

# **Do We Still Need Public Schools?**

Prepared by the  
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Concern for the common good and the well-being of all citizens is one of the highest virtues of American democracy. In 1899 educational philosopher John Dewey said it this way: “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.”

Recognizing the importance of education to our national well-being, the early leaders of the United States created publicly funded schools to educate children from all walks of life. But the founders of public education were seeking to achieve more than merely teaching young people to read, write, and cipher. They believed that a system of publicly supported schools ought to:

- prepare people to become responsible citizens;
- improve social conditions;
- promote cultural unity;
- help people become economically self-sufficient;
- enhance individual happiness and enrich individual lives;
- dispel inequities in education; and
- ensure a basic level of quality among schools.

Today, some Americans seem to be losing faith in the public schools. When discussion turns to the quality of education, it is not uncommon for a friend or neighbor to suggest that the problems of the public schools could be solved by school choice, education vouchers, privatization, home schooling, or some other plan to shift funding and responsibility for education to the private sector. In an age when Americans have begun to question one of the most fundamental elements of society, the public schools, it is useful — indeed necessary — to review why those schools were created in the first place.

## **Before Public Schools\***

Shortly after the American Revolution, some of the early leaders of the new United States proposed a new system of schooling to go along with their emerging philosophy of democratic governance. Public schools would be organized and financed by the states, and they would be open to rich and poor children alike.

Despite this early support from influential leaders, public schools — or “common schools,” as they came to be called — would not become widely established for another 75 years. From colonial times through the early 19th century, before common schools took hold, American children were educated in a hodgepodge of institutions and arrangements. These included church-supported schools, local schools for pay organized by towns or groups of parents, tuition schools set up by traveling schoolmasters, charity schools run by churches or benevolent societies for poor children, 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. Some young people entered apprenticeships instead of attending school, on the promise that their masters would teach them to read. Other children learned at home, at church, or at work; or they received no formal education of any kind.

This unsystematic approach to schooling resulted in many inequities. For example, large groups of children — including African Americans, Native Americans, many girls, and many poor white children who did not belong to a church — were excluded from schools by law or by custom. Some states made it a crime to teach a slave to read.

Other youngsters lived in rural areas where there were no schools. Where schools did exist outside the cities, they often were hard to get to, skimpily equipped, and overcrowded. Teachers were underpaid, inexperienced, transient, and sometimes undereducated themselves.

Early schools also varied widely in curriculum, length of school year, and the ages of students served. Few young people had opportunities for education beyond elementary school. Income and social class usually fixed a child’s options. Youngsters from well-to-do families often had access to a fine, “classical” education. In striking contrast, the children of farmers and day workers and the children in charity schools were lucky to receive even the most rudimentary education.

\*Sources of information about the history of public education include: Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience, 1793-1976* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990); Merle Curti, *The Social Ideas of American Educators: With New Chapter on the Last Twenty-Five Years* (Paterson, N.J.: Littlefield, Adams, 1974); Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); Ira Katznelson and Margaret Weir, *Schooling for All: Class, Race, and the Decline of the Democratic Ideal* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Joel H. Spring, *The American School, 1642-1990: Varieties of Historical Interpretation of the Foundations and Development of American Education* (New York: Longman, 1990); and David B. Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974).

## Why Public Schools?

The first advocates of publicly supported schools believed that the American people had a responsibility to educate all children in order to achieve certain basic democratic goals, including the following:

To prepare people to become responsible citizens. The founding leaders of the United States believed that the success of American democracy depended on the development of an educated citizenry that would vote wisely, protect its rights and freedoms, rout out political corruption, and keep the nation secure from internal and external threats to democracy. Strong character and moral virtue were considered an essential part of good citizenship. Toward this end, the public schools of the 19th century offered moral instruction, often with a religious orientation.

To improve social conditions. The early supporters of public schools put great store in the capacity of education to prevent crime, violence, and other social ills and to bring order to a new and volatile American society. In 1786, Pennsylvania physician and statesman Benjamin Rush said:

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.

To promote cultural unity. Champions of public education hoped that the public schools would unify a diverse population and transmit a common language and culture — and a sense of what it meant to be an “American.” As the number and variety of immigrants increased, the goals of assimilation and harmony took on greater importance. Author Mary Antin wrote in 1912, “The public school has done its best for us foreigners, and for the country, when it has made us into good Americans.”

