

# An American Imperative: Public Education

For many, the term public education conjures up the image of a neighborhood school that is open to all children in a community. As powerful as that image is, other characteristics also define public education and give even greater value to the unique role it plays in achieving and reflecting American ideals. Public education means a tuition-free, publicly funded system that must provide an education to each child in a neighborhood school within a publicly governed school

system. The academic standards, the teachers and administrators, the values and methods of operation employed in these schools are all subject to oversight and direction by public policy-making bodies. The rights of students and parents are legally defined and are enforceable by the courts.

Public education means that a wide range of decision making resides at the community level through the operation of locally elected school boards and through other avenues of direct citizen participation in the schools. Public decision making also occurs through the election of state and congressional representatives, as well as the various publicly accountable agencies designated to carry out specific school functions.

Public education also means a system in which parents and the general public can obtain detailed information about their schools and be involved in school activities.

What would education and society in America be like if these principles weren't at the core of what is meant by public education? What if education were turned over to publicly funded schools that did not have to adhere to these principles? Which of these principles would be eliminated ? Which children would be left behind?

## Public education in America means:

- A tuition-free education for all students
- The promise of equal educational opportunities no matter race, religion or ability
- A commitment to high standards and high expectations for all students
- A system of governance that ensures public accountability
- A benefit to society by teaching democratic principles and common values

Education for All In 21st-century America, education is the key to success. Only the public schools are legally required to accept and retain all students, no matter their race, no matter their religion, no matter their educational attainment, social class, family income, special needs, or personal characteristics. Only the public schools must guarantee that—within a legally enforceable range— the amount spent on each student will be equal from school to school within communities and across the state where those students reside.

Private schools, by contrast, are not legally bound to provide equality in admitting or retaining students. Nor are there legal remedies for the wide financial disparity that distinguishes high- and low-spending private schools from each other. Not only do public schools enroll all students, but they are more likely than their private counterparts to provide services designed to meet the special needs of particular students. Indeed, it is only the public schools that have the legal obligation to accept many students with special needs. Under federal civil rights laws, public schools must provide educational and related services to meet the needs of children with disabilities. Likewise, they must meet the educational needs of students who do not speak English or whose proficiency in English is limited.

In addition, many public schools operate programs for educationally disadvantaged students. They also provide or coordinate a wide range of support programs essential to the education or overall wellbeing of these children, many of whom might not otherwise receive such services. These support services include school meals, health screening and referrals, before- and after-school programs, and free transportation to and from school, to name just a few.

Given the diversity of students with special needs, the costs in some schools will naturally be higher compared to the costs in schools that do not enroll these students or do not provide as wide a range of services or those that educate a more homogeneous group of students in a particular way.

By providing public schools, each student is guaranteed the right to attend a neighborhood school that operates in conformity with academic standards and other legally required

protections relating to the quality of education students are provided and their well-being during the school day. Furthermore, within that neighborhood school, public school students must be offered a curriculum and an environment that are free from the inculcation or primacy of any specific religion, social class, or ethnic group.

### **High Standards and Public Accountability**

Public schools safeguard the quality of education offered to students through statewide and district-wide standards for academic subjects, teacher qualifications, and other operational requirements designed to provide students a safe and effective learning environment. Public schools guarantee quality through public accountability for their performance— and the obligation to provide remedies when schools fall below the accepted standard.

As a matter of federal law, the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) reinforced the states' responsibility to hold school districts and individual public schools accountable for student achievement in math and language arts through public reporting and specific sanctions for poor performance. By contrast, private schools are not similarly held accountable to the public or to parents for the quality of education their students receive—especially if they don't participate in or report on state tests.

Because teachers are the most important ingredients in a child's formal education, having qualified teachers in every classroom is paramount. Beyond possessing a four-year college degree, every state requires that public school teachers be licensed and have their credentials certified as meeting that state's standards to teach.

Following the enactment of NCLB, by the 2005-06 school year, each state's certification standards must require that all public schools teachers in the state, at all grade levels, be "highly qualified" to teach the academic subject area they are assigned. To demonstrate that they are highly qualified, teachers must successfully complete an academic major, pass a test, or be successfully evaluated in their classroom ability to teach that subject.

