



## Reinventing the Ideal of American Public Education

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In recent decades, education reform has focused on student achievement and school choice as a new means of allowing non-governmental organizations to improve schooling. Who is learning and how much they are learning are the major areas of interest in George W. Bush's *No Child Left Behind* and Barack Obama's *Race to the Top* initiative with its stress on Common Core State Standards. Measures of school success are grounded in student achievement on standardized tests, with little attention given to the actual processes of schooling.

Meanwhile, other reformers are asking other questions about America's schools. How do the experiences of minority schoolchildren in cities and rural areas compare to the experiences of mostly white children enrolled in increasingly segregated suburban schools? And what role are schools playing in an increasingly unequal American economy and society? If schools are part of a broader democratic society, thought to shape both individual and collective fortunes, public engagement with schools is an issue that cannot be ignored. The history of public schooling in the United States underlines this point, because the original common school model embodied a very different understanding of how best to educate all students and assigned a more important place to a fully involved citizens, the "public" in public education.

### Two Models for Schooling

Throughout most of the history of the U.S. public school system, the centrality of public involvement in "common" schools was largely taken for granted – even as the public was enlarged through increased high school attendance and after court decisions such as *Brown v. Board of Education* that outlawed racial segregation. In the common school model, schools were funded and operated directly by the government and were held democratically accountable to the public. Students often attended schools that were in their neighborhoods and operated as integral parts of local communities. In this model, the goal was not just to provide good education to individual students, but to also develop skills needed by the economy and democratic citizens for a vibrant national community. This model came under new stresses, however, as many local school districts had to face new challenges of educating diverse student bodies amid declining tax revenues and growing economic inequality and uncertainties.

Under these circumstances, the new "school choice" model has gained currency. In this model, schools receive tax funding but are increasingly operated and receive additional funding from private non-profit and for-profit organizations. These new hybrid schools, charter schools in particular, have unprecedented freedom to make decisions about personnel and operations as long as they are able to maintain satisfactory levels of student achievement as measured by test scores. Market logic is applied to schools, with the idea that students and families are supposed to choose among available schools and enter or leave as they please. Supposedly, schools that have poor test scores will be unable to retain students and end up being closed down. In practice, some students can be left behind in failing schools or can face limited options, especially when there are

insufficient enrollment slots available in nearby successful schools.

In principle, school choice maintains the promise of educating all students, because this model includes the idea that schools will be held accountable for boosting student test scores. However, this recent model allows market dynamics to create competition and instability within school systems, and it allows private organizations rather than democratic entities to shape the schooling experience for more and more American young people. What is easily lost in the new school choice framework is the sense that schools are community institutions that should be responsive to all citizens and serve the larger public good.

## Can American Public Education be Revitalized?

In times of school budget crises, legislative gridlock, and bleak economic prospects, people are understandably looking for clear, positive outcomes from schools. The allure of supposedly objective standardized test scores is obvious. However, recent studies by researchers at Stanford University reveal only slight differences in outcomes for students attending charter schools compared to those attending traditional public schools. The school choice model is not clearly superior to the common school model, and that raises the question of whether the role of the public in American schooling can be strengthened to meet current challenges. My own research as well the work of many others in the field point to three guiding principles that should inform efforts to reinvent and improve U.S. public schooling:

- **Develop a broader understanding of youth development.** The widely-held idea that schools are the great equalizer and source of opportunity for all Americans is a myth that burdens teachers and school administrators with unrealistic expectations. Many other features of families and communities shape student lives and capacities to do well at school and beyond. Americans should develop a more comprehensive approach to fostering youth development that includes not just school reforms, but also community efforts and social programs that can mitigate economic and social inequalities.
- **Ensure public participation and voice in school governance.** School closures in recent years in places such as Chicago, New Orleans, and Philadelphia have left many families frustrated that they have little voice in the fate of their neighborhood schools. Rather than punishing supposedly failing schools, school boards should engage with community members to find ways to support and improve existing schools to meet the needs of families and groups in the surrounding community.
- **Reinforce community ties.** Repeatedly opening and closing schools as if they were fast-food franchises makes it impossible for schools to function as viable educational institutions and community centers. More flux is created in already unstable and economically deprived areas. A better strategy would focus on creating good and stable schools within all neighborhoods, allowing every district to ensure high-quality instruction to all students while at the same time boosting prosperity and social ties in the surrounding community. Stronger communities, in turn, can help to educate and guide youth in all phases of life development.

Effective schools, in short, are about more than teaching and testing individuals within four walls. A revitalized American public school system is possible. In such a system, schools would simultaneously enhance individual performance and serve as effective anchors for communities, open to engagement and critique by all members of the larger publics they serve.