

Americans Have Given Up on Public Schools. That's a Mistake.

The current debate over public education underestimates its value—and forgets its purpose.



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PUBLIC SCHOOLS HAVE always occupied prime space in the excitable American imagination. For decades, if not centuries, politicians have made hay of their supposed failures and extortions. In 2004, Rod Paige, then George W. Bush’s secretary of education, called the country’s leading teachers union a “terrorist organization.” In his first education speech as president, in 2009, Barack Obama lamented the fact that “despite resources that are unmatched anywhere in the world, we’ve let our grades slip, our schools crumble, our teacher quality fall short, and other nations outpace us.”

President Donald Trump used the occasion of his inaugural address to bemoan the way “beautiful” students had been “deprived of all knowledge” by our nation’s cash-guzzling schools. Educators have since recoiled at the Trump administration’s budget proposal detailing more than \$9 billion in education cuts, including to after-school programs that serve mostly poor children. These cuts came along with increased funding for school-privatization efforts such as vouchers. Our secretary of education, Betsy DeVos, has repeatedly signaled her support for school choice and privatization, as well as her scorn for public schools, describing them as a “dead end” and claiming that unionized teachers “care more about a system, one that was created in the 1800s, than they care about individual students.”

Few people care *more* about individual students than public-school teachers do, but what’s really missing in this dystopian narrative is a hearty helping of reality: 21st-century public schools, with their record numbers of graduates and expanded missions, are nothing close to the cesspools portrayed by political hyperbole. This hyperbole was not invented by Trump or DeVos, but their words and proposals have brought to a boil something that’s been simmering for a while—the denigration of our public schools, and a growing neglect of their role as an incubator of citizens.

Americans have in recent decades come to talk about education less as a public

good, like a strong military or a noncorrupt judiciary, than as a private consumable. In an address to the Brookings Institution, DeVos described school choice as “a fundamental right.” That sounds appealing. Who wouldn’t want to deploy their tax dollars with greater specificity? Imagine purchasing a gym membership with funds normally allocated to the upkeep of a park.

My point here is not to debate the effect of school choice on individual outcomes: The evidence is mixed, and subject to cherry-picking on all sides. I am more concerned with how the current discussion has ignored public schools’ victories, while also detracting from their civic role. Our public-education system is about much more than personal achievement; it is about preparing people to work together to advance not just themselves but society. Unfortunately, the current debate’s focus on individual rights and choices has distracted many politicians and policy makers from a key stakeholder: our nation as a whole. As a result, a cynicism has taken root that suggests there is no hope for public education. This is demonstrably false. It’s also dangerous.

THE IDEA THAT popular education might best be achieved privately is nothing new, of course. The Puritans, who saw education as necessary to Christian practice, experimented with the idea, and their experience is telling. In 1642, they passed a law—the first of its kind in North America—requiring that all children in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts receive an education. Puritan legislators assumed, naively, that parents would teach children in their homes; however, many of them proved unable or unwilling to rise to the task. Five years later, the legislators issued a corrective in the form of the Old Deluder Satan Law: “It being one chief project of that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures,” the law intoned, “it is therefore ordered ... that everie Township [of 100 households or more] in this Jurisdiction” be required to provide a trained teacher and a grammar school, at taxpayer expense.

Almost 400 years later, contempt for our public schools is commonplace. Americans, and especially Republicans, report that they have lost faith in the system, but notably, nearly three-quarters of parents rate their own child's school highly; it's other people's schools they worry about. Meanwhile, Americans tend to exaggerate our system's former glory. Even in the 1960s, when international science and math tests were first administered, the U.S. was never at the top of the rankings and was often near the bottom.

Not only is the idea that American test scores were once higher a fiction, but in some cases they have actually *improved* over time, especially among African American students. Since the early 1970s, when the Department of Education began collecting long-term data, average reading and math scores for 9- and 13-year-olds have risen significantly.

