

Enough With Top-Down Education Reform. It's Time for a Grass-Roots Approach



—Getty

Parents need regular reminders of the broader purposes of public schools

By Johann N. Neem

July 25, 2018

We Americans are busy. We work, shop, cook, take care of the kids, and have little time left over. At a time of growing inequality, for many it feels like a struggle just to stay in place. Naturally, we are concerned about our children's future. We wonder whether schools are preparing them for a changing economy.


I'm a parent. I want to do all that I can to help my children, although I'm not always sure what that might be.

That's why we parents need regular reminders of the broader purposes of public schools. Instead of providing us those reasons, education reformers of the 21st century appeal to our fears and our pocketbooks. We are told again and again that our children will not get jobs unless they excel—and that our schools are failing. Children need to be prepared for "college and career," but not, it seems, to be citizens or flourishing human beings.

This is a problem that has been growing for years. The Common Core State Standards' authors considered the civic and humanistic benefits of education as a "natural outgrowth" of high standards, not a purpose for them. As one Dayton, Ohio, Chamber of Commerce member put it in 2014, students are educated **"so that they can be an attractive product for business to consume and hire."** Or, as former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stated in 2012 that then-President **Barack Obama "knows education is about jobs."**

There is nothing wrong with schools preparing Americans for work and encouraging social mobility. Parents reasonably expect schools to offer their children economic opportunities, and all Americans benefit from a vibrant economy. But these goals are not enough. Today, we need reformers who appeal to the better angels of our nature. We need the kind of reformers who promote the ideals that the founders of our schools did over a century ago, most notably Horace Mann.

Mann—the first Massachusetts Board of Education Secretary in the 1830s—called us to be better selves. He used his bully pulpit to celebrate the true purpose of public education. He argued that a child's right to public education "begins with the first breath he draws." Children need more than food and shelter; they have minds, hearts, and souls."

-  [Printer-Friendly](#)
-  [Email Article](#)
-  [Reprints](#)
-  [Comments](#)

"Children need to be prepared for 'college and career,' but not, it seems, to be citizens or flourishing human beings."

Mann reasserted what the founders had said: In a republic, every citizen must be educated with the knowledge to make good decisions and to have empathy. "As each citizen is to participate in the power of governing others," he wrote, "it is an essential preliminary that he should be imbued with a feeling for the wants, and a sense of the rights, of those whom he is to govern; because the power of governing others, if guided by no higher motive than our own gratification, is the distinctive attribute of oppression."

Indeed, Mann hoped that public schools would foster economic opportunity, but not place economic success above other goods. To Mann, public schools should encourage public-mindedness, not just personal ambition.

Other antebellum education reformers agreed. John Pierce, the new state of Michigan's first superintendent of public schools, celebrated public schools where "all classes are blended together; the rich mingle with the poor ... and mutual attachments are formed." James Henry Jr., then superintendent of schools in Herkimer County, N.Y., believed that public schools would prepare every American to "discharge his duties as an individual, as a member of society, and as a citizen of a free State."

We have struggled to meet these aspirations in a society segregated by class and race. Yet, antebellum reformers' civic ideals continued to inspire advocates of public education.

In the 1990s, supporters of national standards in the George H.W. Bush administration offered three reasons to improve achievement: "to promote educational equality, to preserve democracy and enhance the civic culture, and to improve economic competitiveness."

But that pursuit of "economic competitiveness" seems to crowd out the others today. This a real lowering of our expectations.

That's why we need a new generation of reformers to inspire us Americans again with the public purposes of public education. They will not come from the top down in the form of corporate reform; they must emerge from the grass roots. In many communities across the country, this is already happening.

When we vote or attend PTA and school board meetings, we can remind our leaders and—perhaps more importantly—each other, that we value more than getting ahead. Ideally, public schools bring together a diverse community and promote equality and empathy. They will not do so, however, unless we remember what, deep down, we already know to be true. Public schools shape hearts and minds and sustain our democracy.

MORE OPINION

Keep up with the latest
in education opinion.

Follow *Education Week*
Commentary on Facebook.

[Follow Commentary here.](#)

Johann Neem is a professor of history at Western Washington University. He is the author of Democracy's Schools: The Rise of Public Education in America (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).