

**AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF
GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS**

PRESS RELEASE 908

**Public Schools are the Cornerstone of
Democracy:
Lessons from America.**

The separation of religion from the State proved stronger in the United States than Australia – until the recent stacking of the American Supreme Court by the Trump administration. Religious schools have not received the extraordinary largesse from the American Treasury enjoyed by that sector in Australia.

But in recent years American supporters of public education have been discovering the ways in which privatisation of their once proud public system has been accelerating through the charter school movement and the undermining of public by religious schools. For not only is public education under threat in both America and Australia. The political system, of which it is the cornerstone, is also under threat. In America, as in Australia, supporters of public education are mobilising to defend their schools and democracy. Their ideals and arguments mirror very largely what DOGS have been doing in Australia for the last sixty years.

A recent blog post by Denis Smith, reproduced by Diane Ravitch on her on her own blog argues that :

**[If We Lose Public Schools, We Lose Our
Democracy](#)**

[October 3, 2021](#)

Denis Smith worked for many years in the Ohio State Department of Education, finishing his career in the Office of Charter Schools. He writes [in the Ohio Capital Journal about the existential threat](#) posed to our democracy and our society by the privatization of public schools. His advice: Be careful what you wish for.

In the last few months, Americans have witnessed a series of assaults by the political right on key parts of the bedrock principles of democracy. Those attacks include new restrictions on voting rights in more than half of the states, the storming of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 by thousands of insurrectionists, and most recently, clear evidence that the former president pressured the top leadership of the Justice Department to help him overturn the 2020 election results.

Certainly these scary developments are newsworthy and have garnered banner headlines and filled airtime on the evening news. But these high-profile assaults on our democracy have served to obscure another, perhaps even more serious threat, an added variant and supplement to the seditious behavior of insurrectionists and a twice-impeached president who encouraged their assault on democracy.

In the midst of the chaos caused by angry militia types working to keep in power a rogue administration, and being mindful of the distraction these events have caused, it's past time to get educated about the future viability of public education.

While the U.S. Capitol was placed under assault some months ago, public education has been targeted for forty years, when Ronald Reagan signaled his followers that the public sector was undesirable and that private enterprise was always preferable in the nation. His attitude was immortalized in his [remark](#) that “the nine most terrifying words in the English language are ‘I’m from the government and I’m here to help.’”

This observation has been interpreted by the right as a command from Reagan himself to privatize about everything in the public sector — except the military — as part of an ideology which holds that a private enterprise is always preferable to a public function. That thinking has morphed into a crusade to destroy perhaps the most recognized and common artifact in any community: the public school.

Individual liberty v. community responsibility

For those who know this institution's place in American history, the terms public school and common school are used interchangeably, and the leading proponent who believed that every community should offer a program of education was Horace Mann, considered the father of American public education. In his role as the first commissioner of education in Massachusetts, Mann [believed](#) that “[education](#) should be free and universal, nonsectarian, democratic in method, and reliant on well-trained professional [teachers](#).”

As Mann's nineteenth-century idea of the common school spread across the new American Republic, in villages, small towns and cities where a community's shared and accepted values were honoured and embraced, the little red schoolhouse became an icon, the force that helped to mould the very idea of community.

That was the America we recognized until several decades ago.

Today, attacks by insurrectionists attired in their cammies and state legislators dressed in business suits are hard at work to undermine that very sense of community, of place. Instead of embracing the idea of place, the community and its schools which educated generation after generation, those same legislators mumble vaguely about something they call "socialism" or "government schools" and instead espouse something else called "educational choice."

That word choice, used often in the same sentence with freedom, serves as the anti-government elixir peddled by legislators to further encourage insurrectionists and religious zealots who do not accept the idea of community – and its public or common schools.

And with the frequent use by the right of such terms as choice, freedom, and liberty, that tattered social fabric we should be concerned about is worn down even more.

Indeed, words – particularly those three – have consequences.

Several years ago, the New York Times columnist David Brooks critiqued the work of author Marcia Pally, who observed that Americans project a prominent duality – a need to explore as well as be "situated" – i.e., having a sense of community. But today, our very sense of community is under stress, a weakened social fabric fueled by politicians who in their continuing mischief and purposeful vandalism promote divisive policies that result in the transfer of public funds away from our common schools to support private, religious, and charter schools.

