

## For the Common Good: Recommitting to Public Education in a Time of Crisis



### Public Schools and the Common Good

Since the early years of the United States, public schools have been expected to fulfill multiple purposes that benefit the whole society as well as individuals. Teaching academic knowledge and preparing young people for careers are perhaps the most obvious. Other purposes include preparing young people for civic life, bringing together a diverse population, promoting equity, providing community and social services, and more. Underlying all of these purposes is a recognition that all Americans have an interest in creating and sustaining a robust system of public education. This belief in education as a common good was integral to the kind of democratic governance envisioned by the nation's founders.

Now, the covid-19 pandemic has jolted us into a stranger, harsher, and more challenging future than most would have predicted. Mass closures of school buildings have created unprecedented disruption and have left teachers and school leaders struggling to carry out the most basic education functions however they can. When schools reopen, they will confront complex logistical decisions, learning losses, budget cuts, and possible staff reductions, as well as many families distressed by economic hardship and the loss of loved ones. The current crisis will transform public education in dramatic and unpredictable ways. Education leaders and teachers will need to adapt and plan.

The education of a nation, instead of being confined to a few schools & universities, for the instruction of the few, must become the national care and expense, for the information of the many.

—John Adams

At the same time, school closures are making many Americans more aware of the vital educational, civic, and social roles filled by public schools and their impact on the common good. With children at home, many parents are gaining a better appreciation of the expertise and contributions of teachers and school leaders. Families are recognizing the importance of services like school lunch and breakfast programs. People of all ages are realizing how much public schools are intertwined with the daily lives of communities. This heightened awareness can be useful in marshalling public support to help schools through the challenges that lie ahead.

To support this effort, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) at the George Washington University has issued this report, which draws on the ideas in one of CEP's most popular publications, *Why We Still Need Public Schools*,<sup>1</sup> and reconsiders them in the current context. This new report highlights the multiple purposes filled by public schools in American society and discusses why, in this time of upheaval, it is crucial to maintain a robust public education system.

## The Vital Purposes of Public Schools

First and foremost, public schools exist to teach young people the academic subjects and skills needed to succeed in higher education and careers and in their daily lives. But public schools have also been charged with other important civic and social purposes, described below.

These multiple purposes are not new. As explained in a companion publication by CEP, *The History and Evolution of Public Education in the US*,<sup>2</sup> the need to prepare people for democratic citizenship was a major reason why some of the Founding Fathers proposed a more formal and unified system of publicly funded schools. Early advocates also saw public schools as means not only to develop an educated citizenry, but also to create cohesion among disparate groups and social classes, build economic strength, and eliminate poverty, crime, and other social problems. While these noble purposes have not been fully met, they are as relevant as ever.

### *Providing universal access to education*

The most essential role of public schools—one that is often taken for granted—is to be available to all students free of charge.

Public school districts are required by law to educate any student, regardless of income, race, ethnicity, academic level, disability, immigration status, language proficiency, or other background characteristics or needs. Public education is generally provided “at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without tuition charge.”<sup>3</sup> Although private schools are important to many families, they are not meant to be a universal system. They are limited by geography, may be expensive, and may have selective policies for admitting and retaining students.

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<sup>1</sup> Center on Education Policy, *Why We Still Need Public Schools: Public Education for the Common Good*, 2007, <https://www.cep-dc.org/displayDocument.cfm?DocumentID=291>. The 2007 report was an update of the 1996 report, *Do We Still Need Public Schools*, 1996, <https://www.cep-dc.org/displayDocument.cfm?DocumentID=129>

<sup>2</sup> Available at [www.cep-dc.org](http://www.cep-dc.org)

<sup>3</sup> 20 USCS § 7801(21)

The vast majority of American students are educated in public schools.

Public schools (traditional and charter) educate about 90% of elementary and secondary students; only about 10% are educated in private schools.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, our nation's economic stability, security, and social outcomes depend on how well public schools do their job. In turn, the capacity of public schools to do their work well is related to the level of support and commitment they receive from parents, policymakers, and the broader public.