To help people become economically self-sufficient. Public schools would give all Americans the basic literacy and arithmetic skills that they needed to succeed in the workplaces of the new nation, thereby reducing poverty and its consequences. Early national leaders also saw the public schools as a social escalator in a merit-based society, enabling children of humble birth to pursue financial success and to improve their lot in life. Later, as the Industrial Age introduced new occupations, the public schools offered more courses with direct vocational content.

To enhance individual happiness and enrich individual lives. Some early proponents of public schools noted that the pursuit of knowledge produced people who could think rationally, apply the wisdom of the ages, and appreciate culture. In 1749 Benjamin Franklin said, “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.”

## **Why Public Funding for Education?**

Many taxpayers who accepted the principle of public schooling balked at government funding and supervision of schools. But the early proponents of publicly supported schooling asserted that the education of all children is a vital public interest and a shared responsibility. Only public funding would give schools a consistent base of support and make them accountable to the American people. These early advocates for public schools asserted two additional goals of public funding:

To dispel inequities in education. Public responsibility for education would improve opportunities for children whose schooling was neglected. Despite slow progress toward this goal, especially for such groups as African Americans, it remains an ideal. In 1903 civil rights leader and educator W.E.B. DuBois wrote:

Education and work are the levers to uplift a people. Work alone will not do it unless inspired by the right ideals and guided by intelligence. Education must not simply teach work — it must teach Life.

To ensure a basic level of quality among schools. Government funding and policies would overcome local stinginess and reconcile wide variations with regard to curricula, attendance policies, length of the school year, and teacher qualifications.

*Beyond the power of  
diffusing old wealth, [education]  
has the prerogative of creating new.*

*It is a thousand times more lucrative than fraud; and adds a thousand  
fold more to a nation's resources than the most successful conquest.*

*Horace Mann*

*"Father of the Common School," 1848*

## **The Rise of the Common School**

In the 1820s, persuaded by these reasons and bolstered by growing citizen support for public schooling, a few states began to distribute public monies and public lands to schools. Over the next 30 years, the common schools took hold gradually and unevenly. By the 1850s, many Northeastern and Midwestern states had established systems of free public schools, including high schools in some locations. In the latter half of the 19th century, free public schools became accessible to most children in the South and the West, and education became compulsory in most states.

Little by little, public schools also became more inclusive. During the second half of the 19th century, more girls began to attend school, and secondary schools became more prevalent. After the Civil War, public schools were created for African American children. Although these schools were segregated and generally substandard, they provided schooling for children who previously had little, if any, access to education. Segregated schools continued to operate in many areas until the middle of the 20th century.



*The school houses might, in many cases, be rendered more commodious. Provision ought to be made for affording the advantages of education, throughout the whole year, to all of a proper age to receive it. Teachers well qualified to give elementary instruction should be employed; and small school libraries, maps, globes, and requisite scientific apparatus should be furnished.*

*Edward Everett*

*Governor of Massachusetts, 1837*

## Are the Reasons for Public Schools Still Valid?

The United States has changed dramatically since the early Americans first debated the rationale for public schools some 200 years ago. Today, it is necessary to ask whether the reasons for creating public schools are still valid. Thoughtful citizens need to consider whether certain national needs still exist.

*Does the nation still need to prepare people to become responsible citizens?* At a time when cynicism and ignorance about government are rampant, preparing young people to become knowledgeable and responsible citizens is more important than ever. Students must understand the workings of our government, its relationship to other forms of government, their own rights and responsibilities as citizens of a constitutional democracy, and the meaning of liberty. They should be ready to help solve complex problems through active participation in the political life of their nation and their community.

Better educated people have higher voting rates. In the 1992 Presidential election, only 27% of high school dropouts voted, compared to 50% of high school graduates and 79% of college graduates.

*U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1992." Series P-20.*

Students enrolled in civics courses are more knowledgeable and more active citizens. Students who participated in a nationwide civics education program called "We the People" did better than their peers in every realm of a test of civics knowledge and had much higher voter registration rates.

*Educational Testing Service, 1990 study of "We the People"; and Center for Civic Education.*

People lack basic knowledge about government. More than half of American adults questioned in a recent survey could not name a single Supreme Court justice. Luntz Research Companies, 1995 survey.

*Does the nation still need to improve social conditions?* Crime, violence, and delinquency continue to affect American society, and education remains the best strategy for preventing crime and violence. In addition, many citizens are looking to the public schools to address a range of other social problems, such as drug abuse.

Half of the people in prison in 1992 were high school dropouts.

