**Public schools for private gain: The declining American commitment to serving the public good**

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***When schooling comes to be viewed mainly as a source of private benefit, both schools and society suffer grave consequences.***

We Americans tend to talk about public schooling as though we know what that term means. But in the complex educational landscape of the 21st century — where charter schools, private schools, and religious schools compete with traditional public schools for resources and support — it’s becoming less and less obvious what makes a school “public” at all.

A school is public, one might argue, if it meets certain formal criteria: It is funded by the public, governed by the public, and openly accessible to the public. But in that case, what should we make of charter schools, which are broadly understood to be public schools even though many are governed by private organizations? And how should we categorize private schools that enroll students using public vouchers or tax credits, or public schools that use exams to restrict access? For that matter, don’t private schools often serve public interests, and don’t public schools often promote students’ private interests?

In short, our efforts to distinguish between public and nonpublic schools often oversimplify the ways in which today’s schools operate and the complex roles they play in our society. And such distinctions matter because they shape our thinking about education policy. After all, if we’re unclear which schools deserve what kinds of funding and support, then how do we justify a system of elementary, secondary, and higher education that consumes more than $800 billion in taxes every year and consumes 10 to 20 or more years of every person’s life?

To clarify what we mean by public schooling, it’s helpful to broaden the discussion by considering not just the formal features of schools (their funding, governance, and admissions criteria) but also their aims. That is, to what extent do they pursue the public good, and to what extent do they serve private interests?

A public good is one that benefits all members of the community, whether or not they contribute to its upkeep or make use of it personally. In contrast, private goods benefit individuals, serving only those people who take advantage of them. Thus, schooling is a public good to the extent that it helps everyone (including people who don’t have children in school). And schooling is a private good to the extent that it provides individuals with knowledge, skills, and credentials they can use to distinguish themselves from other people and get ahead in life.

People, organizations, and governments that create public goods tend to face what is known as the “free-rider” problem: If you can’t prevent people from enjoying goods for free, then they’ll have little incentive to pay for them. For example, if I can hang out at my local park whenever I want, then why should I donate to the park cleanup fund that my neighbors organized? I can get a free ride on them, enjoying a clean park without chipping in any of my own money.

The standard solution to the free-rider problem is to make it mandatory for everybody to support certain public goods (for example, efforts to reduce air pollution, fight crime, and monitor food safety) by using mechanisms such as general taxation. Indeed, this is how we’ve always supported our public schools. You may pay tuition to send your children to an exclusive, ivy-covered academy — or you might not have kids at all — but even so, you are required to pay taxes to fund schools for the whole community. Your family may not benefit personally from the services provided by, say, the elementary school down the road, but you do benefit, along with your neighbors, from having a well-funded school nearby. If local kids get a decent education and grow up to become gainfully employed, law-abiding citizens, that is a public good. It makes the entire community a better, safer, and happier place to live.

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For much of American history, schooling has been understood in this way. For example, at the founding of our educational system, in the early 19th century, schools were supposed to turn young people into virtuous and competent citizens, a public good that was strongly political in nature. By the turn of the 20th century, schooling was still regarded mainly as a public good, but the mission had begun to shift from politics (creating citizens) to economics (training capable workers who can help promote broad prosperity). Over the subsequent decades, however, growing numbers of Americans came to view schooling mainly as a private good, producing credentials that allow individuals to get ahead, or stay ahead, in the competition for money and social status.

In this article, I argue that this shift in how Americans have viewed schooling — from conceiving of it mainly as a public good to defining it mostly as a private good — has led to dramatic changes in both the quality of the education that students receive and the kind of society we expect our schools to create. The institution that for much of our history helped bring us together into a community of citizens is increasingly dispersing us into a social hierarchy defined by the level of education we’ve attained.

**The social functions of U.S. schooling: A short history**

In the early 19th century, the United States created a system of universal public schooling for the same reason that other emerging nations have done so over the years: to turn subjects of the king into citizens of the state (Labaree, 2010).

Historically, public schooling has been the midwife of the nation-state, whose viability depends on converting the occupants of a particular territory into members of an imagined community who come to see themselves for the first time as *French*, say, or *American*. This mission was particularly important for the United States because it was a republic entering a world that had long demonstrated hostility toward the survival of such states. From ancient Rome to the Italian city states of the Renaissance, republics tended either to succumb to a tyrant or be destroyed in a Hobbesian war among irreconcilable interests.

As the founders well knew, the survival of the American republic depended on its ability to form individuals into a republican community in which citizens were imbued with a commitment to the public good (Labaree, 1997). Further, when the Common School Movement emerged in the 1820s and ’30s, it faced an additional challenge, because the shared civic virtue of the fragile new republic was undergoing a vigorous challenge from the possessive individualism of the emerging free-market economy. Horace Mann (1841), the leader of the movement in Massachusetts, put the case this way: “It may be an easy thing to make a Republic; but it is a very laborious thing to make Republicans; and woe to the republic that rests upon no better foundations than ignorance, selfishness, and passion.”