Public schools are supported by tax dollars and accountable to the public.

More than 98% of public school revenues come from public sources.<sup>5</sup> The provision of public funding was integral to the development and spread of a system of public education throughout the US; it meant that children's access to education would no longer depend on the inconsistent decisions of parents, charitable organizations, and town governments. It also gave taxpayers a degree of control over their schools and established the principle that education is a public good that merits contributions from all.

Public schools are overseen by public authorities.

Public schools must comply with various state, federal, and local requirements and must collect and publicly report information about test scores, other student outcomes, expenditures, safety, teachers, and more. (Public charter schools are often held to fewer requirements than traditional public schools and may be managed by a charter organization through a contract with a public agency.) Private schools, which are not under public governance, are not held to the same requirements.

Public schools must continue to be there for all students even in times of trouble.

As the nation moves toward an uncertain and worrisome future in the wake of covid-19, it will take a greater level of public support to ensure that public schools continue to operate and that public school teachers and leaders can continue doing their jobs.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_cgc.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgc.asp)

<sup>5</sup> [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18\\_235.10.asp?current=yes](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_235.10.asp?current=yes)

## *Preparing young people for civic life*

Public schools have long been considered the primary institution for educating students about our system of government and preparing them to participate in civic life.

Our democracy depends on having educated citizens who understand political and social issues and who will exercise the vote, act to protect their rights and freedoms, and resist tyrants and demagogues. Not only are public schools responsible for teaching civics and government, but they are also one of the first places where children form a community with others outside their families and practice skills they will use in civic life, such as making group decisions and handling disagreements.

This civic purpose of public education has wide support.

Nearly all Americans (97%) agree that public schools should be teaching civics, according to the 2019 PDK poll, and 70% of Americans think civics instruction should be required. One-fourth (25%) of Americans consider preparing students for civic life to be the main goal of public education.<sup>6</sup>

Yet civic education is underemphasized in the school curriculum compared with other core subjects.

While most states (35 plus DC) require high school students to study civics, just 8 of these states require students to take a year-long civics or government class in order to graduate. (Many of the 15 states that do *not* mandate a high school civics or government course nevertheless embed civics material in their standards for learning and leave it up to districts to determine how to incorporate it.)<sup>7</sup>

The need for civic education is great—many Americans lack key knowledge of civics and government.

According to a 2017 survey of civic knowledge, only 26% of Americans can name all three branches government, and 37% can't name any of the rights guaranteed under the First Amendment.<sup>8</sup> Inadequate attention to the civic purpose of public education could have high

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<sup>6</sup> <https://pdkpoll.org/results/should-students-study-civics-public-schools-pdk-poll>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/data-most-states-require-history-but-not.html>

<sup>8</sup> [https://cdn.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Appendix\\_Civics\\_survey\\_2017.pdf](https://cdn.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Appendix_Civics_survey_2017.pdf)

costs. It could lead to a chipping away of key aspects of democracy before the public realizes what has been lost.

Civic education is especially critical in the current context.

The pandemic has underscored the importance of civic knowledge and civic mindsets. Americans have been asked to make sacrifices to protect others. They have watched debates about the responsibilities and powers of different levels of government play out in front of them with serious consequences. People must sift through an outpouring of conflicting and confusing information to distinguish fact from fallacy. They have seen first-hand the impact of government policies and, in many cases, have gained a new respect for competence in government, expertise in public institutions, and dedication to public service. All of this is occurring in a Presidential election year when voters' decisions will have very high stakes.

On a more hopeful note, engagement with public schools can be a beneficial form of civic participation.

Adults can help children learn to be good citizens by taking actions that demonstrate their commitment to democratic values. Public education offers many opportunities for people of all ages to participate. Examples include volunteering in schools, contributing expertise, attending school board meetings, serving on school boards or advisory boards, joining the PTA or other organizations involved in public education, or participating in more informal ways. These and other forms of engagement can not only contribute to the effectiveness of schools, but also strengthen support for public education.

The measure of a country's greatness is the ability to maintain compassion in a time of crisis.