These gains have come even as the student body of American public schools has expanded to include students with ever greater challenges. For the first time in recent memory, a majority of U.S. public-school students come from low-income households. The student body includes a larger proportion than ever of students who are still learning to speak English. And it includes many students with disabilities who would have been shut out of public school before passage of the 1975 law now known as the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, which guaranteed all children a "free appropriate public education."

The fantasy that in some bygone era U.S. test scores were higher has prevented us from acknowledging other possible explanations for America's technological, scientific, and cultural preeminence. In her 2013 book, *Reign of Error*, Diane Ravitch—an education historian and former federal education official who originally supported but later became a critic of reforms like No Child Left Behind—cites surprising evidence that a nation's higher position on an international ranking of test scores actually predicted *lower* per capita GDP decades later, compared with countries whose test scores ranked worse. Other

findings complicate the picture, but at a minimum we can say that there is no clear connection between test scores and a nation's economic success. Surely it's reasonable to ask whether some of America's success might derive not from factors measured by standardized tests, but from other attributes of our educational system. U.S. public schools, at their best, have encouraged a unique mixing of diverse people, and produced an exceptionally innovative and industrious citizenry.

Our lost faith in public education has led us to other false conclusions, including the conviction that teachers unions protect "bad apples." Thanks to articles and documentaries such as *Waiting for "Superman,"* most of us have an image seared into our brain of a slew of know-nothing teachers, removed from the classroom after years of sleeping through class, sitting in state-funded "rubber rooms" while continuing to draw hefty salaries. If it weren't for those damned unions, or so the logic goes, we could drain the dregs and hire real teachers. I am a public-school-certified teacher whose own children attended public schools, and I've occasionally entertained these thoughts myself.

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But unions are not the bogeyman we're looking for. According to "The Myth of Unions' Overprotection of Bad Teachers," a well-designed study by Eunice S. Han, an economist at the University of Utah, school districts with strong unions actually do a *better* job of weeding out bad teachers and retaining good ones than

do those with weak unions. This makes sense. If you have to pay more for something, you are more likely to care about its quality; when districts pay higher wages, they have more incentive to employ good teachers (and dispense with bad ones). And indeed, many of the states with the best schools have reached that position in the company of strong unions. We can't say for sure that unions have a positive impact on student outcomes—the evidence is inconclusive. But findings like Han's certainly undermine reformers' claims.

In defending our public schools, I do not mean to say they can't be improved. But if we are serious about advancing them, we need to stop scapegoating unions and take steps to increase and improve the teaching pool. Teacher shortages are leaving many states in dire straits: The national shortfall is projected to exceed 100,000 teachers by next year.

That many top college graduates hesitate to join a profession with low wages is no great surprise. For many years, talented women had few career alternatives to nursing and teaching; this kept teacher quality artificially high. Now that women have more options, if we want to attract strong teachers, we need to pay competitive salaries. As one observer put it, if you cannot find someone to sell you a Lexus for a few dollars, that doesn't mean there is a car shortage.

Oddly, the idea of addressing our supply-and-demand problem the old-fashioned American way, with a market-based approach, has been largely unappealing to otherwise free-market thinkers. And yet raising salaries would have cascading benefits beyond easing the teacher shortage. Because salaries are associated with teacher quality, raising pay would likely improve student outcomes. Massachusetts and Connecticut have attracted capable people to the field with competitive pay, and neither has an overall teacher shortage.

Apart from raising teacher pay, we should expand the use of other strategies to attract talent, such as forgivable tuition loans, service fellowships, hardship pay for the most-challenging settings (an approach that works well in the military and

the foreign service), and housing and child-care subsidies for teachers, many of whom can't afford to live in the communities in which they teach. We can also get more serious about de-larding a bureaucracy that critics are right to denounce: American public schools are bloated at the top of the organizational pyramid, with too many administrators and not enough high-quality teachers in the classroom.

WHERE SCHOOLS ARE struggling today, collectively speaking, is less in their transmission of mathematical principles or writing skills, and more in their inculcation of what it means to be an American. The Founding Fathers understood the educational prerequisites on which our democracy was based (having themselves designed it), and they had far grander plans than, say, beating the Soviets to the moon, or ensuring a literate workforce.

