

## **Preserving the “Public” in Public Education for the Sake of Democracy**

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At the dawn of the 21st century, public education in the United States is undergoing intense, fundamental change, a “revolution” possibly as remarkable as the common school movement that gave rise to publicly supported schools. The past few decades has brought a host of neo-conservative education reforms. We have witnessed the emergence and rapid expansion of charter schools (Bulkley & Fisler, 2002; Center for Education Reform, 2005), the proliferation of private voucher plans in metropolitan areas including New York City, Dayton, Ohio, San Antonio, Texas, and Washington, D.C. (Godwin & Kemerer 2002; Howell & Peterson, 2002), and the implementation of publicly-funded voucher programs in selected urban districts and statewide in Arizona, Florida, Maine, Ohio, Utah, Vermont, Wisconsin, and the District of Columbia (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2007; Shaul, 2002). Moreover, these reforms have been gaining momentum from federal regulation and court rulings, most notably the charter school option in *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), the Supreme Court’s decision upholding the constitutionality of tuition vouchers in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* (2002), and, more recently, the Obama administration’s choice to keep vouchers in the D.C. school system and provide stimulus package incentives (e.g., Race to the Top funds) for states to permit or expand charter schools.

Teacher unions are under constant attack as well. New York City Schools Chancellor Joseph Klein, for instance, called for an end to the “three pillars of non-meritocracy”—teachers’ seniority rights, tenure, and pay scales (Gootman, 2003), and D.C.’s former Education Chancellor

Michelle Rhee adopted an evaluation system that dismisses teachers who fail to improve students' standardized test scores despite fervent resistance from the teacher union (Edsall, 2009; Turque, 2009). Merit pay schemes have also reemerged in districts throughout the nation with political support from both the Bush and Obama administrations, and performance-based accountability (with dramatic implications for teachers and school administrators) has become the *modus operandi* of public education (Hannaway & Hamilton, 2008). While primarily the province of neo-conservative policymakers, these reforms have also attracted (and in a few cases, such as Milwaukee's Democratic Mayor John Norquist, been led by) some liberals who have become disenchanted, indeed impatient, with the inability of traditional education reforms to improve educational opportunities for children most at risk of academic failure.

In this article, we argue that while the influence of these reforms on classroom instruction and student achievement are still contested, these reforms may help schools achieve other goals that are part of their mission and promote outcomes for the common good—“certain general conditions that are in an appropriate sense equally to everyone's advantage” (Rawls, 1971, p. 246). The first section of the manuscript provides an overview of the private and public benefits of educational attainment. Arguments in the second section suggest that the current state of public schools precludes public schools from accomplishing these goals, in particular supporting a stable, democratic society. In the last section, we consider current reforms in light of public goals and suggest that these reforms, coupled with accountability measures, may change how we think about “public” education and rekindle optimism in the ability of public schools to meet their goals to the advantage of both the individuals receiving an education and society.

### **Education as a Quasi-Public Good**

Because education not only produces benefits for the individual, but also yields benefits to the public, education is often considered a *public good*. The term public good is misleading, and at least partially erroneous. In the strict economic sense of the term a *public good*: (a) is non-excludable—others cannot be prevented from using the good or service, (b) is non-rivalrous—use of the good or service does not prevent others from using the good or service at the same time, and (c) has externalities—provides benefits that extend beyond the person consuming the good or service. Whether education possesses the first two properties of a public good depends on how we describe the means to which someone obtains an education. If education is understood to be a classroom in a

school (schooling), for instance, then education is excludable and rivalrous. A school can prevent a student from attending (excludable) and, along this line of reasoning, one student in a class prevents another student from enrolling in that class (rivalrous). From this perspective, education has only two of the three characteristics of a public good.

In contrast, if we view education as simply the acquisition of knowledge, education is non-excludable and non-rivalrous. Theoretically, someone cannot be prevented from acquiring knowledge, thus education is non-excludable. Furthermore, from this perspective the consumption of education by one person does not preclude or reduce the amount of education available to others, and thus education is non-rivalrous as well. From this approach, education has all three attributes of a public good. Both of these notions, however, have the third attribute of a public good, externalities. The benefits of education are not confined to the person or persons who directly receive an education. There are positive social, cultural, political, and economic outcomes of education that contribute to the public good (see Spring, 2006, for an overview of this concept). It is because of the presence and importance of these externalities that are *for the public good*, that education is often referred to as a *public good*.