The key characteristic of the new common school was not its curriculum or pedagogy but its *commonality*. It brought young people together into a single building where they engaged in a shared social and cultural experience meant to counter the differences of social class that posed a serious threat to republican identity. Ideally, students would learn, in age-graded classrooms, to belong to a community of equals.

The goal of these schools wasn’t just to teach young people to internalize democratic norms but also to make it possible for capitalism to coexist with republicanism. For the free market to function, the state had to relax its control over individuals, allowing them to make their own decisions as rational actors. By learning to regulate their own thoughts and behaviors within the space of the classroom, students would become prepared for both commerce and citizenship, able to pursue their self-interests in the economic marketplace while at the same time participating in the political marketplace of ideas.

However, by the end of the 19th century, the survival of the republic was no longer in question. At that point, the United States was emerging as a world power, with booming industrial production, large-scale immigration, and a growing military presence. And while there was some pressure to turn peasant immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe into American citizens, policy makers were even more concerned with turning them into modern industrial workers. In the roaring economy of the Progressive Era, then, the mission of schooling evolved: The most pressing goal was to strengthen the nation’s*human capital*(to put it in today’s terms).

Note, though, that schooling during this time continued to be defined as a public good. When the workforce became more skilled and productivity increased, the whole country benefited. Overall, Americans’ standard of living improved. Thus, there remained a strong rationale for everyone to contribute to the education of other people’s children. And that rationale continues to resonate somewhat today. Even now, politicians and policy makers often talk about “investing” public funds in education as a way to promote economic growth, lifting all boats.

It was only in the 20th century that schooling came to be regarded as the primary means for individuals to obtain a good job. As their enrollments skyrocketed, high schools gave up the long-standing practice of providing a common course of study for all students and, instead, differentiated the curriculum, providing separate tracks designed for different career trajectories: the industrial course for factory workers, the business course for clerical workers, and the academic course for those bound for college (and then for work in management and the professions). As one school board president in the 1920s put it, “For a long time, all boys were trained to be President . . . Now we are training them to get jobs” (Lynd & Lynd, 1929, p. 194).

The new vocationalism lacked the grandeur of the mission set for the Common School, but it did address parents’ primary concern: how to ensure their children ended up with a good income and a secure social position, ideally by landing a job in the upper ranks of the new occupational hierarchy. Such work tended to be safer, cleaner, less manual, more secure, more prestigious, and better paid. And, crucially, each step up in the hierarchy required a higher level of education.

This new function of schooling — allocating desirable jobs — was in some ways just the flip side of the idea that schools exist to produce capable workers. What a policy maker views as a process of strengthening the nation’s human capital looks, to the individual student, like a way to attain personal status. For the student, school becomes purely a contest to obtain better educational qualifications and get better jobs. And from this angle, school is a decidedly private good. The pursuit of high-status jobs is a zero-sum game. If you get hired for a position, then I don’t.

All but gone is the assumption that the purpose of schooling is to benefit the community at large. Less and less often do Americans conceive of education as a cooperative effort in nation-building or a collective investment in workforce development. Increasingly, rather, school comes to be viewed as an intense competition among individuals to get ahead in society and avoid being left behind. It has begun to look, to a great extent, like a means of creating winners and losers in the pursuit of academic merit, with the results determining who becomes winners and losers in life.

**Consequences of the rise of schooling as a private good**

When schools become a mechanism for allocating social status, they provoke intense competition over invidious educational distinctions. But while schooling may serve as a very private good, that doesn’t mean it can’t also function, at the same time, as a public good.

At one level, everyone who attends a school benefits personally from the knowledge, skills, and socialization they gain there, as well as from any diplomas they receive, which certify their learning and provide a signal to the job market about their relative employability for a variety of occupational positions. Viewed from this angle, even students at the most traditional public schools accrue private goods.

And at another level, everyone in society benefits from having a well-educated and successful group of fellow citizens and coworkers. One of the core concepts of neoclassical economics is that the pursuit of private and personal gain often has public benefits. People with more education tend to commit fewer crimes, participate more fully in public life, vote more often, and contribute to civil society through engagement with a variety of nongovernmental organizations. They are more likely to assume positions of political, social, and economic leadership and to populate the professions. And they tend to be more productive workers, which helps both to spur economic growth and to increase the standard of living for the population as a whole. The fact that these benefits may be unintended consequences, resulting indirectly from people seeking personal gain and glory, doesn’t make them any less significant.