—Thurgood Marshall

### *Bringing together a diverse population and promoting equity*

Public schools are the main places that bring together young people from diverse economic, social, racial-ethnic, and religious backgrounds for a major part of the day.

When students from diverse backgrounds learn side-by-side, they have opportunities to find common ground and acquire skills of getting along. Although this ideal has been thwarted at various times by practices ranging from outright discrimination to more subtle forms of student tracking, public schools remain the primary societal institution where children are likely to interact with peers different from themselves.

This unifying purpose of public education is especially important in today's context.

The school-age population and the larger US society have become more racially and ethnically diverse. Less than half (49%) of public elementary and secondary school students are white, 26% are Latinx (the fastest-growing group), 15% African American, 6% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% Native American/Alaska Native, and 4% two or more races.<sup>9</sup> Still, polarization and conflict persist among different racial, ethnic, linguistic, economic, and political groups. By exposing students to diverse cultures and different ways of thinking, public schools can be a force for increasing tolerance, reducing tensions, and promoting greater understanding.

Accomplishing these purposes has become a greater challenge because of school and neighborhood “resegregation.”

Over half of Latinx and African American students attend schools in which non-white students comprised at least 75% of total enrollment.<sup>10</sup> Several factors have contributed to this situation, including “white flight” to suburban districts, housing policies and individual real estate decisions, private and public school choice, and the secession of wealthier and whiter municipalities from urban county districts. These trends are counterproductive for all student groups, however. Evidence suggests that schools with integrated student bodies have higher average test scores, higher college-going rates, and lower dropout rates than racially/ethnically homogenous schools, and that the achievement of middle-class and white students is not diminished when they attend more integrated schools.<sup>11</sup>

Promoting equity is a fundamental purpose of public education, but this goal has not been fully realized.

Public school classrooms have long been the places where society's efforts to end discrimination and ensure equal educational opportunity have been put to the test. Public schools have been the first institutions charged with implementing policies such as civil rights for African Americans, appropriate education for children with disabilities, and services for English learners and immigrants. Much remains to be done to achieve educational equity, however. Achievement gaps persist by race, ethnicity, linguistic background, and disability status. Students in schools with high poverty and high enrollments of children of color tend to receive less state and local per pupil funding, have notably higher rates of teacher turnover, and have more dire infrastructure

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<sup>9</sup> [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator\\_rbb.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_rbb.asp)

<sup>10</sup> [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator\\_RBE.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_RBE.asp)

<sup>11</sup> [https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/studies/pdf/school\\_composition\\_and\\_the\\_bw\\_achievement\\_gap\\_2015.pdf](https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/studies/pdf/school_composition_and_the_bw_achievement_gap_2015.pdf); <https://botc.tcf.org/content/report/bold-agenda-school-integration/>

needs.<sup>12</sup> These disparities are likely to be exacerbated by the pandemic crisis, which has disproportionately affected low-income areas and communities of color.

### *Meeting social service and community needs*

#### Public schools address a range of family and social service needs.

At the most basic level, covid-19 policies have made clear how much working parents rely on schools to take care of their children while they do their jobs and how much family schedules are geared to public school schedules. Public schools do much more than provide a place of learning for children. For example, they also provide lunch to more than 29 million students each day and breakfasts to almost 15 million;<sup>13</sup> these school meals may be the most reliable source of nutrition for some children from low-income families. Many schools also provide health care through school nurses, before- and after-school programs, counseling, recreation, substance abuse prevention, and safety and violence prevention. At some public schools, entire families can access a variety of social and community services. School closures related to the pandemic have made clear just how important these services are, and many school districts have continued distributing meals at pickup points.

#### Public schools help to build and sustain communities.

Public schools are places where community members come together for meetings, recreation, entertainment, voting, and other activities. In some small, rural communities, schools are the only public building suitable for these purposes, and the loss or consolidation of public schools can have a negative ripple effect when the community loses this anchor.<sup>14</sup> When parents send their children to public school, they become part of the larger school community and are more invested in the success of the school system. And when people support their local public schools through their taxes, time, and voluntary efforts, they are exercising a civic responsibility that benefits the whole society. If we let public schools falter, we lose an important source of social glue.

