

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

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The Public Purpose of Public Schooling

As we are confronted in these *jungle times* with attacks on our democratic institutions and the undermining of those same institutions by billionaire oligarchs, the preservation of public education comes into focus.

The following blog post by Jan Resseger an American supporter of public education articulates the fundamental purpose of public education and why the DOGS week by week fight for its survival and wellbeing.

[The Public Purpose of Public Schooling—A Summary of Expert Thinking](#)

"That all citizens will be given an equal start through a sound education is one of the most basic, promised rights of our democracy. Our chronic refusal as a nation to guarantee that right for all children.... is rooted in a kind of moral blindness, or at least a failure of moral imagination.... It is a failure which threatens our future as a nation of citizens called to a common purpose... tied to one another by a common bond." —Senator Paul Wellstone — March 31, 2000

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This fall the airwaves are blasting political ads from billionaires and crypto currency entrepreneurs who seek to protect their personal largess—and mostly forget about the rest of us—by supporting far-right politicians who disdain public schooling. It is urgently important for those of us who support public education to spend a few minutes considering the public value of our nation's largest civic institution. Here is a mere sampling of the thinking of academic experts whose work has defined the public importance of our nation's system of public schooling.

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On the first page of his 1899 book, [The School and Society](#), philosopher John Dewey described what he believed is the necessary purpose of public schooling:

“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. All that society has accomplished for itself is put, through the agency of the school, at the disposal of its future members... Only by being true to the full growth of all the individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself.”

Public schools are universally available and accessible. Even those of us who are public school graduates and value our own experience in a neighbourhood public school may forget the reach of the institution. The late Stanford University historian of public education, David Tyack, explains: “The size and inclusiveness of public education is staggering. Almost anywhere a school-age child goes in the nation, she will find a public school she is entitled to attend. Almost one in four Americans work in schools either as students or staff... Schools are more open to public participation in policymaking than are most other institutions, public or private... When local citizens deliberate about the kind of education they want for their children, they are in effect debating the futures they want... Good schools are hard to create and nurture, for they require healthy relationships of trust, challenge, and respect, qualities that take time to develop. These values become embedded in institutions as part of the common good that unites the members of the schools... Democracy in education and education in a democracy are not quaint legacies from a distant and happier time. They have never been more essential to wise self-rule than they are today.” ([Seeking Common Ground](#), pp. 182-185)

Constitutional law professor [Derek W. Black reminds us](#): ” (A)s the largest government institution in the United States, public education is an obvious potential target of those aiming to undermine faith in government institutions. Public education is twice the size of the entire federal government. More important, it represents the most extensive and persistent relationship that citizens ever have with government. Public schools educate roughly ninety percent of Americans for more than a decade during their formative years.”

Today, however, as many parents seek to protect their children from exposure to what they fear are dangerous ideas and peers in the public schools and ask taxpayers to pay for private schools that will insulate their children, constitutional scholar, [Black explores](#) what for centuries have been accepted assumptions about public schooling’s public purpose: “The first goal of public education is to prepare young people for citizenship and self-government... Second, the founders believed the legitimate exercise of governmental power rests on education... Third, public education was intended to protect individual liberty and autonomy... Fourth... education provides citizens the nonviolent means by which to resist tyranny... (and) finally public education is meant to bind a diverse and sometimes adverse population together.”

The fact that our public schools make up an enormous national system has given them the capacity to shape our society even beyond their purely civic purpose. For example, Harvard University economic historian, Claudia Goldin captures one primarily economic benefit that developed as public schooling expanded: “During the first half of the twentieth century the educational attainment of American youth greatly increased; almost 60 percent of that increase was due to the rise of high school education. Mass secondary schooling was indeed a ‘remarkable educational movement’ and set America far ahead of other nations for decades to come... Greater levels of education enhanced economic growth and also led to a more even distribution of its benefits... Americans pioneered the modern secondary school in the early twentieth century, tailored it for the masses, and rejected more elitist European institutions... In 1910, barely 9 percent of all American 18-year-olds graduated from secondary school and 19 percent of 13-to 18-year-olds were enrolled in a public or private high school. By 1940 the median youth across the entire nation had a high school diploma and 73 percent of American youth were enrolled in high school.” ([The Race Between Education and Technology](#), pp. 194-195).