Consider the classic statement of this phenomenon by Adam Smith (1776/1976): “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest . . . Nobody but a beggar chuses [*sic*] to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow-citizens” (p. 18). From this perspective, the competition for educational advantage benefits not only the individuals who gain the credentials but also the public at large. When we strengthen the level of skill in the workforce, everybody’s quality of life improves. And if true, this solves the free-rider problem: Rather than compelling people to contribute to the public good, we can simply encourage them to pursue their private interests, trusting that this will, over the long haul, produce the greatest benefits for everybody.

The problem is that, whether or not this theory is correct, few of us can afford to wait for the long haul. Encouraging individuals to pursue their private interests doesn’t do much for the vast numbers of people who have serious obstacles to confront in the short term. Moreover, while a rising tide of economic growth may raise all boats, this doesn’t change the fact that most kids are born in dinghies, not yachts.

We know from decades of research that children from lower-income backgrounds usually attend worse schools than those born into affluent families, are less likely to be in the high-level reading group or on the honors track, and are much less likely to graduate from high school. If they go to college, they are less likely to attend a four-year institution and are less likely to earn a degree. And every year, it becomes less and less likely that a person who was born in a dinghy will ever end up owning a yacht, much less raise their children in one.

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For those families that do enjoy greater wealth, the public benefits of schooling are easy to miss, whereas the private benefits are material, immediate, and personal. When push comes to shove, the latter are simply more compelling. It’s no surprise that affluent parents will deploy their economic, social, and cultural capital to gain as many educational advantages as they can for their children. They move to the best school district they can afford or send their kids to private school; they make sure they get into the classes with the best teachers and gain access to the gifted program in elementary school and the advanced placement program in high school. And they push their children toward the most selective college they can attend. To do anything less would be a disservice.

Sure, in the name of fairness and justice, parents could choose to send their children to the same lousy schools that less fortunate people are forced to attend. But even if they support efforts to improve the quality of educational opportunities for other people’s children, what kind of parent would put their children’s future at risk for a political principle?

In short, the pursuit of private educational goods drives most parents’ immediate decisions, while efforts to promote the public good are deferred to the indeterminate realm of political action for possible resolution in the distant future. It’s not that anybody wants to punish other people’s children; it’s just that they need to take care of their own. But when the public good is forever postponed, the effects are punishing indeed. And when schooling comes to be viewed solely as a means of private advancement, the consequences are dismal for both school and society:

* Over time, the market rewards the accumulation of educational credentials more thanitvalues knowledge and skills. For example, employers will pay a higher salary to a person who squeaked out a college degree than one who excelled in all four years of college but left one credit short of a diploma.
* As a result, students learn early on that the goal is to acquire as many grades, credits, and degrees as possible rather than the knowledge and skills that these tokens are supposed to represent. So much the better if you can find ways to game the system (by, for example, studying only what’s likely to be on the test, buttering up the teacher, or just plain cheating). Only a sucker pays the sticker price.
* In turn, schooling becomes more and more stratified, in two related ways: First, students have incentives to pursue the highest level of schooling they can (a graduate degree is better than a four-year degree,which is better than a two-year degree, and so on). Second, they have incentives to get into the highest-status institutions they can, at every level.
* Cooperative learning becomes a dangerous waste of time. Students have no incentive to learn from their classmates but only to maximize their own ranking relative to them.
* Families with more economic and cultural and social capital begin to hoard educational opportunities for their own children, elbowing others aside for access to the most desirable schools, teachers, and other resources.
* This, in turn,  threatens the legitimacy of the whole system, undermining the claim that people succeed according to their educational merit.
* Moreover, people with the highest-status degrees and jobs tend to marry each other and pass their concentrated levels of advantage on to their own children, which only widens the divide across subsequent generations.
* Enjoying greater wealth, those parents choose to send their children to private schools, or they choose to live in neighborhoods with elite public schools — in any case, the nominally “public” school hardly differs from the private academy, except that while it enjoys public subsidies, its boundaries have been drawn up in a way that denies access to other people’s children. (In effect, such a school is a public resource turned toward private ends.)

My point is that over the last several decades, as schooling has come to be viewed mainly as a source of private benefit rather than as a public good, the consequences have been dramatic for both schools and society. Increasingly prized as a resource by affluent families, traditional public schooling has become a mechanism by which to reinforce their advantages. And as a result, it has become harder and harder to distinguish what is truly public about our public schools.

At a deeper level, as we have privatized our vision of public schooling, we have shown a willingness to back away from the social commitment to the public good that motivated the formation of the American republic and the common school system. We have grown all too comfortable in allowing the fate of other people’s children to be determined by the unequal competition among consumers for social advantage through schooling. The invisible hand of the market may work for the general benefit in the economic activities of the butcher and the baker but not in the political project of creating citizens.

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