

## Good schools for a troubled democracy

Jon Valant  
October 26, 2020

There's no such thing as a "good school" in the abstract. Every school serves a particular community, in a particular time and place, with its own needs and desires. A good school in rural Montana might not be a good school in Midtown Manhattan, just as a good school in 1920 might not be a good school today. This doesn't mean that we can't define school quality. It does, however, mean that we can't define quality without first considering the needs of a school's time and place.

I believe that the school system we have today in the United States — and our conception of a good school — is mismatched with the needs of our time. That system was born of a different era, when our leaders were preoccupied with America's place in the global economy. They built a policy framework that sees the dominant purpose of schools as equipping students with the academic knowledge and skills needed for workforce success. Over the last few decades, this framework has defined not only what schools do but also, more subtly and dangerously, what the public believes schools are *able* and *supposed to* do. It has left us with powerful tools for assessing school quality, and it has given us the impression that doing so is straightforward and scientific. However, it's time to reevaluate what we need from schools and, by extension, what makes a good school.

Looking forward, what the U.S. needs from its schools has more to do with building a cohesive society and a stable democracy than with shoring up our economy. We're experiencing dramatic changes in how we consume information and engage with one another. These changes, coupled with our lack of preparation to handle them, threaten core aspects of American life. Those threats won't subside, no matter who wins any particular election, unless and until we prepare ourselves to navigate this new terrain. Schools have an important role to play in that work, but if we want them to play that role, we will have to rethink what it means to provide, and measure, a good K-12 education.

### 'Good schools' in the era of *A Nation at Risk* and NCLB

Our existing education policy framework — emphasizing standards, testing, and accountability — has its roots in the 1980s, a time when many of this country's business leaders and elected officials worried about economic competition from overseas. *A Nation at Risk*, the influential 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, identified the country's challenges primarily in its weakening grip on the global economy. It cited Japan's rise as an automobile manufacturer, South Korea's production of the world's most efficient steel mill, and Germany's increasing share of the machine tools market as indicators that Americans' opportunities for gainful employment were slipping away. A key culprit, it argued, was the nation's lagging performance in teaching children the basic academic skills needed to thrive in the workforce.

The report also cited weak academic skills as a threat to the nation's free and democratic society. For instance, it recommended three years of high school social studies as necessary for the "informed and committed exercise of citizenship in our free society." However, the rhetoric of economic ruin and international competition drowned out this message, and civics and social studies would receive relatively little attention in the state and federal test-based accountability policies to come. According to the logic of the times, the nation's most pressing need — and, consequently, the most urgent task for our public schools — was to strengthen the workforce.

I'll leave it to others to debate whether this was, in fact, a reasonable diagnosis of the country's greatest needs and whether the proposed school reforms were a reasonable solution. More relevant here is that leaders saw a link between the country's needs and the appropriate pursuits of schools — a link between economic prosperity and better instruction in core academic subjects such as math and English language arts.



Getty Images

The policy solutions that followed had an elegance to their logic and at least the appearance of rigor: States would craft academic standards that, if mastered, would equip students with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college and career and, in turn, sustain the country's prosperity. Schools would adopt curricula aligned with these standards, and states would build assessment systems to measure students' mastery of these curricula. Test-based accountability policies brought carrots and, more often, sticks, which gave educators incentives for teaching those state-defined standards. The system would tell us which schools were good and which were not.

This accountability system was fueled by numbers. A good school was one with strong academic outcomes, and test scores quantified just how much students supposedly knew and learned. Those numbers begat more numbers, as private companies, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies translated test-score data into school performance ratings. It turned out that plenty of people were eager to tell us which schools were good — and plenty of us, including parents and homebuyers, wanted to know.

Before long, a quick internet search would produce multiple ratings for just about every public school in the country. Today, when I Google the elementary school down the street from my office in Washington, D.C., the first page of search results produces a star rating from the D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education; a color-coded numerical rating from GreatSchools (along with color-coded numerical ratings for various subcategories); a letter grade from Niche; a star rating from SchoolDigger (accompanied by the school's ranking among the District's 122 elementary schools), and three real estate sites that embed GreatSchools ratings into their home listings (Zillow, Redfin, and realtor.com).

These school ratings systems rely heavily on students' test scores in core subjects. At least that's my assumption, since some of these sites provide hardly any information about how they arrived at their ratings. The ratings reinforce the idea that the dominant purpose of schools is to prepare students academically for college and career — and that we should evaluate school quality based on how well they serve this purpose. They provide actionable information (*Sending my children to this school is better than sending them to that one. It's best to buy a house within this attendance zone.*) while conditioning us, in a sense, to believe that school quality is reducible to a single number or letter.

I'm not arguing that there's anything inherently wrong with measuring academic performance or even rating schools based in part on those measures. If done well, this can expose systemic and localized problems while challenging the idea that student demographics are good proxy measures for school quality. For instance, that's why much of the civil rights community supported test-based accountability, recognizing its potential both to reveal inequities in students' opportunities and to highlight examples of excellent schools that serve disadvantaged students.

Our test-based accountability system limits what we, as a nation, *believe* schools can and should do.