Private school teachers, on the other hand, are not held to the same state certification requirements as public school teachers, nor to the higher standard now required for public schools under No Child Left Behind. This is not to say that many of these teachers are not qualified, but there is no public or objective means for people to determine that.

### **Public Education and the Free Market**

Increasingly, public schools are providing students with more choices, both in curriculum options and in the school they can attend. This is being accomplished through such initiatives as schools-within-schools, magnet schools, paired schools, charter schools, and open-enrollment programs. These choices respond to customer needs, recognizing differences in student preferences, learning styles, and talents. They also recognize the expanding range of academic knowledge and development in educational technology that can open different doors for students, while still maintaining high standards and a commitment to core areas of study.

A central benefit of public school choice, designed and operated by the school system, is that individual students can be accommodated without sacrificing the viability of the system—especially the quality of education provided to other students. Unlike publicly funded private school choice, public school choice does not draw funds out of the system.

Nor does it diminish the number of motivated parents and voters who have an interest in ensuring that the system as a whole is funded and operated to meet the needs of all students. Here again, because public school systems can design and administer their choice programs, they can take the well-being of the rest of the school system into account.

Every public school is open to all students and provides programming that meets the varying goals and special needs of a diverse student body. Clearly, individual neighborhood public schools could be operated at lower costs if they did not provide a wide range of services to accommodate all students and, instead, enrolled a homogeneous student body and provided a narrowly focused program.

But the mission of the public schools is not to create a market niche or to cream off the best and lowest-cost students and fit them into a limited program. Rather, the mission is to serve all children.

Contrary to market principles, the focus of the public schools is not on turning a profit, which will naturally be the first priority of investors. Nor is it on marketing, sales, or meeting quarterly growth enrollment or profit projections. It is about providing services to meet students' needs. Because education in America involves a wide range of academic, social, and individual goals, the principal responsibility for providing it should be in the public sector.

Students and their parents have a primary interest in the nature and quality of the education our schools provide. But the broader public also has an interest in students' acquiring the knowledge, skills, and values needed to contribute to society as workers and citizens. How students are educated today will substantially determine the kind of society we all will live in tomorrow.

Accordingly, the public at large— including the 75 percent of households with no children currently in school—has an important opportunity and a right to be involved in and have a say in the direction of the public schools. In education, that right is unique to public schools.

Locally, the community's interest is represented through a variety of means. For example, voters elect their fellow citizens to serve on school boards, which make basic policy decisions about the schools' direction and costs. Those decisions must occur in meetings that are open to the public and that give individual citizens an opportunity to participate.

Further, in addition to parents, other community members and groups of citizens (such as business and civic groups) frequently serve on advisory councils to provide their expertise or to have their values or needs reflected in the school program. In addition to direct public involvement, the local media actively report information about the activities and performance of the public schools. Likewise, both the public and the media have access to reports and

documents not protected by student confidentiality or other legal requirements.

There are no other schools where the public interest in education is as deliberately and proactively represented, or as open to public scrutiny, as in the public schools.

### **Promoting Common Values**

In a free society, parents play an important role in conveying their values to their children through their own teachings and those of the religious and cultural groups of their choice. To complement those teachings, there is an appropriate array of values that advance the larger common good and enable our society to function. The public schools are uniquely positioned to convey these values, which include such vital concepts in our civil society as integrity, individual responsibility, fairness, justice, patriotism, respect for others, doing a good job, being on time, working well with others, being a good citizen, and exercising democracy in government and other interactions.

Conveying these values involves more than teachers lecturing or students reading about the values. It also involves day-to-day practices within the classroom that help students learn to recognize and exercise these values in every day life. Public education provides that common base of information and expectation among people that allows both individuals and the society—especially one as large, diverse, and complex as ours—to function and thrive.

### **Promoting Democracy**

A democratic and free nation requires a people who value and practice certain principles in their society. These principles include equality and freedom for all, social mobility and meritocracy, equal opportunity and self-governance, and respect for civil law and civic responsibility. Despite our nation's size and diversity, the American people have developed a shared vision and a common set of expectations about what living in a democratic and free society means.