In spite of these destructive policies adopted by state legislatures that are antithetical to societal cohesion, the need for community comes at the very time, in Pally's analysis, when the forces of global migration, globalization, and the internet are proving to be transformative and thus challenge the very idea of community, of being situated.

*But it was Brooks' added observation that a fourth force, in the form of individual choice, gained my attention then and now, particularly in the current and growing national atmosphere that proclaims **it's all about me and my***

freedom to choose, regardless of compelling community needs, including health, safety, and the transmission of a common cultural heritage, as Horace Mann, John Dewey, and other visionaries laboured to establish in another, more unified time in our history.

The by-product of this thinking — that it's all about me — centred as it is on the individual and not the community, is seen in both the Capitol insurrectionists and the anti-vaxxers. These protesters are seemingly also armed with the idea that personal freedom and individual choice trump any responsibility in caring for the well-being of others, whether by wearing a mask or being vaccinated against COVID.

To hell with elections. It's all about me and what I believe, we are being told by those who protest the warnings of scientists and public health experts. And to hell with masks and vaccinations. We don't need tyranny, they tell us.

And while we're at it, to hell with the idea of community. When it's all about me and what I believe, there is no room for what you value.

It doesn't take many dots to connect this thinking with the deterioration of the idea of community, of being situated, and of having common values like the public schools that were created to serve all the youth in a particular community. We hold that truth (or should we use the past tense now?) to be self-evident. Not.

But in all of this, of slogans like freedom and choice, be careful what you wish for.

I wrote in April 2016:

“...how we preserve freedom serves to illustrate the certainty of unintended consequences for conservatives, viz., how can you promote the concept of choice, particularly educational choice, as a desired public policy outcome, while also warning about weakened community cohesion and a frayed, tattered, strained social fabric”?

Five years later, I stand by those words. In light of recent events, that strained social fabric is even more fragile, and approaching an irreparable state of repair. It follows that with such disrepair, the idea of community in this country may soon be on a ventilator.

Cookie-cutter legislation

The enemy, it seems, is within. We witnessed this bashing of democracy with the images of militia-types beating police with flagpoles. Another version of that assault is the introduction of cookie-cutter legislation, some of which was crafted by the Koch-funded American Legislative Council, which exists to destroy education by taking the word public out of it, and replacing elected local school boards with charter schools whose boards are hand-picked by for-profit chains rather than being elected by voters in a community.

When state legislators vote to create educational vouchers that subsidize private and religious school tuition with public funds, they are making a decision to support schools that often teach content that has not been subject to a thorough review process, as public schools are. By contrast, vouchers mean that students can now be attending schools, free from state regulation, that may not even teach science or other subjects, or use instructional materials that do not support appropriate knowledge about our world.

The image of a caveman and a dinosaur, coexisting in an earlier time, as displayed in a Kentucky museum, comes to mind. It's not too hard to imagine that under a voucher scheme, if a church affiliated with the museum operated a school and offered a curriculum in line with such a view, it could be eligible for state educational choice dollars.

Yes. Your tax dollars. And mine.

But where is the proper public purpose for taxpayer support of such an imagined school? Right now, for example, the proposed expansion in some states including Ohio of so-called educational choice vouchers to religious schools could make such situations possible in the future. One wonders what would happen if private and religious schools would first be required to agree to a set of very detailed assurances, including the teaching of specific courses of study consistent with the curricular offerings of local public schools, before receiving any state funding in the form of educational vouchers.

I think we know the answer to that. It's called having it both ways – getting public money with no accountability and no strings attached.

The purpose of public schools

And then there is the subject of citizenship and our common heritage. Besides its purpose to produce skilled and literate individuals, public schools have also been charged to prepare young people to be caring and ethical citizens. By contrast, it can be argued that with private and religious schools, their own unique missions may not place civic-related ideals in the top rank, but instead

subordinate civic education and awareness to a more narrow or sectarian purpose that mirrors the defining purpose of the school.

But if in the name of freedom and educational choice there is already enough concern about the use of public tax dollars to help fund private, religious and charter schools and thus undermine public education, weaken our democracy, and further damage our social fabric, there is yet another problem created by the actions of state legislatures to fund religious schools through vouchers.

It's the Establishment Clause.