Retired Distinguished Professor of Education at the University of Illinois, Chicago, William Ayers reminds us, however, of the enormous challenge of protecting public schools from the fraught politics in broader society that inevitably infect our largest civic institution: “Schools don’t exist outside of history or culture: they are, rather, at the heart of each. Schools serve societies; societies shape schools. Schools, then, are both mirror and window—they tell us who we are and who we want to become, and they show us what we value and what we ignore, what is precious and what is venal.” ([Public Education: Defending a Cornerstone of American Democracy](#), p. 315)

And so today, we see a huge battle between those of us who believe the Civil Rights Movement is at the heart of what our society has become and others who seek to reject the “diversity, equity, and inclusion” that have defined the impact of our society’s attempt to address the generations of injustice the Civil Rights Movement exposed. In his most recent book, [Dangerous Learning](#), Derek W. Black describes the conflict: “Brown v. Board of Education and its progeny fundamentally altered the way society thinks about education, not just of Black children but of all children. Laws prohibiting discrimination against students based on sex, language status, ethnicity, alienage, disability, poverty, and homelessness all grew out of the foundation Brown laid. For the past half century, the federal legal

apparatus as well as several state regimes have aimed to deliver equal educational opportunity... Yet this hopeful narrative is attached to another one. Something dangerously reminiscent of the pre-Civil War South is happening in education today. The rising paranoia over critical race theory, curricular transparency, 'socialist' teachers, and diversity, equity, and inclusion in public schools strikingly resembles the South's paranoia over Northern textbooks, Northern teachers, Northern universities, and Northern popular literature in the decades before the Civil War." (Dangerous Learning, pp. 275-278).

The Drive for the Privatization of Public Education

In the past 50 years, however, as public schools have increasingly adopted the principle that respectful and equitable inclusion of all students, no matter their race or ethnic heritage or sexuality, is good for all students, a reaction has grown. Today, a coalition of school privatizers, their lobbyists supported by billionaire philanthropy, and promoters of far-right individualist politics actively promotes the idea that school privatization, underwritten in large part by tax dollars, can better protect the individual beliefs of all families. The rapid spread of school vouchers across the states will be further expanded this coming January, when the federal tuition tax credit voucher program established by the 2025 [federal "One Big Beautiful" tax and reconciliation bill](#), is launched. [More than half of the states' governors have already bought into this program.](#)

Scholars attuned to the public purpose of public education have doggedly demonstrated the danger of this threat. Two decades ago as school privatization began to accelerate, the late political theorist Benjamin Barber identified what he believed would be its primary danger: "It is the peculiar toxicity of privatization ideology that it rationalizes corrosive private choosing as a surrogate for the public good. It enthuses about consumers as the new citizens who can do more with their dollars and euros and yen than they ever did with their votes. It associates the privileged market sector with liberty as private choice while it condemns democratic government as coercive... Privatization is a kind of reverse social contract: it dissolves the bonds that tie us together into free communities and democratic republics. It puts us back in the state of nature where we possess a natural right to get whatever we can on our

own, but at the same time lose any real ability to secure that to which we have a right. Private choices rest on individual power... personal skills... and personal luck. Public choices rest on civic rights and common responsibilities, and presume equal rights for all. Public liberty is what the power of common endeavor establishes, and hence presupposes that we have constituted ourselves as public citizens by opting into the social contract. With privatization, we are seduced back into the state of nature by the lure of private liberty and particular interest; but what we experience in the end is an environment in which the strong dominate the weak... the very dilemma which the original social contract was intended to address." ([Consumed](#), pp. 143-144)

More recently in a powerful 2023 collection of essays by academic researchers on the damage wrought by school vouchers, [The School Voucher Illusion: Exposing the Pretense of Equity](#), the editors, professors Kevin Welner, Gary Orfield, and Luis A. Huerta highlight the specific characteristics of growing voucher programs that are most dangerous to the public good: "As currently structured, voucher policies in the United States are unlikely to help the students they claim to support. Instead, these policies have often served as a facade for the far less popular reality of funding relatively advantaged (and largely White) families, many of whom already attended—or would attend—private schools without subsidies. Although vouchers are presented as helping parents choose schools, often the arrangements permit the private schools to do the choosing... Advocacy that began with a focus on equity must not become a justification for increasing inequity. Today's voucher policies have, by design, created growing financial commitments of taxpayer money to serve a constituency of the relatively advantaged that is redefining their subsidies as rights—often in jurisdictions where neighborhood public schools do not have the resources they need." (*The School Voucher Illusion: Exposing the Pretense of Equity*, p. 290)

Remembering to Celebrate Public Schooling

Even as we condemn school privatization, we must not forget to recognize, celebrate, and continue to insist that public schools accomplish their long-recognized public purpose. In the powerful concluding essay in the Teachers College Press's 2022, [Public Education: Defending a Cornerstone](#)

[of American Democracy](#), the University of Illinois, Chicago's William Ayers updates John Dewey's 1899 definition of the purpose of public schooling: "A decent, generously staffed school facility must be in easy reach for every family. This is easy to envision: What the most privileged parents have for their public school children right now—small class sizes, fully trained and well compensated teachers, physics and chemistry labs, sports teams, physical education, and athletic fields and gymnasiums, after-school and summer programs, generous arts programs that include music, theater, and fine arts—is the baseline for what we want for all children."

Ayers adds: "In a free society, education must focus on the production—not of things, but—of free people capable of developing minds of their own even as they recognize the importance of learning to live with others. It's based, then, on a common faith in the incalculable value of every human being, constructed on the principle that the fullest development of all is the condition for the full development of each, and, conversely, that the fullest development of each is the condition for the full development of all." (Public Education: Defending a Cornerstone of American Democracy, p. 315)

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