



The case against public schooling

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To hear her opponents, you'd think school-choice-supporter Betsy DeVos, President-elect Trump's pick for secretary of education, would banish mothers, apple pie and baseball to a desert island. Her opponents suggest public schools (aka government schools) are just as essential to American culture.

Evidence begs to differ.

Soon after DeVos was nominated, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, took to the pages of the New York Daily News to preach doom. She proclaimed DeVos is "a grave threat" to the public schools "that made America great." She wrote that those schools are "the places where we prepare the nation's young people...to contribute. They are where we forge a common culture out of America's rich diversity."

Such rhetoric isn't new. That public schooling is the "bedrock of our democracy," as political theorist Benjamin Barber once put it, is a time-honored proclamation. But it is almost never backed with rigorous evidence, and it flies in the face of history.

Before the late 1830s when the "common school" movement began, few colonies or states had much government furnished schooling. Even in those that did, it was not much like what we consider public schooling. There was little compulsory attendance, it wasn't supposed to be tuition-free, and the education was overtly religious.

Of course, much of huge "democratic" importance happened between the colonial era and the 1830s. The United States declared independence from Great Britain while proclaiming the centrality of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," and established the longest functioning constitution in the world.

The country also had widespread education. In a time when literacy wasn't nearly as important as it is today, estimates are that by 1840 about 90 percent of white adults were literate. As the historian David Tyack has noted, "Before Americans generally accepted the idea that schooling should be publicly controlled and financed they clearly believed in education of the public."

Early American education was hardly perfect, of course, but much of that had to do with government. By 1840 it was the vast majority of "white" Americans who were literate. In several states it was actually illegal to teach African Americans how to read.

Indeed, the reality of public schooling utterly contradicts the "great unifier" narrative. For most of our history government either banned, hampered, or segregated African Americans when they tried to access public schools. Meanwhile, among the marginalized groups that were allowed access — Roman Catholics and immigrants especially — the schools were often explicitly places where assimilation, as dictated by political elites, was imposed on children.

Sometimes imposition in public schools has resulted in actual bloodshed, such as conflicts over whose version of the Bible would be used in Philadelphia in the 1840s, or what textbooks would be employed in Kanawha County, W.Va., in the 1970s.

Thankfully, physical fighting has not been common. But that is largely because public schools often have not brought diverse people together. People have been able to stay apart in education because public schooling has been locally controlled, and "local" has meant small, homogeneous communities.

When local control hasn't enabled minority groups to get the education they've wanted for their children — in big districts, or with state or federal dictates — minorities have often felt compelled to start their own schools, at big expense to themselves. Most notably, Catholics established an alternative to the de facto Protestant public schools that by 1965 enrolled 5.5 million children.

For most of our history, most public schools simply have not brought diverse people together. When togetherness has been imposed, conflict and inequality have often been the results.

So what has unified Americans?

Human nature. It is simply easier to live and thrive in a society when you speak a common language and share a common culture. But people often want commonality without being required to sacrifice things they cherish that might also make them different. School choice works with that, enabling families and educators to freely interact, and to unify without zero-sum, forced sacrifice.

But at least public schooling has spread education wider than it would have been if done privately, right?

The pre-common schooling literacy findings suggest that's almost certainly wrong, and private schools often preceded public long after that. Meanwhile, even today's typically hamstrung private school choice programs — vouchers, tax credits, and education savings accounts — appear to get better academic results than traditional public schools, usually for much less money. Substantial research also indicates that the more educational freedom there is, the better the outcomes.

When you examine the evidence, far from being essential to American success, public schooling appears to be a hindrance. All the hollow proclamations in the world won't change that.

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