children are children of immigrant parents. It is not uncommon for a single school district to enroll students from more than two dozen language groups. In some very diverse districts, more than 90 different languages are spoken by the English language learner population.

Not all schools live up to the goal of bringing together children from different backgrounds. Because of neighborhood housing patterns and patterns of private school attendance, some public schools enroll students who come mostly from the same racial/ethnic or socioeconomic background—whether a largely Latino inner-city school or a primarily white rural school. The existence of these schools makes it all the more important for the nation to recommit to the goal of using public education to promote tolerance while building a shared culture.

4. To prepare people for citizenship in a democratic society

Above all things I hope the education of the common people will be attended to, convinced that on their good sense we may rely with the most security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty.

—Thomas Jefferson, U.S. president, letter to James Madison, 1787

Our nation's founders believed strongly that the success of American democracy depended on the competency of its citizens. A chief reason for public education cited by Jefferson and other early leaders was the need to produce citizens who would understand political and social issues, participate in civic life, vote wisely, protect their rights and freedoms, and keep the nation secure from inside and outside threats.

Developing good citizens includes more than preparing students for their roles as voters. The founders considered strong character and high morals to be essential to good citizenship, and toward that end, the public schools of the 19th century offered moral instruction. Today, some schools offer character education, encourage students to volunteer or participate in community life, or teach them how to evaluate information critically and engage in dialogue and debate.

The need to transmit the knowledge, skills, and habits necessary for a democratic way of life remains an important mission for public education. The more education one has, the more likely one is to vote.

- In the 2004 Presidential election, just 40% of citizens with less than a high school education voted, compared with 56% of high school graduates and 78% of college graduates.

Preparing students for citizenship is also critical because studies suggest that young people have an inadequate degree of basic civics knowledge.

- According to an international study of civics knowledge among students in 27 democratic nations, young people in the U.S. scored consistently better than students in the other countries in interpreting political information, such as a leaflet about election issues or a political cartoon. But U.S. students showed only an average understanding of the basic concepts and institutions of democracy.

Although all schools, public and private, play a role in preparing young people to be good citizens, public schools fill several unique roles. Public school classrooms are one of the first places where children form a community that mirrors the larger society. By associating with children from diverse backgrounds, students learn the skills of making group decisions, establishing and enforcing rules, and handling disagreement—skills that they will use later in civic life.

In addition, supporting public education is itself an exercise in citizenship. People contribute tax dollars, time, and effort toward an activity that benefits the whole society. Citizens, whether or not they have children, also have a sense of ownership and oversight of public education. Through school boards, state associations, stakeholder groups, and more informal involvement with their local public schools, citizens can influence policies and practices affecting public education.

5. To prepare people to become economically self-sufficient

Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance-wheel of the social machinery . . . It does better than disarm the poor of their hostility towards the rich; it prevents being poor.

—Horace Mann, “father of the common school,”
Report no. 12 of the Massachusetts School Board, 1848.

To justify the creation of public schools, early advocates often emphasized the economic benefits of education. Providing education for children of the poor and middle class would prepare them to obtain good jobs, which in turn would reduce disparities in wealth and strengthen the nation’s economic growth. Without question, public education has been the engine of upward economic mobility for millions of Americans.

Economic arguments continue to be a persuasive reason for maintaining and improving American public education, and one that enjoys strong public support. As people know from their own experience, individual earnings are strongly linked to educational attainment.

- Adults 18 and older who completed high school earned an average of \$28,645 in 2004—about 1.5 times as much as the average of \$19,169 earned by adults who lacked a high diploma. Adults with a bachelor’s degree earned almost 1.8 times as much as those with just a high school diploma.

Of course, teaching students the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in their careers is a major goal of all schools, private as well as public. But public schools have a special responsibility to help all students to become economically self-sufficient, including students with disabilities or academic problems. In addition, public high schools, unlike the vast majority of private schools, offer vocational and technical education for students who learn best through hands-on, work-oriented instruction.

Since most U.S. students attend public schools, the quality of the public education system not only affects an individual’s ability to get a good job but also shapes the nation’s ability to compete in a global economy. As many developing nations understand quite well, investing in public education is one of the surest means to improving a nation’s economic standing.

6. To improve social conditions

Fewer pillories and whipping posts and smaller gaols [jails], with their usual expenses and taxes, will be necessary when our youth are properly educated, than at present. I believe it could be proved that the expenses of confining, trying, and executing criminals amount every year, in most of the counties, to more money than would be sufficient to maintain the schools.

