Public schools, public goods, and public work

The value of public schools goes beyond individual benefits to include important civic priorities.

By **Kathleen Knight Abowitz and Sarah M. Stitzlein**

Do public schools constitute a public good? Before answering that question, it's important to understand what we mean by a public good. School choice advocates tend to define the concept in a way that is typical in the field of economics: A public good is available for all individuals to freely share and virtually impossible to exclude others from enjoying (Anomaly, 2018). One of the most obvious examples is clean air, something accessible and beneficial to each individual. Many economists go further, claiming that public goods are aggregations of private goods — things that serve the needs, desires, and interests of individuals. In other words, public goods are those items that are preferred by and benefit the largest group of individuals.

Those who embrace market-based education reform persistently use this economic definition (Currie-Knight, 2017; DeAngelis, 2018), usually claiming that public schools are only a public good if they are consistently preferred and chosen by a large number of individuals and if they can be freely consumed by each individual as he or she desires. These reformers will point to evidence of inequities in public schools, or to the preferences of some families for private education, as reasons to answer *no* to the question of whether public schools are a public good. And if these schools do not constitute a public good, the logical next step is to call for policies that will defund public schooling.

However, this increasingly popular conception of the public good effectively disregards the civic element altogether (Santoro, 2018, p. 11), which, in turn, jeopardizes the long-standing role of education in a democracy.

Defining a public good from a civic perspective requires us to use a rubric that goes beyond consideration of the individual. In the case of education, the civic public good includes benefits for both the individual and the wider community. Individuals benefit from receiving an education that enables them to function in society, and the wider community benefits from being part of a populace possessing shared general knowledge, critical-thinking ability for making decisions about social problems, and norms of civility and community engagement. These benefits are made widely available and accessible to all social classes, races, and ethnic groups through a universal, tuition-free system of public schooling.

To assess the public value of such a system of education, it is essential to understand the limitations of the economists' view of the public good and counter it with richer language and narratives that convey the civic value of public education to our future as a free, democratic people.

Buying education at the supermarket?

Recently, a small group of Ohio citizens invited their state senator to discuss education policy with them. When asked why he had supported many laws that weakened

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the state's public schools, he asserted that the provision of education should be more like shopping for groceries at a competitive supermarket. He explained that if he could, he would wipe the slate clean and start all over again to rebuild the educational system. Rather than creating one school system for everyone, he would create an educational credit card, where you could shop for your family's education like you shop for groceries, in a marketplace of educational choices.

This well-worn grocery shopping metaphor is a familiar gambit for explaining what's wrong with the model of government-run public education systems. For instance, in 2011, the *Wall Street Journal* published an op-ed by Donald Boudreaux titled, "If supermarkets were like public schools" that asked, "What if groceries were paid for by taxes, and you were assigned a store based on where you live?" The piece was a thought experiment intended to demonstrate how ridiculous it would be to set up a system for purchasing groceries that was like our system for educating our nation's children. If families were assigned one grocery store where their groceries would be provided for free (having been paid for by taxes), these stores would have no incentive to offer quality items and good choices. They would always be subpar and would therefore waste public money.

The supermarket metaphor is effective because it calls on the familiar experience of easily going to the grocery store and enjoying abundant options. Indeed, the plentiful American versus the sparse Soviet supermarket became a trope for the benefits of capitalism during the 1980s and '90s, widely used to communicate the bad outcomes of centralized planning (see, for example, Williams, 1995). "Competitive markets respond to competitive choice," Boudreaux (2011) argues in the *Wall Street Journal*. If competition has improved the quality of cereal, it is bound to improve the quality of schools. This logic has dominated education policy for more than a decade.

Unfortunately, the Ohio senator and many leaders like him operate under a set of assumptions built on the economic definition of a public good that views education as only an individual experience sought to fulfill one's unique desires. These assumptions ignore that public schools are, in large part, aimed at supporting and improving social life in communities and the nation. This civic framing of school as a public good is a historic ideal, but it is in danger of fading as a commonly held value in the face of powerful, well-financed individualist views of education.

Choosing breakfast cereal: Three assumptions

To help advance the civic framework of schooling's public value, let us walk through exactly how choosing a school for a child is different from choosing a breakfast cereal, starting with our common assumptions about that purchase. In the United States, cereal is widely available for every taste, budget, and nutritional profile. When we shop for cereal, three assumptions tend to drive our choice:

Assumption 1: *Cereal is an individual preference that can be efficiently accommodated by a wide array of good options.* I can change brands and find good cereals easily, as the cost is relatively low for most consumers. Buyers select their breakfast cereal based on individual preferences, and it is not unusual for a home to have multiple cereal boxes in the cupboard to accommodate each family member's tastes.

Assumption 2: *Cereal is a choice I make for my own family.* Your family's needs or wishes shouldn't affect my choices, and I shouldn't attempt to interfere with yours. My

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choice rarely affects other people — and only indirectly. My mission, when buying my family groceries, is to provide nutrition, full stomachs, and happiness to them, and not to anyone else.

