

# Public Education and Democracy

## **WHERE WE CAME FROM**

From the Center on Education Policy at the George Washington University Graduate School of Education and Human Development:

The Founding Fathers maintained that the success of the fragile American democracy would depend on the competency of its citizens. They believed strongly that preserving democracy would require an educated population that could understand political and social issues and would participate in civic life, vote wisely, protect their rights and freedoms, and resist tyrants and demagogues. Character and virtue were also considered essential to good citizenship, and education was seen as a means to provide moral instruction and build character.

While voters were limited to white males, many leaders of the early nation also supported educating girls on the grounds that mothers were responsible for educating their own children, were partners on family farms, and set a tone for the virtues of the nation.

The nations' founders recognized that educating people for citizenship would be difficult to accomplish without a more systematic approach to schooling. Soon after the American Revolution, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and other early leaders proposed the creation of a more formal and unified system of publicly funded schools. While some Northeastern communities had already established publicly funded or free schools by the late 1780s, the concept of free public education did not begin to take hold on a wider scale until the 1830s.

In the 1830s, Horace Mann, a Massachusetts legislator and secretary of that state's board of education, began to advocate for the creation of public schools that would be universally available to all children, free of charge, and funded by the state. Mann and other proponents of "common schools" emphasized that a public investment in education would benefit the whole nation by transforming children into literate, moral, and productive citizens.

## **Advocates for Inclusive Education**

Position Paper: Public Ed & Democracy, June 2023

Common school advocates emphasized the knowledge, civic, and economic benefits of public schooling. Common schools would teach the “three R’s” (reading, writing, arithmetic), along with other subjects such as history, geography, grammar, and rhetoric.

A strong dose of moral instruction would also be provided to instill civic virtues. Educating children of the poor and middle classes would prepare them to obtain good jobs, proponents argued, and thereby strengthen the nation’s economic position. In addition to preparing students for citizenship and work, education was seen by some reformers as a means for people to achieve happiness and fulfillment.

### **WHERE WE ARE NOW**

From Allison Jennings Roche, “Delegitimizing Censorship: Contending with the Rhetoric of an Anti-Democratic Movement”:

There is a renewed focus on leveraging the rhetorics and arguments of parental rights as a means to assert control and further marginalize the perspectives of targeted populations.

This kind of language has been used to call for everything from vouchers to private school to a right to keep children from receiving proper sexual education. A huge reason this kind of discourse has caught fire at such a rapid pace is because the neoliberal approach to educational reform has been so successful in reframing public education as a private good to be consumed.

- There are some who believe they ought to be able to send their child, and the taxpayers’ money that sponsors that child’s education, to any school they choose. This is the idea behind vouchers.
- Others believe that vouchers would hurt their local schools, but that the local district could open and oversee a charter school, geared to specific needs of a specific population of children.
- Others challenge that both vouchers and charters will weaken community education as we know it and pave the way for the privatization of our children’s education and therefore, their future, for someone’s profit and to someone’s unknowable motives.

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### **WE BELIEVE**

- Public community schools are cornerstones of democracy.
- People who do not want their children to attend their local community school always have the option of sending their children to private or parochial schools or homeschooling them. If they withdraw their children from their community school, they are not entitled to force others to pay for the choice they prefer. We do not allow people vouchers for other municipal services, such as fire- or police protection. Taxes are spent on municipal services and people are free to use them or forgo them, but not to create their own private substitute and expect others to foot the bill.
- Locally governed, locally administered local schools serve our children best. Taxpayers elect their school board, they can speak during public comment, they can write and speak to the board and to administrators, and they can serve on advisory committees that help determine policy and decision-making. This ensures that the community governs the school which in turn serves the community's children.
- Children who attend community schools meet their neighbors' children. They play together on sports teams, collaborate on projects, and forge bonds between families.
- They learn civic responsibility by meeting and sharing experiences with the other children in their community.
- Public community schools are cornerstones of democracy.

### **WHERE WE WANT TO GO**

- We want to see our schools become the best they can be to serve every single solitary child, mentoring each to their highest potential.
- This means looking at all the children, assessing all their needs, and hiring outstanding professional staff to implement a varied, vibrant, up-to-date curriculum. It means a panoply of options: all the usual academic subjects, plus art, music, drama, sports, clubs, and a banquet of books in school libraries to help each child grow into a lifelong, passionate learner.
- It also means standing up for our wonderful schools, rejecting divisive tactics, and supporting teachers in doing their best work.
- We resist anti-democratic censorship movements.
- We defend intellectual freedom, free expression, and cultural representation.

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