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<sup>12</sup> [https://ikoglyevnfp2lpq1dhrqe17-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/FundingGapReport\\_2018\\_FINAL.pdf](https://ikoglyevnfp2lpq1dhrqe17-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/FundingGapReport_2018_FINAL.pdf); [https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Teacher\\_Turnover\\_REPORT.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Teacher_Turnover_REPORT.pdf); and [http://www.21csf.org/best-home/docuploads/pub/331\\_StateofOurSchools2016.pdf](http://www.21csf.org/best-home/docuploads/pub/331_StateofOurSchools2016.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> <https://schoolnutrition.org/aboutschoolmeals/schoolmealtrendsstats/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://journalistsresource.org/studies/society/education/what-happens-when-a-rural-school-closes/>; <https://theconversation.com/school-closures-can-hit-rural-communities-hard-128837>; and <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/how-schools-are-forced-to-close-as-rural-populations-dwindle>

Public schools will play a key role in dealing with the long-term effects of the current crisis.

The pandemic has exacerbated the already wide disparities in wealth and health. Americans at the lower rungs of the economic ladder have been harder hit by exposure, illness, and layoffs. The nation can expect a long, difficult period that will negatively affect the economic stability of families and the learning and well-being of many children. Public schools must be ready to deal with an increased number of children and families with serious educational and social needs. To do this job, public schools will need support from all Americans, not just parents with children in public school.

## Recommitting to Public Education

Over the past several years, alternatives such as public charter schools, virtual schools, private school voucher programs, and outsourcing of certain education functions to private companies have altered the education landscape. Still, most students attend public schools, and most Americans remain committed to public education, although their support is tempered by such issues as costs, taxes, and concerns about school quality.

The covid-19 pandemic has made the multiple contributions of public schools more visible and has reinforced the need for strong and effective public institutions, but it has also exposed the stubborn inequities that have made public education a target for those who would like to radically change the mission of public schools. This debate will likely become even more intense when public schools reopen, as local systems try to meet the needs of students and staff with far less funding and far more ongoing disruptions.

While the covid-19 crisis has unsettled schooling across the nation to an extent unseen since the 1918 flu epidemic, it is important to remember that the US public education system has proved its resilience in overcoming many other unexpected or traumatic events, including the Great Recession of 2008, a spate of tragic school shootings, and a series of natural disasters. Although these occurrences have wreaked havoc on school systems large and small, public schools have managed to adjust and move ahead with the business of educating over 90% of the nation's students. Still, helping schools rebound from this crisis will require a deeper public commitment and a stronger political will than has been evident in recent years. Even if people are not yet able to come together physically in a public space, it will be important for them to come together metaphorically.

We must recognize that the well-being of our own children is intimately linked to the well-being of all other people's children. After all, when one of our children needs life-saving surgery, someone else's child will perform it. When one of our children is harmed by violence, someone else's child will have committed it. The good life for our own children can be secured only if it is also secured for all other people's children.

—Lillian Katz, University of Illinois,  
Champaign-Urbana

The public education system that emerges from the crisis will be different from that of the past, but at this critical moment, there is an opportunity for communities to come together and recommit to a better, stronger future for their public schools. If we have learned anything from this period of distancing from each other, it is that communities need to think holistically about how public institutions, like schools, serve and reinforce the nation's longstanding commitment to the common good. We all have a role to play as the nation moves to recover and rebound from this crisis. If we use this moment to both reflect on the past and innovate toward the future, the result could be a more equitable and effective public education system.

## Credits

This report was written by Nancy Kober, editorial consultant; Diane Stark Rentner, deputy director; and Maria Ferguson, executive director, all with the Center on Education Policy.

Located in Washington, D.C., and founded in 1995, the Center on Education Policy at the George Washington University is a national, independent source for research and information about public education. The Center helps 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 try to 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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