As current world events and the long history of nations demonstrate, democracy and the principles associated with it are not in-born. They are learned through intellectual exposure and practice. And the public schools have been the primary place where that function has been performed. Teaching students to value the principles and practices of a democratic society is not a “natural component” of any academic subject or the “obvious lessons” to be derived from it. What is taught in history or social studies does not have to emphasize democracy or other American values, such as equality, that underlie our democratic process.

Fortunately, in public education, public oversight—along with content standards, curriculum, and text materials, as well as such activities as student government— ensures that students will be exposed to democratic principles in a manner that they can value and practice when they enter adult society.

### **Teaching the Common Culture**

Beyond learning academic subjects and the values that will enable them to function successfully in society, students also need to learn about the larger world around them. Here again, parents have a central role to play.

Likewise, for better or for worse, the news and entertainment media and the fashion and sports industries also play influential roles. In shaping the nation’s children, each of these forces creates impressions of what life in America is like, what opportunities are open to students, and how our society functions.

Schools also have an important role to play in helping students understand and thrive in the larger American culture— including sorting through and critically analyzing the wide range of influences to which they are exposed. Students are exposed in school to such elements of common culture as the correct use of language; awareness of career opportunities;

the use of basic technology; the customs, manners, and methods of interaction among people;

and the events, icons, and trends that are commonplace in the conversation and daily life of the larger society, if not within their own neighborhood or social group.

### **Living in a Diverse Society**

America is a diverse nation in terms of race, religion, and ethnicity, as well as in how people choose to organize themselves politically and socially. We are also a large country, with nearly 300 million people who are mobile, live in dense population centers, and interact with a wide range of other people as workers and consumers. Neither individuals nor society as a whole will function effectively without mutual respect, knowledge, and comfort in our dealings with people who are different from us.

Public education provides an opportunity to proactively teach children to tolerate, interact with, and, hopefully, enjoy people who are different than themselves. In bringing diverse students together, the public schools, by law, cannot advocate the value of one racial, ethnic, or religious group over another, nor can they engage in practices that would discriminate against any such group.

Among education institutions, public schools are the most diverse, thereby ensuring that many students will learn about each other on an equal footing, from personal experience, as well as in theory. And, the attitudes children form during their grade school years will constructively serve them and the nation in the world they will shape as adults.

Clearly, the public schools alone cannot solve all of the nation's social conflicts. Nonetheless, lessons throughout history and the world today should lead a diverse country such as ours to value public education for the vital role it can play in unifying our nation. Throughout human history, the education of the young has been essential to the survival and progress of all civilizations. In earliest times, education focused on such basics as acquiring oral language, surviving the forces of nature, procuring food and shelter, and learning the rules that govern social and personal interactions. As societies progressed, additional education and training in

specific areas ensured that at least some of the people acquired the specialized knowledge needed for their group to function.

Generally, education was provided by parents and family members. Over time, religious orders, craftsmen, and schools taught subjects and skills that required a higher or more-specialized level of learning. Earlier societies frequently were (and some still are) quite rigid in determining which of their children would be educated and what the content of their education would be. In effect, children were taught the skills, values, and self-concept needed to contribute to a role in society that frequently was predetermined for them by the accident of their birth.

Colonial America did not deviate much from this pattern, though some towns did have public schools. Education and basic literacy—except for Bible reading —were not viewed as necessities in a simple agrarian society.

But by the 1840s, economic development changed the picture. Common schools, the foundation of public education, began to spread, relying on local property taxes rather than tuition for their support. From these origins public education for the masses evolved as an integral part of America's heritage and its success as a democracy and an economic force.

Over the past 150 years, Western society has undergone enormous change that has significantly altered the way we think about the role and content of education and how it is provided. The Industrial Revolution, the age of mass production, and now the Information Age have progressively increased the importance of an academic education for all, increased the years required for formal education, and increased the emphasis on the needs and rights of individual students.