—Benjamin Rush, physician and statesman,
Essays, Literary, Moral, and Philosophical, 1786

Many early advocates of the common school put great store in the power of public education to eliminate poverty, crime, and a host of other social problems. Although education has not done away with all of society’s ills, it has clearly improved people’s lives according to a variety of social indicators. People with more education are less likely than undereducated adults to commit crimes, be homeless, or abuse drugs, to cite just a few examples. Those with more education enjoy better health and more stable families.

- Most prison inmates are high school dropouts. Seventy-five percent of state prison inmates, 59% of federal inmates, and 69% of jail inmates did not complete high school.

Both public and private schools contribute to the nation's well-being. But Americans expect public schools to do more than private schools to address social problems. Unlike private schools, public schools are expected to have programs to feed low-income children, provide before- and after-school care, prevent substance abuse and violence, and address health issues. In addition, some public schools serve as community centers, where families can meet, learn, play, and access a range of services.

At a time when a significant number of children live in poverty and many communities suffer from a range of social problems, the need is as great as ever for a strong public education system. Not only does education offer a way out of poverty, but good public schools can also help turn around neighborhoods in distress.

- Sixteen percent of school-age children in the U.S. are from families with incomes below the federal poverty level.

Perspectives About the Purposes of Education

According to public opinion polls, many Americans agree that the missions cited above are important reasons for having public schools.

- When asked to choose which reason for public schools seemed most important to them, 25% of Americans participating in a 2006 national poll cited as their top reason “to give all children a chance to get ahead and level the playing field”; 22% said “to keep America strong and competitive in the global economy”; 19% said “to help strengthen our democracy so children will have the skills to participate as adults”; and 16% said “because today’s children are tomorrow’s workforce.” (Other reasons were cited by 10% or less of those polled.)

Still, the six public missions listed above are not the only reasons why education is essential. Education serves a variety of purposes that are not discussed in this publication, either because they are not unique to public schools or because they relate to individual benefits rather than collective goals. For example, education enriches individuals’ lives by developing their capacities to think critically, appreciate culture, and maintain a sense of curiosity about the world. Education exposes children to new ways of thinking. Perhaps most importantly, a good elementary and secondary education can spur young people to go on to higher education and pursue learning all their lives.

Maintaining Public Education While Improving Its Quality

What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy.

—John Dewey, educational philosopher, *The School and Society*, 1907

Although the missions listed above remain viable ones for public education, not all public schools are fulfilling them well. Some schools are not effectively teaching students the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the workforce or participate fully in civic life. Schools with high dropout rates are not improving the economic well-being of their young people or the social conditions of their community. Schools that serve a homogenous neighborhood may have difficulty teaching students how to get along with others from different backgrounds.

Schools fall short for various reasons. Some of these reasons are factors inside the school, such as poor leadership, ineffective teaching, or misplaced priorities. Others are factors beyond the school, such as inadequate funding, lack of community support, or communities strained by poverty and social dysfunction.

Just because individual public schools are not living up to these ideals, however, is no reason to abandon the ideals or the institution of public education. Some citizens point to the poor performance of some public schools as a reason to shift responsibility for education to the private sector. That was tried before, in the years preceding universal public education, and many children were left out.

In a democracy, certain functions, including education, are intended to promote the public good as much as private interests. Without public schools, education would become a private interest, much to the detriment of society. Private schools would accept the higher-achieving students whose families could afford to pay, or would give scholarships to the best students, but what about the rest? What institution could be counted on to educate all students whose families could not afford tuition? What institution could be counted on to enroll children with disabilities or English language learners? What about children whose parents lack the skills or motivation to navigate the array of educational options likely to spring up in the absence of a public education system?

In a world without public schools, responsibility for education would be dispersed across a jumble of providers, with no coordinating role from any level of government. Citizens would lack clear channels to influence state or national education policy. There would be no guarantees that any of the public missions of public education would remain a priority. Children from more privileged families would suffer, too, by being isolated from other segments of American society. The nation would lose the one institution that routinely brings together children from different walks of life.

Citizens today might take a lesson from the idealism of the founders of public education. Although public schools sometimes fall short of expectations, holding a set of ideals gives these schools something to work toward. The answer is not to do away with public schools or give up on the ideals that have guided them for two centuries. Nor is the answer to accept public schools as they are. The answer is to encourage reforms that will help *all* schools live up to these ideals.

Public schools must be accountable to citizens, but citizens must also be accountable to public schools. Americans can provide a model for their children of the virtues of a well-educated citizenry by supporting public education, engaging with their local schools, showing wisdom and compassion in decisions affecting schools, and advocating for better and more equitable public education.

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Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in January 1995 by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy is a national independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. We do not represent any special interests. Instead, we help citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create the conditions that will lead to better public schools.

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