*Educational Testing Service, Dreams Deferred: High School Dropouts in the United States, 1994.*

Crime exacts a heavy cost. One murder or fatal assault, on average, costs society about 2.9 million in tangible losses and quality-of-life expenses. The average robbery nets the robbers \$750 in cash value but costs society \$8,000.

*Ted R. Miller, Mark A. Cohen, and Brian Wiersema, Victim Costs and Consequences: A New Look, National Institute of Justice Research Report, 1996.*

In a recent survey, 20.9% of twelfth-graders and 5.7% of junior high students reported

smoking marijuana within the past month, and 40.6% of twelfth-graders and 11.8% of junior high students reported drinking beer during the past month.

*National Parents' Resource Institute for Drug Education, "1994-95 Summary," 1995.*

*Does the nation still need to promote cultural unity?* Students in American schools are more culturally and linguistically diverse than ever before. Public schools remain the primary institution for transmitting our shared American culture and language and providing people with opportunities to learn about and to understand cultures different from their own.

In 1993, 67.6% of the children in U.S. schools were white, 15.8% were African American, 11.9% were Hispanic, and 4.8% were from other racial backgrounds (for example, Asian, Native American). In the central cities, diversity is even more pronounced: 33% of school children are African American and 22% are Hispanic. By the year 2030, non-Hispanic white children are projected to be a minority of the school-age population.

*U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, "School Enrollments: Social and Economic Characteristics of Students, October 1993"; and Council of the Great City Schools, Urban Indicator, September 1995.*

About 9.5 million immigrants entered the U.S. during the decade of the 1980s — almost one million more than arrived during the great decade of immigration from 1900 to 1910. These new immigrants are diverse, coming from Mexico, the Philippines, China, Korea, Vietnam, and elsewhere. By the year 2010, an estimated 22% of school-age children will be children of immigrants.

*Michael Fix and Jeffrey S. Passel, Immigration and Immigrants: Setting the Record Straight, Urban Institute, 1994.*

In 1992-93, about 5% of the children in U.S. schools had limited English proficiency. Concentrations in major cities and in some states were much higher, however. Sixteen percent of the students in the nation's largest cities had limited proficiency in English, as did 15% of the children in California.

*U.S. General Accounting Office, Limited English Proficiency: A Growing and Costly Educational Challenge Facing Many School Districts, 1994; U.S. Department of Education, The Condition of Education, 1995; and Council of the Great City Schools, Urban Indicator, September 1995.*

*Does the nation still need to help people become economically self-sufficient?* Many entry-level jobs today require much more than basic reading skills and a strong back. Our economic vitality depends on workers who have a broad, solid foundation of knowledge and good thinking skills. Education is still the main avenue to a better life for children living in poverty.

People with more education have higher earnings. In 1993 male high school dropouts earned just two-thirds as much as their counterparts who graduated from high school but were not enrolled in college. Female dropouts earned only 59% as much as females who completed high school. Over the past 20 years, the wage gap between dropouts and more educated young people has been widening.

*U.S. Bureau of the Census, March Current Population Surveys.*

High school dropouts are much more likely to be unemployed or on welfare than young people with additional education. In 1993, 47% of recent dropouts were employed, compared to 64% of recent high school graduates not enrolled in college. And in 1992,

high school dropouts were three times as likely to be receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children or public assistance as high school graduates with no college (17% versus 6%).

*U.S. Bureau of the Census, March and October Current Population Surveys.*

Other nations are catching up with or exceeding America's once unparalleled graduation rates. In 1992 the U.S. secondary school completion rate was 87% among 25- to 34-year-olds, while Japan's rate was 91%, Germany's was 89%, and the United Kingdom's was 81%.

*Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators, 1992.*

In 1992, almost 22% of American children under 18 lived in poverty.

*U.S. Department of Education, The Condition of Education, 1995.*

*Does the nation still need to enhance individual happiness and enrich individual lives?* School can help children experience the great satisfaction and joys that come from learning. And people who love learning enrich our culture through their appreciation of the arts and literature, their curiosity about the world and the people around them, and their ability to think clearly and rationally. Yet there are indications that this goal of education is undervalued by many Americans.

In a recent survey of public views about education reform, fewer than one in four Americans said that it was absolutely essential for schools to teach great literature, such as the works of Shakespeare. The survey also found that, for many Americans, the term "highly educated" has negative rather than positive connotations.