In fact, because education provides direct benefits of consumption to the private individual, such as higher income, greater productivity, better health, and greater upward social mobility than those with lesser or no education; and these desirable outcomes produce indirect public benefits, such as higher income tax payments, improved health resulting in lower public medical costs (i.e., Medicaid), reduced reliance on public assistance (i.e., welfare), a reduction in crime, and improvements in human capital which increases economic productivity, education is often deemed as, much like recent trends in automobiles toward “green” cars, a hybrid—both a public and a private good, sometimes referred to as a quasi-public good, a mixed good, and a near-public good.

Both classic and contemporary arguments for tax-supported, public schools are largely rooted in claims concerning the public benefits associated with educated citizens. Specifically, it is widely held by contributors to economic, political, and philosophical thought and citizens that the public benefits of education are so important to society that relying on education development outside of a public, formal institutional structure is not worth the disadvantages to society that may arise from inadequate education outcomes. It is commonly assumed that provision by the private sector may lead to self interest behavior that results in the undersupply of education—not all citizens would receive a quality education. Ironically, many public school districts are not fulfilling their responsibility for providing quality educational opportunities in

the same way that proponents of publicly funded and operated schools feared private sector suppliers might do.

### **The Condition of Public Education Limits Public Benefits of Education**

Education is touted as a means for upward social mobility, yet decades of evidence suggests that schools by and large maintain the existing social and economic order of society (Anyon 1981, 1997; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Carnoy & Levin, 1985; Coleman et al., 1966; Lareau, 1989; Oakes, 1985). And although the achievement of students from low income families has improved in recent decades, and there has been a substantial increase in education funding at the local, state, and federal levels to support a wide array of innovative “fixes,” schools, on the whole, remain segregated and unequal. Schools are often rewarding students who have the norms and values of the upper middle class, and bringing about the reproduction of the existing class structure—a monument to the preservation of power relations. Indeed, the achievement gap along the lines of race, ethnicity, and class mirrors income and racial inequality in society.

With the number of students of color rising dramatically to the degree that the “minority” has become the “majority” in certain geographic regions and school districts in the nation and children of color being more likely to be from low income families (Adams et al., 2006), it follows that if the educational system continues to underserve minorities, then schools will produce even greater numbers of under- or uneducated citizens. Unfortunately, little pressure exists to fundamentally alter structural arrangements to benefit disadvantaged students because, as educational historian Michael Katz (1971) wrote over three decades ago, “for those who control the system there has been no point in making fundamental structural alterations” (p. xxiv) when such alterations would threaten the position of those who benefit from the existing system—including teacher unions, professional and non-professional staff, middle and upper class parents and their children, school boards, and countless politicians.

Since disadvantaged youth do not have access to the same educational opportunities as middle and upper class youth, they receive fewer private benefits from education. Furthermore, because disadvantaged students have more to gain from a quality education than privileged students and because privileged students have alternative opportunities to acquire the knowledge and skills to produce private benefits, society also benefits more from the education of disadvantaged students than privileged students (note, most of the positive externalities diminish conditions related to

low-income status). Thus, it stands to reason, as schools fail to provide an education that maximizes the learning potential of all students, they fall short in generating the very externalities for which public schools were created to engender (e.g., less need for welfare or unemployment, higher income tax payments, improved nutrition resulting in lower tax supported medical costs, reduction in crime and a smaller population of individuals who are incarcerated, increased economic productivity of workers, and democracy). Therefore, improving contemporary education in a manner that minimizes or closes the achievement gap will produce conditions that convey advantages to all citizens equally—in the sense that every member in society profits, not that benefits are consumed equally, which is theoretically improbable as it relates to many of the positive externalities associated with education. A reduction in overall crime rates due to education, for example, may benefit someone in an urban setting with high crime rates more than a person who resides in a rural setting with little criminal activity.