Thomas Jefferson, among other historical titans, understood that a functioning democracy required an educated citizenry, and crucially, he saw education as a public good to be included in the “articles of public care,” despite his preference for the private sector in most matters. John Adams, another proponent of public schooling, urged, “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 expense of the people themselves.”

In the centuries since, the courts have regularly affirmed the special status of public schools as a cornerstone of the American democratic project. In its vigorous defenses of students’ civil liberties—to protest the Vietnam War, for example, or not to salute the flag—the Supreme Court has repeatedly held public schools to an especially high standard precisely because they play a unique role in fostering citizens.

This role isn’t limited to civics instruction; public schools also provide students with crucial exposure to people of different backgrounds and perspectives. Americans have a closer relationship with the public-school system than with any

other shared institution. (Those on the right who disparagingly refer to public schools as “government schools” have obviously never been to a school-board meeting, one of the clearest examples anywhere of direct democracy in action.) Ravitch writes that “one of the greatest glories of the public school was its success in Americanizing immigrants.” At their best, public schools did even more than that, integrating both immigrants and American-born students from a range of backgrounds into one citizenry.

At a moment when our media preferences, political affiliations, and cultural tastes seem wider apart than ever, abandoning this amalgamating function is a bona fide threat to our future. And yet we seem to be headed in just that direction. The story of American public education has generally been one of continuing progress, as girls, children of color, and children with disabilities (among others) have redeemed their constitutional right to push through the schoolhouse gate. But in the past few decades, we have allowed schools to grow *more* segregated, racially and socioeconomically. (Charter schools, far from a solution to this problem, are even more racially segregated than traditional public schools.)

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Simultaneously, we have neglected instruction on democracy. Until the 1960s, U.S. high schools commonly offered three classes to prepare students for their roles as citizens: Government, Civics (which concerned the rights and responsibilities of citizens), and Problems of Democracy (which included

discussions of policy issues and current events). Today, schools are more likely to offer a single course. Civics education has fallen out of favor partly as a result of changing political sentiment. Some liberals have come to see instruction in American values—such as freedom of speech and religion, and the idea of a “melting pot”—as reactionary. Some conservatives, meanwhile, have complained of a progressive bias in civics education.

Especially since the passage of No Child Left Behind, the class time devoted to social studies has declined steeply. Most state assessments don’t cover civics material, and in too many cases, if it isn’t tested, it isn’t taught. At the elementary-school level, less than 40 percent of fourth-grade teachers say they regularly emphasize topics related to civics education.

So what happens when we neglect the public purpose of our publicly funded schools? The discussion of vouchers and charter schools, in its focus on individual rights, has failed to take into account American society at large. The costs of abandoning an institution designed to bind, not divide, our citizenry are high.

Already, some experts have noted a conspicuous link between the decline of civics education and young adults’ dismal voting rates. Civics knowledge is in an alarming state: Three-quarters of Americans can’t identify the three branches of government. Public-opinion polls, meanwhile, show a new tolerance for authoritarianism, and rising levels of antidemocratic and illiberal thinking. These views are found all over the ideological map, from President Trump, who recently urged the nation’s police officers to rough up criminal suspects, to, ironically, the protesters who tried to block DeVos from entering a Washington, D.C., public school in February.

We ignore public schools’ civic and integrative functions at our peril. To revive them will require good faith across the political spectrum. Those who are suspicious of public displays of national unity may need to rethink their aversion.

When we neglect schools' nation-binding role, it grows hard to explain why we need public schools at all. Liberals must also work to better understand the appeal of school choice, especially for families in poor areas where teacher quality and attrition are serious problems. Conservatives and libertarians, for their part, need to muster more generosity toward the institutions that have educated our workforce and fueled our success for centuries.

The political theorist Benjamin Barber warned in 2004 that “America as a commercial society of individual consumers may survive the destruction of public schooling. America as a democratic republic cannot.” In this era of growing fragmentation, we urgently need a renewed commitment to the idea that public education is a worthy investment, one that pays dividends not only to individual families but to our society as a whole.

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