Today's parents continue to play an important role in their children's education, as do religious and social institutions. But in a world driven by an ever-widening base of knowledge, the school has become more crucial in determining the success of individual children and our

nation overall. This is especially true in this scientific and technical era, when knowledge is accelerating and becoming more specialized. Yet schooling is also vital in instilling the larger world view that students must share if they are to be productive citizens of our nation and the world.

### **Educating 20th-Century America**

During the first decades of the 20th century, the nation's public schools succeeded in dramatically raising high school graduation rates, Americanizing millions of immigrant children, and preparing the nation's young people for an evolving industrial society that enabled the United States to become a world leader.

1900-1950. In 1900, just half of America's children were enrolled in school, and only 6 percent of all 17-year-olds had graduated from high school. Meanwhile, our nation was rapidly changing from an agrarian to an industrial and urbanized society. We had opened our doors to welcome and assimilate millions of non-English-speaking children from widely varied cultures and values.

In subsequent decades, the key to America's success, economically and socially, hinged on the ability of public schools to educate more students, for longer periods of time, for a different way of life than what their parents knew. The public schools rose to the daunting challenge of Americanizing a nation of immigrants and preparing an industrial workforce. Each year more children went successfully through the nation's school system. By 1930, some 30 percent of the population had graduated from high school on time; by 1950, more than 50 percent had done so.

1950-2000. From the 1950s to 2000, the goal of the public schools shifted to preparing students for higher education. Increasingly, the American workplace required a better educated citizenry as manufacturing jobs became more technical and, more important, as the economy was increasingly driven by information and services.

How well has public education met these new challenges? Consider these bottom-line outcomes:

- Our nation has become the world's superpower because of what our people know and can do—and 90 percent of them were educated in public schools.
- Public education has provided opportunity for advancement and made an economic difference for countless individuals, as evidenced by the significant correlation between education level attained and earning power.
- The United States has the largest and best university system in the world, which can be attributed in large part to the standard of performance of the students it enrolls—the overwhelmingly majority of whom are public school graduates.
- The United States is a world leader in high school completion. Eighty-seven percent of 18- to 24-year-olds have completed high school, and more than two-thirds of 25- to 29-year-olds have some college.
- The public schools continue to be successful in bringing together the most diverse population of students among the industrialized nations and preparing large numbers of immigrants for life in America.
- Beyond a basic education program, U.S. public schools provide a wide range of social services and special education programming unparalleled by other nations.

### **Building a Democratic and Diverse Nation**

During the last half of the 20th century, public schools focused more attention on providing equal access to educational opportunities to African Americans and other minorities, as well as to students with disabilities or limited English proficiency.

#### **Equal Opportunity and Desegregation.**

As successful as the first half of the 20th century had been in improving the education of most Americans, wide variations in the quality of education—and the fact that students were spending more years in school—produced a wide and persistent achievement gap between

white and minority students.

The unacceptably inadequate education available to many African-American students and other minorities had been driven by a combination of de jure segregation, segregated housing patterns, inequalities of funding between wealthy and poor communities, and commonly accepted racist attitudes within the larger society, including school systems.

In 1954, in the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed the doctrine of separate but equal that had legally and socially institutionalized what the court referred to as an “inherently unequal” and inferior education for black children. As a result, more than 91 percent of southern black students were enrolled in integrated schools by 1972.

*Brown* and other court decisions did not address de facto segregation, including the racial isolation in many of our nation’s big cities, where today students frequently attend schools that are all minority or predominantly minority. The decision did, nonetheless, play an important role in beginning to close the educational achievement gap between the races, though more still needs to be done. The desegregation of the public schools occurred within a broader social context, but education was the arena in which a national transformation of racial attitudes began. The result has been widespread recognition of the value of racial equality and promotion of racial pluralism and understanding among an increasingly diverse American population.

In sum, the implementation of the 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* was a major statement about educational opportunity, social integration, and ultimately an opportunity for a better life for all Americans, regardless of race. While the struggle for racial equality and harmony has been difficult, think where America would be—on this the 50th anniversary of the *Brown* decision— without the crucial role played by public education.

### **Equal Opportunity and Special Needs.**

Twenty years after Brown, the public schools were again to play a leading role in providing equal educational opportunity to students whose primary language was not English (through the case of Lau v. Nichols), to students with disabilities (as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), and for girls (in Title IX of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act).