*Assignment Incomplete, Public Agenda, 1995.*

And what about public funding of schools? Does the nation still need to dispel inequities in education? Inequalities among districts, schools, and groups of students still plague American education. As long as these disparities exist, the nation cannot be said to provide truly equal education opportunities. Without effective, adequately funded schools for all children, the gaps between the haves and have-nots — inside and outside of school — will widen.

Gross disparities exist between the wealthiest and the poorest school districts in the amounts spent on education. Even if the lowest 5% and the highest 5% of districts are omitted from spending comparisons, the gaps between the poorest and the wealthiest school districts are still wide: for example, \$4,470 per pupil versus \$8,403 in Pennsylvania and \$6,088 per pupil versus \$11,210 in New York in 1991-92.

*Wayne Riddle and Liane White, "Public School Expenditure Disparities: Size, Sources, and Debates Over Their Significance," Congressional Research Service Report, December 1995.*

Achievement and educational gaps remain between white and minority students. In the area of high school completion, for example, the rates in 1994 were 91% for white students, 84% for African Americans, and 60% for Hispanics. But policies aimed at helping minority children achieve are making a difference. Between 1970 and 1990, average math and reading scores on a nationwide test rose 10 percentile points for African American eighth-graders and 11 points for Hispanic eighth-graders, compared to 3 points for white children.

*U.S. Bureau of the Census, March Current Population Surveys; and National Assessment of Educational Progress.*

*Does the nation still need to ensure a basic level of quality among schools?* A decade and a half of sustained attention to quality public education is paying off. States and school districts are taking seriously the challenge to raise education standards and to ensure that students who graduate from public secondary schools have attained a minimum level of knowledge and skills.

High school graduates are taking more academic courses. The percentage of graduates who completed the full regimen of English, science, social studies, and math courses recommended in the 1983 school reform report,

*A Nation at Risk, rose from 13% in 1982 to 47% in 1992.*

*U.S. Department of Education, The Condition of Education, 1995.*

Students are taking more advanced courses. Between 1982 and 1992, the percentage of students taking geometry, trigonometry, calculus, biology, chemistry, and physics grew significantly.

*U.S. Department of Education, The Condition of Education, 1995.*

Forty-nine states and the District of Columbia are developing or have completed academic standards for what students should know and be able to do at specific grade levels. And for certain basic academic subjects, consensus is emerging around voluntary national standards.

*American Federation of Teachers, Making Standards Matter, 1995.*

*The whole people must  
take upon themselves the  
education of the whole  
people and be willing to bear  
the expense of it.*

*John Adams*

*President and Statesman, 1758*

## Where Do We Go from Here?

The preceding data suggest that the reasons for creating public schools are still valid. This is not to say that all public schools are doing a good job of meeting all of these goals or that we ought to maintain the status quo. American schools need to improve in many areas, including raising student academic achievement, preparing all students for a competitive world economy, closing gaps between white and minority students, and reducing disparities between wealthy and poor communities.

Confronted by problems in the public schools, some citizens have advocated shifting financial support and authority from the public to the private sector, which would mark a radical change in American education. Before adopting any such proposal, we must ask what the consequences would be for the nation. For example, even if private school enrollments doubled as a result of instituting an education voucher program, the vast majority of American children (78%) still would attend public schools — a compelling justification for maintaining the public schools and making them better, instead of abandoning them.

Certainly the public schools have problems that need to be addressed. But there are ways to improve the schools without undermining the essential concept of a system of public schooling. As we weigh various proposals for education reform, we must not forget that Americans developed public schools to unify our nation and to provide for the common good. If we proceed with proposals that are not true to the spirit of this history, then we may lose the very features of public schooling that our early leaders believed were necessary to form a strong, cohesive, and just nation.

The reasons for establishing public schools offer a framework for evaluating current education reforms. For every idea being promoted as a solution to the problems of the public schools, thoughtful citizens should ask some fundamental questions:

- Will this reform prepare all Americans to become responsible citizens, or will the reform benefit only some citizens?
- Will it improve social conditions or exacerbate social ills?
- Will it promote cultural unity or sharpen divisions within our society?
- Will it help all people become economically self-sufficient, or will it leave some citizens out of the economic mainstream?
- Will it enhance the happiness and enrich the lives of many individuals or only a few?
- Will it dispel inequities in education or aggravate them?
- Will it ensure a basic level of quality among all schools, or will it aid only some schools?

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“Solutions” that do not meet these tests may well bring us back to a time when American education consisted of a patchwork of grimly unequal arrangements that left many children and families to fend for themselves to gain an education. The ideals of American democracy — and the history of American public education — demand that we do better than that.



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