Share this on 

A good system of measurement and evaluation can be a powerful tool for school improvement. However, we built a bad one, which is worse than having no system at all. Many of the unintended consequences of test-based accountability in the No Child Left Behind era are well known, so I won't review them here, other than to note that, as the saying goes, "What gets measured gets done." Intense pressure to maximize state test scores in math and English narrowed the curriculum and had negative effects on teaching, learning, and the everyday life of our public schools. As Daniel Koretz (2017) wrote, "Walk in to almost any school, and you will enter a world that revolves around testing and test scores, day after day and month after month."

However, another of NCLB's consequences has received less attention, although it has been just as harmful: Our test-based accountability system limits what we, as a nation, *believe* schools can and should do. The machinery of standardized testing is so impressive, having such a powerful aura of objective truth, that it can trick us into believing that schools are only *capable* of teaching that which we can readily measure. Let's call it the wrongheaded idea that "what *isn't* measurable isn't doable." Testing whether students know how to multiply fractions is easy. Testing whether students are assembling the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will allow them to listen and respond carefully to each other's ideas, or to identify and reject propaganda 15 years after they graduate, is hard. That can give the impression that the former is teachable and the latter is not. But that's not the case. We just aren't as good at measuring some types of learning as others — and that's OK. If we fail to appreciate this point, we risk thinking too narrowly about schools' capabilities.

We should be aware of that risk, since much of what we need to start asking of schools isn't so easy to measure.

## The changing purposes of U.S. schools

Our current education policy framework, which was seeded in *A Nation at Risk* and operationalized by No Child Left Behind, assumes that the overriding goal of K-12 education is to help students find gainful employment and power the U.S. economy. As David Labaree (1997, 2018) has described, Americans have, over the long term, changed how they've thought about education. The country built its public school system to mold virtuous citizens, but our focus has shifted toward preparing students to be capable workers. Now, he argues, we tend to see education as a private good (benefiting the individual student) more than a public good (benefiting the community at large). We think of schools as existing mainly to provide credentials, which young people rely upon as they attempt to outcompete each other for a limited number of desirable college and career opportunities.

Labaree emphasizes the shift from public to private goods, but the shift toward economic goals is also notable. It's evident in his description of how the meaning of the public good has evolved from molding citizens to molding workers. And economic purposes may have won out in the private sphere, too. To the extent that early public schools were meant to benefit the individual, the focus was on providing a liberal education, helping children to become well-rounded adults. Even now, almost all parents say that characteristics like strong moral character are important for their children's future (Bowman et al., 2012). However, the school ratings that many parents use today don't evaluate schools based on how well they open minds or shape character. They evaluate schools based on students' performance on state tests. The implicit message is that what parents should want from schools — what distinguishes a good school from a bad one — is academic preparation for college and career.

The truth, though, is that schools can and should do much more than that. We need them to serve their democratic and societal purposes, not just their economic purposes. It's the only way for schools to produce meaningful public, and private, value.

This is especially true today, as American democracy is now in a precarious place. Affective polarization (animosity) has risen sharply in the U.S. (Boxell, Gentzkow, & Shapiro, 2020), with polls showing decades-long highs in ideological division and antipathy between Democrats and Republicans — even before Donald Trump took office (Pew Research Center, 2014). Pride in being American is at the lowest level on record (Brenan, 2020), and trust in the government is close to its low point (Pew Research Center, 2019). Conspiracy theories and disinformation are widespread. Roughly one-third of U.S. adults (and most Republicans) now believe, at least in part, in QAnon conspiracy theories (Civiqs, 2020). Most Americans say it's hard, and getting harder, to tell the difference between facts and misleading information (Santhanam, 2020).

Perhaps most troubling, though harder to quantify, is that we seem increasingly unable to solve the most important problems we confront. Our handling of the COVID-19 pandemic is an obvious example. Issues that never should have become politicized, such as mask wearing and school reopening, have become partisan, undermining the effectiveness of our responses. With daunting challenges ahead, from handling the effects of global warming to dismantling structural racism, political dysfunction presents a serious threat to the country's future.

Here's a thought experiment to consider: Let's say we were to assemble a blue-ribbon commission to produce a contemporary version of *A Nation at Risk*. Let's say, also, that this panel had the same objectives and rhetorical flair as the 1983 commission. Would the 2020 report begin, as the earlier one did, by warning that "Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world"?

The problem isn't that we're unprepared for our 21st-century economy; it's that we're unprepared for our 21st-century democracy.

Share this on   

It wouldn't. The most severe threats we face as a country, now and in the foreseeable future, aren't about workforce training. They aren't threats that can be neutralized with better literacy and numeracy, or even by helping more students make a successful transition to college (though those things may help). The problem isn't that we're unprepared for our 21st-century economy; it's that we're unprepared for our 21st-century democracy.

Participating in American politics and society is different today from what it was a generation ago. For example, the media landscape is starkly different from the one we knew in, say, 1983. It has become more fragmented and politicized, blurring the lines between news and commentary and between fact and fiction. From the rise of talk radio and 24-hour cable news networks to the free-for-all of online information consumption (in an era of deepfakes and disinformation campaigns), information has become both

easier to find and harder to interpret. Further, much of our interaction with each other now happens on social media, where we come to know people by way of memes and 280-character broadsides. What does empathy look like in that setting? What about decency, or constructive debate?