A product of The Enlightenment, the First Amendment's Establishment Clause was crafted by the nation's founders, who knew that religious wars had consumed Europe in the centuries preceding the American Revolution. Currently, in my home state of Ohio, a coalition of school districts is preparing a court challenge to check the legislature's intent to expand the state's voucher program as not only a violation of the constitutional prohibitions against supporting sectarian schools but also a violation of the Ohio Constitution's purpose to establish a "[system of common schools.](#)"

I trust that this language from the Ohio Constitution is illustrative of how other states establish a system of public education.

[Article VI, Sec. 2 Education] *The General Assembly shall make such provisions, by taxation, or otherwise, as, with the income arising from the school trust fund, will secure a thorough and efficient system of common schools throughout the State; but, no religious or other sect, or sects, shall ever have any exclusive right to, or control of, any part of the school funds of this State.*

Certainly, private and religious schools do not meet the definition of a common school that must be supported by public funds, yet in the name of educational choice there is a nationwide movement to expand voucher programs that will support private and religious schools, in spite of any Establishment Clause violation and other legal prohibitions.

So we return to the purpose of the common school as a unifying force to build community and not be a dividing force, as private and religious schools will be, if they are put on an equal footing with public education through support with public funds.

*If all of these issues might seem to be troublesome, there is one which will likely prove to cause the most damage: How can you maintain the concept of **E Pluribus Unum** when public policy seems poised to support all types of schools*

and thus erode the idea of the common school, in this case the Unum in our national motto, as the essential driver to ensure that children who come from many backgrounds form a single nation through our common schools?

Indeed, we know that the mission of public education is to prepare young people to be skilled, literate, and ethical citizens. But that's only part of it.

Let's take a look at the Unum part of the equation. In an essay about the role of public education written two decades ago, Kenneth Conklin, a Hawai'i philosophy professor, raised some concerns about how a fragmented educational system can itself cause a fragmented society.

"If an educational system is altered, its transmission of culture will be distorted," Conklin [wrote](#). "The easiest way to break apart a society long-term without using violence is to establish separate educational systems for the groups to be broken apart."

Public tax dollar support of private, religious, and charter schools clearly represent the establishment of separate educational systems. Such tax support violates the very idea of Horace Mann's common school, the very image of democracy in every community.

Conklin provides some additional advice for us to consider:

"A society's culture can survive far longer than the lifespan of any of its members, because its educational system passes down the folkways and knowledge of one generation to subsequent generations. A culture changes over time, but has a recognizable continuity of basic values and behavioral patterns that distinguishes it from other cultures. That continuity is provided by the educational system." (Emphasis mine)

What's next?

We're in trouble. A community thrives on consensus, of shared values. The actions of agents of disinformation spreading lies about vaccines have undermined confidence in science and public health. And if we lose a consensus about public education and the shared values it represents, we have lost our democracy.

But there is hope.

In reaction to this assault on public education in Ohio, a group of 85 school districts have joined to challenge the intent of the Ohio General Assembly to greatly expand the Educational Voucher program and put private and religious

schools on an equal footing to receive tax dollars siphoned away from constitutionally established common schools. Their position is that Article VI of the Ohio Constitution makes no provision for publicly supported but parallel and competing forms of education supported by public funds.

[The Ohio Coalition for Equity and Adequacy of School Funding](#), which was itself established twenty-five years ago to ensure fair state funding for school districts irrespective of wealth, is facilitating the legal efforts of districts in challenging the constitutionality of educational vouchers and the blatant violation of the Establishment Clause in establishing funding for religious schools. With so much at stake for future state funding of public school districts, more districts are expected to join this lawsuit in the coming weeks

So what is the lesson to be learned from public support of private and religious schools, along with the privatization of what is left of public education?

Be careful what you wish for.

If you think freedom and choice are the purest ideals to possess and not a sense of community to hold us together, most prominently seen in our public schools, think again. Every vote in every state legislature to offer or expand choice in the end represents a choice for disunion, for a fragmentation of our cultural heritage, a basis for community – and our very nationhood.

We are on the brink. If there is not a counter-movement to roll back this destruction of our communities by the Ohio General Assembly through the planned destruction of the common school, we will get what we deserve.

Yes, be careful what you wish for.

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<http://www.3cr.org.au/dogs>