During that same period, states acted more aggressively to equalize expenditures (Serrano v. Priest), and the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that individual due process rights of students must be guaranteed in the public school setting (Goss V. Lopez).

Although courts and Congress established these universal rights, in part, because too many school districts did not do so on their own, the public schools have nonetheless met these challenges over the past 25 years. Now they do so as a matter of course, providing a range of educational and social services to support their students that is unparalleled by other nations.

Since these civil rights requirements do not extend to private schools, the importance of the role played by public education in this arena cannot be overstated; nor can the need to ensure that public education is maintained as a strong institution. Public schools are the only guarantee many students have of being enrolled in a school where their needs are addressed in a manner that will produce effective educational opportunities for them.

### **Criticisms of the Public Schools**

Throughout the 20th century, the schools have come under constant criticism, especially for watered-down standards and curriculum. In the 1920s, for example, education for the masses placed greater emphasis on vocational training, practical skills, and assimilation into American society. Although this approach satisfied business interests, others were concerned at the loss of a traditional education that, not too many years earlier, had featured Latin and Greek in public high schools that served only a narrow segment of the population.

By the 1940s, the increased emphasis on socialization and teaching “life skills” invited further criticism that core academic subjects were being eroded—especially for students who were not bound for college.

Certainly the opportunities for many students might have been enhanced had there been a greater emphasis on academics in their education. Yet, as a group, public school students became the business leaders, workers, and citizens who built the world’s greatest industrialized nation. These students became what television anchorman Tom Brokaw referred to in his book by the same name as “the Greatest Generation.”

In 1957, the criticism of public education reached a new crescendo when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the first satellite. The public schools were blamed for the United States being beaten in the “space race.” They were chastised and told to improve, especially in math and science, to keep our nation from being overtaken by our Cold War competitor, with all that failure would imply militarily, technologically, and politically on the world stage. But once again, as the high school classes of the 1950s now head toward retirement, they leave behind them the strong and vibrant America they built in the last decades of the 20th century.

Then, in 1983, a presidential report titled *A Nation at Risk* concluded that if a foreign country perpetrated America’s public education system upon us, it would be regarded as an act of war. More than 20 years have passed since the publication of the report. Many of the students of that era have since become the technology innovators and information age workers who continue to enable the United States to lead the world during this globally competitive era.

In sum, although more needs to be done to improve opportunities for all students, history shows that, overall, public education has consistently done the job of preparing our youth to make this nation a success.

## **Education on the Move**

Change has been the constant in American life. It has affected how the nation does business, how workers and consumers live their daily lives, and the content and shape of our culture, values, and language. To prepare young people for this changing world, schools must be open to change. Yet, because schools follow society rather than lead it, they are likely to be criticized for not changing fast enough.

Some voice that concern today, but education has not been static. Following the Nation at Risk report, which called for a greater emphasis on academic achievement, states quickly raised their graduation requirements. During the 1990s, states set higher performance standards, established curriculum mandates, and placed a greater emphasis on testing as a means of increasing accountability for performance. A federal framework for ensuring that states would hold schools accountable for achievement, especially for specific groups of children, was established in 2002 through the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Meanwhile, the public schools have continued to serve an increasingly diverse population. School districts have effectively implemented a wide range of initiatives, from technology integration, to innovative teaching practices, to new management approaches. Not surprisingly, test scores have risen despite the financial and other challenges public schools have faced in the past few years.

A look at today's schools reveals more effective teaching practices, greater responsiveness to individual student needs, and adaptation to a rapidly changing society in which preparing students to use technology and information as workers, consumers, and citizens is crucial.

Our nation has led the world for more than 100 years because of the character of its people—and, increasingly, because of what they know. Throughout the 20th century, nearly 90 percent of the American people were educated in our nation's public schools. Public education has provided a successful place for learning. It has been the foundation of our economy and the very foundation of our society.

History tells us that America succeeded not in spite of public education, but because of it. If the 20th century was America's century, it was in no small part because it was public education's century.

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