If we want to equip ourselves, as a country, for 21st-century citizenship, what types of skills, knowledge, and dispositions might we want our students to learn? Surely, we would want them to develop digital and media literacy skills that, today, many people lack (Breakstone et al., 2018). We would want them to seek out competing ideas, to graciously admit that their own assumptions may be wrong, and to develop a sense of intellectual humility (Porter & Schumann, 2018). We would want them to appreciate our democratic norms and institutions and to understand that government and politics matter, not because they're entertaining — or a way to inflict harm on those with whom we disagree — but because government actions have serious consequences. We'd want them to approach others with genuine senses of compassion and camaraderie, whether they interact in person, virtually, or not at all. We'd want them to understand how others interpret their words, both spoken and written, and how others' words affect them.

I don't mean for this list to be comprehensive but, rather, to illustrate a few points. First, note how scarcely today's school quality ratings incorporate any of these types of learning. There's little reason to believe that these traits will somehow arise from more effective instruction in core academic subjects, yet those ratings purport to measure school quality with little, if any, attention to them. Second, note that this type of learning isn't fundamentally partisan. Would any American *not* like to see more of these traits in our citizenry, or in their own children? Third, note that we, as a country, have work to do in building these traits. Many of them don't come naturally to us. For example, online disinformation is a potent threat because it is hard for us to detect. Similarly, caring about people we know only through hostile social media posts is qualitatively different from caring about someone right in front of us.

Not surprisingly, it's challenging to adapt instruction to these new realities. In writing about teaching students to evaluate information in a "post-truth" world, Clark Chinn, Sarit Barzilai, and Ravit Golan Duncan (2020) argue for putting students in authentic learning environments in which they must navigate real-world complexity and ambiguity. They worry about the tendency to teach these skills in carefully scripted settings in which educators have more control but the opportunity for learning is modest. Preparing students for 21st-century citizenship isn't well-suited to worksheets and lists of best practices — and probably isn't well-suited to standardized tests. That's a challenge. It's tempting to give in to the "what gets measured gets done" mentality and try to find ways to hold schools accountable for their performance in preparing citizens. I don't think that's the right approach. Our experience with test-based accountability should give us pause, and measuring attributes like students' civic dispositions is bound to be a flawed endeavor.

Rather, if we believe that a good school, today and for the foreseeable future, is one that aims to prepare young people to participate responsibly in the life of their democracy, then states and districts will have to hardwire such priorities into schools' day-to-day activities. They need to build it into curricula, standards, course requirements, professional development programs, hiring criteria, and the like — tests be damned. It's not enough to encourage schools to take their roles in preparing citizens seriously, especially when our accountability systems and school ratings give them incentives to focus their attention elsewhere. And parents, for their part, should think carefully about what they want for their children, and ask what today's school ratings really tell them.

We should continue to demand that schools prepare students for successful, fulfilling careers. However, this is one purpose of schools, not the only purpose of schools. Now as much as ever, we must recognize that good schools serve democratic and social goals, not just economic goals.

## References

- Bowman, C.D., Hunter, J.D., Dill, J.S., & Juelfs-Swanson, M. (2012). *Culture of American families: Executive report*. Charlottesville, VA: Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture.
- Boxell, L., Gentzkow, M., & Shapiro, J.M. (2020). *Cross-country trends in affective polarization* (NBER Working Paper 26669). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Breakstone, J., McGrew, S., Smith, M., Ortega, T., & Wineburg, S. (2018). Why we need a new approach to teaching digital literacy. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 99 (6), 27-32.
- Brenan, M. (2020, June 15). *U.S. national pride falls to record low*. Washington, DC: Gallup.

Chinn, C.A., Barzilai, S., & Duncan, R.G. (2020). Education for a “post-truth” world: New directions for research and practice. *Educational Researcher*. Advance online publication.

Civiqs. (2020, September 2). *Report: Americans pessimistic on time frame for coronavirus recovery*. Oakland, CA: Author.

Koretz, D. (2017). *The testing charade: Pretending to make schools better*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Labaree, D.F. (1997). Public goods, private goods: The American struggle over educational goals. *American Educational Research Journal*, 34 (1), 39-81.

Labaree, D.F. (2018). Public schools for private gain: The declining American commitment to serving the public good. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 100 (3), 8-13.

Pew Research Center. (2014, June 12). *Political polarization in the American public: How increasing ideological uniformity and partisan antipathy affect politics, compromise and everyday life*. Washington, DC: Author.

Pew Research Center. (2019, April 11). *Public trust in government: 1958-2019*. Washington, DC: Author.

Porter, T. & Schumann, K. (2018). Intellectual humility and openness to the opposing view. *Self and Identity*, 17 (2), 139-162.

Santhanam, L. (2020, January 21). American voters worry they can't spot misleading information, poll finds. *PBS NewsHour*.

[Jon Valant](#)

---

**JON VALANT** (jvalent@brookings.edu; @JonValant) is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, Washington, DC.