

The Necessity of Public Education for Democracy

Public education is a precious institution in all societies, but in a democratic society, good public education is an absolute necessity. Public education like democracy itself is for and by the people. This means that public schools in the United States must be 1) institutions which are universally open and accessible to all learners, regardless of class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender; 2) institutions in which all students can receive a quality education, 3) institutions that reflect the interests and needs of the communities that are served by the school.

Universally open and accessible to all learners. Education has been taking place in America for as long as people have inhabited these lands — Native societies educated their children for some of the same reasons that Puritans wanted to build schools in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Yet public schooling, defined as institutions built and sustained by the self-taxation of citizens for *all* children in a community, is a relatively recent democratic innovation. We have only had something that looks like a public school system for about one hundred years. Prior to that, the education you received depended largely on where you were born, your gender, the color of your skin, and how much money you had. And even in the one hundred years or so of public school systems, the battles to include *all* children in public schooling have been hard-won: the struggles of Latinos, African-Americans, women's rights groups, and advocates of the disabled have all helped make our public school systems live up to their *public* label in the sense of including and educating the children of all our families. It is only in the past several generations, then, that we have had large numbers of school systems that were truly public as far as being free, universally open to all, and committed to educating the range of ethnicities, genders, sexualities, and abilities that now attend public schools.¹

Part of what makes a public school truly deserving of the name public is that both they are for everyone and funded by everyone. Since excellent public education benefits not only one's own children but the communities, state, and nation in which we live, a portion of everyone's taxes is collected and set aside for schooling. A well-educated population means that our communities are more productive, our political systems work better, our economy is more prosperous, our streets are safer, and our children and families are more apt to thrive. Good public schools make our society better, and thus the public system was set up to be a common system open to all and funded by all. This system has worked for generations; tax dollars create a common fund of money for our common future as a society, and help equalize the educational opportunities available to all families. While schools can be encouraged to apply for grants and to raise money in other ways, consistent sources of public funding are always necessary in order for the educational goals of adequacy and equity to be met.

We must nurture and sustain a publicly funded system that is free, truly open and welcoming to all children, and committed to serving the diverse educational needs of all children in their community.

¹ For a well-written history of U.S. education, see David Tyack, *Seeking common ground: Public schools in a diverse society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

Recommendation #1: Ensure that public schools are adequately supported by public funds, and appropriately supporting and educating *all* members of the communities they serve.

Providing a high quality education for all students. For some students, American schools are among the best anywhere. For other students, they are among the worst in industrialized world. Unfortunately and to our embarrassment, there is a perfect correlation between students' tests scores and income: US students scoring the highest on international tests are from schools with the least poverty and students scoring the lowest are from the highest poverty schools. In schools serving communities with high rates of poverty, and in poorly-funded school districts, students are not adequately educated for the tasks of civic, familial, and economic participation and productivity. Just as the gap between rich and poor has grown tremendously in the past generations in the U.S., so grows the gap between the well educated and the inadequately educated.

We currently tolerate enormous inequality in our school systems. Although the U.S. now boasts an extensive and elaborate system of public schools, the *quality* of the education you receive is still influenced by where you were born, how much wealth your family owns, and the color of your skin. If you are a child lucky enough to be born in wealthy suburb in New Haven, Connecticut or Houston, Texas, for example, you will be likely receive a quality education by excellent teachers and resources. If you are unlucky enough to be born into poverty in Cincinnati, Ohio, or rural South Dakota, your schooling is more likely to be provided by teachers who are not certified in their subject area, using textbooks and computers that are more dated, and using curriculum that is more dependent on testing and “drill and kill” learning activities.² If you are Black or Latino, you are more likely to attend high poverty school districts and more likely to drop out of high school.³

A public school system that provides rich and poor with an excellent education is essential to a democracy. Equity and excellence are not mutually exclusive; they are intertwined goals for a truly public school system in a democratic nation. The very idea of the “American dream” is predicated on the necessity of a quality education being widely available to rich and poor alike. Yet this is not currently the case in the U.S.. In fact, “no other developed country allows family wealth to be more predictive of educational achievement than America.”⁴

² For information on the inequities in teacher quality across rich and poor districts, see “Teacher Quality: Equalizing Educational Opportunities and Outcomes,” by Gail L. Sunderman and Jimmy Kim. (Cambridge: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2005). April, 2005. Available:

<http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/esea/teacherQuality.php#report>

³ “Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis” By Gary Orfield, Daniel Losen, Johanna Wald and Christopher B. Swanson. (Cambridge: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2004). February 2004. Available:

<http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/dropouts/dropouts04.php>

⁴ The Education Trust, “Myths versus Realities: Answers to common questions about the new No Child Left Behind Act,” Available:

Recommendation #2: State legislators and school leaders need to provide the resources needed to enable the children of *all* families, including poor families, to attain their educational goals.

Public schools must reflect the interests and needs of the communities that are served by the school. One of the central ideas of a *public* school is that it is responsive to the people it serves. A public school in Morristown, Tennessee, serves the complex array of diverse families and children who live in the neighborhoods there. These families and children are culturally diverse, and diverse in their educational aspirations for their children, too. A public school should provide a good fundamental grounding for these diverse children and provide pathways for many different definitions of “success.”

The struggle between the *local* and the *federal* governance of education is an old battle in the U.S.. Currently, in our Republican-dominated Congress and White House, it is ironic that we are in a time of unprecedented federal control of public schooling. Standardized testing requirements now dominate the agenda in public schools and crowd out the kinds of teaching and learning that parents often care about. A teacher in a public school in rural Missouri cannot take the time to run a mock trial in her classroom, designed to help her 8th grade students learn the importance of due process and trial by jury. A science teacher in Florida must spend time preparing her students for the standardized tests rather than teaching a unit on the history of local agricultural practice and current environmental problems challenging farmers in the region. Teachers are now more controlled by testing and curricular requirements than ever before, and it isn’t making our children smarter or our society better.

It is important to have some federal and state oversight over education, and national bodies of math, science, social studies, and English teachers and scholars rightly set standards to help school districts design their curriculum. These standards ensure that there is some degree of consistency of content across the wide array of school districts and regions in the U.S.. Standards can be implemented without standardizing public education in such a way that the flavor and histories of local communities is totally wiped out of our school systems. Schools belong to local communities in a very important way, and thus public schools must reflect the diverse values and interests of these communities. Only through the participation of these communities in determining the purposes, desired outcomes, and necessary resources for their schools can children in the U.S. receive a proper education for a democratic future.

Recommendation #3: The current standardization of education is driven by the central role that high-stakes standardized testing plays in the No Child Left Behind legislation. Pervasive standardized testing and high-stakes testing must be eliminated from our public schools. A greater emphasis on local and community governance is necessary to shape the plans that districts and states use to ensure accountability.

In short, progressive citizens must take action to protect and strengthen their public schools, rather than punishing and privatizing these institutions so essential to a strong democracy [link to "[Getting Involved in your Schools](#)"]. Universally accessible, inclusive, equitable, and excellent public education will help the United States prepare students for family, community, civic, and economic life in their own communities and in the broader world.