The American democratic way of life is also threatened by the current conditions of public education. Public education, as an institution of political socialization, fosters the development of dispositions and skills necessary for becoming informed and active citizens that uphold democratic heritage (Dewey, 1944). Educated individuals are capable of accessing and understanding public information to increase their awareness of political and social issues, critically thinking about the information upon which policies are formed, participating in public debates, and contributing to the development of policies—all of which are necessary components of a healthy democratic society (Labaree, 1997; Rawls, 1999). Research has shown “the uneducated man or the man [sic] with limited education is a different political actor from the man who has achieved a higher level of education” (Almond & Verba, 1989, p. 315). For example, education is correlated with voter participation rates—in the 2006 elections, the voting rate of citizens who had a bachelor’s degree (61%) far exceeded the voting rate of citizens who had not completed high school (27%) (File, 2008). Education is also linked to support for free speech, political literacy, sophistication, and volunteering (Dee, 2004; Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996; Putnam, 1995; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). Given the strong relationship between education and political and civic knowledge and action, a healthy democracy cannot be sustained by an ailing public education system that fails to educate those most at-risk—a population that constitutes an increasingly large segment of American society. Students who do not have the ability to understand information related to matters of policy will make uninformed political decisions. Because “we all depend on this political competence of our

fellow citizens, since we put ourselves at the mercy of their collective judgment about the running of our society” the educational achievement of all students is of vital importance to all members of society (Labaree, 1997, p. 42). Moreover, disenfranchised students become disenfranchised adults—adults less likely to vote, participate in voluntary organizations, or sustain our democracy through civic action.

Public education is also an important mechanism for ensuring that there is an adequate distribution of income and wealth that is necessary to sustain a democracy (Labaree, 1997; Rawls, 1999). Inequality in wealth leads to inequality in political influence. If there is an inadequate distribution of income and wealth, then the privileged will exercise undue political influence because those lacking adequate financial resources will not have the means to take advantage of their basic freedoms, exercise oversight over government institutions, or in some instances may not be able to act independent of those with economic influence. With the gap between rich and poor in the United States now being the third largest income inequality among advanced economies (Einhorn, 2009), with 19% of children in the U.S. living in families with incomes below the federal poverty level (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2008), with demographic trends indicating ever increasing poverty rates, and with schools upholding practices that reproduce class structures in society, democratic control in society is weakening.

### **Redefining Public Education**

With the persistent failure of public schools to effectively or equitably educate a significant portion of at-risk youth, predominately children of color and children from low-income families, the belief that public education necessarily enhances the public good is being questioned. That is, we are beginning to see not only a change in our understanding of education as a *public good*, but also as education *for public good*. This uncertainty has led to a paradigm shift in how we think about public education. Discourse is moving away from public education—*by the people and for the people* toward an emphasis on public education—*for the people*. From the latter perspective, the goals of education are not necessarily coupled with the means by which we provide it (Hill, 2000). With this view “common schools are means to civic ends, not ends in themselves” (Macedo, 2000, p. 274). By reframing the debate, influential policy elites have been able “to frame the problem in education as one of a government monopoly, and to locate the solution in the redefinition of public education” (Lubienski, 2001, p. 640). This redefinition assumes that public education is no longer solely the province of the public school



system—there is privatization of a quasi-public good. Other venues or providers (e.g., parochial, private, home schooling, charter, privately managed, etc.) are viewed as capable of offering a quality education that can produce public benefits. This redefinition includes various forms of school choice, including charter schools, for-profit educational management organizations, vouchers, and market-based accountability systems. With this redefinition, neo-conservatives have eliminated the separation of the public and private spheres. What was heretofore the domain of the public becomes the responsibility of the private—less reliance on government and more reliance on markets and decentralization (Wolin, 1989). Public education for the public good is recast as public, public-private, and private education for the public good.

Private sector participation in public schools is not new. School districts routinely contract out for a variety of services, including food, sanitation, and maintenance. Continuing education for employees and purchasing textbooks and other instructional materials from private vendors are well known examples of this public-private provision of public education. In recent decades, however, these partnerships have evolved into new forms, such as publicly funded charter schools operated by for-profit education management organizations. Even federal laws authorize these public-private partnerships. NCLB, for instance, allows for public money to be used to pay for tutors from the private sector (Reid, 2004). The private sector's involvement in public education is so pervasive that Frederick Hess, resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, reasoned the lines between the public and private spheres in education have become blurred to the point that hard and fast distinctions are no longer relevant (Hess, 2004).

As private sector involvement in the governance and operation of schools grows and some private sector organizations develop reputations for outperforming traditional schools, some argue that private schools may be indeed serving the public interest better than their conventional counterparts (Hess, 2004), and policymakers are beginning to consider to what extent can private agencies provide education in a way that ensures that the vital public benefits will not be diminished. Now, some reformers, largely neo-conservatives, contend that private sector actors cannot only educate students, but they can also improve the educational opportunities of at-risk students—the student population least effectively served by traditional public schools. More specifically, they claim that outcomes or performance-based accountability systems, coupled with various forms of school choice, are the solution to the educational crisis that has beset American society. In fact, as it relates to promoting the common goal of democracy, research shows that public schools are not

the only or even the most effective at promoting values that uphold our civic heritage. Studies have shown that students at secular and nonsecular private schools do not score lower than, and in some instances score higher than students who attend or graduated from public schools on attitudes commonly associated with sustaining a democracy—voluntary service, civic participation, tolerance of minority groups, knowledge of the U.S. constitutional processes and rights, voter participation, and commitment to freedom of speech (see Hill, 2000). These findings clearly demonstrate that alternative forms of schooling—private, parochial, and homeschooling—can be vehicles for promoting democracy.

### **Toward a Middle Ground: Keeping the “Public” in Public Education**

A number of scholars in a variety of disciplines question the presumed benefits expected through an inversion of the public and private spheres. Drawing from research in economics, Sawicky (1997) observed that markets and business organizations do not always “do a good job in satisfying public wants and promoting social welfare” and, in fact, in many cases “they fail miserably” (p. 21). The ideology of privatization—that “business will always do better”—is patently false, according to Sawicky. A case in point, numerous school districts have tried and abandoned merit pay schemes, in part due to the difficulty of measuring individual contributions to the performance of large, complex organizations such as schools (Peters, 2001). The scholarly research on merit pay suggests that it is an insufficient motivator to improve school system performance. Management theorists have long recognized that many public service organizations, including schools, do not respond well to marketplace incentives (Drucker, 1985). Contracting out educational services to for profit management companies such as Edison, The Tesseract Group (formerly Educational Alternatives Inc.), and Alternative Education Inc., have failed to significantly improve educational outcomes, contrary to expectations (Fitz & Beers, 2002). Generally, research on various school choice plans, be they charter schools or vouchers, has been mixed and has failed to demonstrate definitively that choice reforms create a more effective, efficient, or equitable educational system (Fusarelli, 2003). Perhaps the biggest critique of market-based reforms, such as school choice and performance-based accountability, has been that they will further exacerbate inequities in education (e.g., Borman et al., 2004; Fuller, 1996a, 1996b; Fuller & Elmore, 1996; Smith & Meier, 1995). For example, purely market-based systems tend to create and perpetuate economic and social disparities, not resolve differences in achievement.



One alternative that would move us beyond the traditional approach yet not fool-heartedly adopt market-based reforms entirely is incorporating the best features of both the public and private spheres—expanding freedom of choice while preserving public accountability. For example, Viteritti (1999) favors voucher plans for the poor that guard against discrimination in student selection and require that schools receiving public funds in the form of vouchers be held to the same accountability standards as public schools. Just as not all public schools are failing schools, not all private and parochial schools are effective schools. Unregulated choice plans may be just as dangerous to the public good as failing schools are in our current educational delivery system (Moe, 2001). However, school choice also has the potential to offer better educational opportunities to those most at risk (Hill, 2000). An ideal educational system allows for school choice regardless of economic status while maintaining protections designed to ensure accountability for public goals, such as performance and fiscal audits. Regulated choice plans, coupled with performance-based public accountability systems applied to all schools, would preserve the “public” in public education.

In this way, public accountability will allow for the public and private provision of the quasi-public good of education that ensures excellence and equity. Through an increase in the private benefits associated with consumption of education as more students attain a quality education, society’s gains are substantially augmented as well. The resulting improvements in equity and excellence in education will improve the health of our democracy—more citizens will have the literacy and knowledge to participate in a democracy and more citizens will have the opportunity to earn enough income to bring about an adequate distribution of wealth that supports a stable democracy. It should be noted, however, that although there is general consensus that sustaining a healthy democracy is for the public good and education is the foundation of democracy, the presence and importance of other outcomes of education that promote the public good are hotly contested matters and will likely continue to be so since democracy allows for pluralist perspectives (Tyack, 2003). Ironically, these debates are a consequence of having citizens who understand political arguments in light of their own interests, participate in civic discussions and organizations, and vote for government officials that represent their interests—the very actions that result from having vast numbers of educated citizens in society and a democratic tradition.

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