Assumption 3: *Cereal choice has almost exclusively individual, not shared, consequences.* If I eat Sugary Corn Pops every day for a decade, I will bear any effects on my body or life. If I buy overpriced granola and blow my weekly budget, my family alone will experience the consequence. Individual consequences of breakfast cereal are borne by those who make those individual choices, and not the wider society.

Unlike cereals, though, schools serve our shared civic interests, rather than just our individual desires and needs.

Shared liberties as a public good

Our capitalist marketplace provides grocery stores that carry an array of cereals fitting diverse tastes. Individuals go to the store to buy a cereal they want, take it home, and eat it for enjoyment or nutritional value. The market is designed to deliver maximum choice and quality to serve each individual's preferences. Education, on the other hand, isn't solely about an individual's experience, nor is it aimed solely at individual fulfillment. While schools do and should provide some private goods, like credentials that enable future employment, schools are also widely valued for building skills for social interaction and engaged citizenship.

The best public schools are places of interactive learning and building social relationships. To be successful, they must accommodate individual interests and differences in a way that also meets society's common needs and promotes certain shared values and principles. U.S. citizens enjoy, for example, individual liberties enshrined in our Bill of Rights, and we share an interest in preserving these individual liberties. Our rights to privacy, free assembly, or the vote are protected only when citizens recognize their shared interests in these rights and work to safeguard them in the political process. Through learning history, literature, philosophy, and more, students cultivate an appreciation for these rights and the know-how to defend them. And so public education helps create and protect shared liberties as a public good from which each individual benefits.

Choosing an educational institution for my children is a much longer-term project than choosing a breakfast cereal.

This is not to say that some private schools do not provide a sound education with regards to civic values and shared liberties. Indeed, some do so with creativity and rigor. Other private schools do not, however, because they are founded on religious or sectarian values that are not always aligned to those ideals. This variance in what a private education provides means that a fully privatized system of education will have no way to systematically and thoroughly reproduce these civic values for future generations.

A public good is generated when citizens learn to appreciate shared liberties while being elbow-to-elbow and nose-to-nose with diverse others. The intentional and

unintentional separation or exclusion of students based on social class, intellectual ability, religious affiliation, sexuality, race, or other attributes diminishes the power of a school to construct a public good of safeguarding shared liberties for all. Because private schools, by design and by practice, select students based on an array of criteria, their value in this regard is more limited than in public schools that must accept all comers. (In practice, of course, some public schools are not particularly diverse, and the de facto segregation of America's public schools by race and class tarnishes public schooling's value as a public good.)

Shared governance as a public good

Cereal is an individual affair. It is bought to be consumed by individuals, in their private residences. As a consumer, I want to purchase the cereal that satisfies the individuals in my household, without regard for the individuals in my block or city. Yet education in a society governed by democratic ideas must prepare individuals for more than the satisfaction of their individual interests.

Shared governance is the assumption that citizens in democratic societies have a legitimate stake in the running of their society and should be educated to participate in that work. Electing political leadership, engaging in public dialogue around shared problems, serving on communal boards, and volunteering for civic projects are all common aspects of shared governance. These activities involve not just making policies or decisions for our public institutions; rather, they are forms of public work that help preserve these institutions and create new innovations to address shared problems. Public work entails "self-organized efforts by a mix of people who solve common problems and create things, material or symbolic, of lasting civic value" (Boyte, 2011, p. 632–633).

Public schools both rely on and transmit the skills for shared governance and public work. Public schools depend on their communities to work well — to do everything from partnering with teachers to build educational opportunities outside the classroom, to conducting free eye exams, to sponsoring interns in workplaces, to leading parent workshops on raising teenagers, to working with students and families coping with addiction. Parents, pastors, health care professionals, business leaders, social workers, and students themselves are among the many kinds of citizens who engage in nonpaid labor that contributes to public schooling's success. Community members provide this labor not just because schools can't afford to pay for these services (although many public schools cannot), but because public schools represent the shared interests of a community. Again, this work can be and is sometimes done in private schools, but those communities tend to be more homogenous, creating fewer opportunities to work together across differences in ideology, religion, or ethnicity.

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The value of public work and shared governance is not derived from individual action alone — as it is with buying and eating cereal — but from collaborative action that reproduces a shared value: a free democratic society, governed by and for its own citizens. The economic definition of a public good tends to sideline this value.

Shared future as a public good

The experience of buying, eating, and digesting a box of cereal is ephemeral in nature and unlikely to have long-lasting effects. One's education is quite different; concentrated in the first years of one's lifetime, it is designed to affect the course of a person's entire life.

What constitutes a meaningful, productive, and flourishing life is, of course, debatable, and any public school must have some consensus on what is necessary for such a life while providing enough latitude in curriculum and policy to allow its diverse students to pursue their particular interests and talents. Many private schools, on the other hand, direct students to pursue particularist visions of a meaningful life, such as a Catholic vision of a life well lived. These visions may be suitable for some students, but public schools have an obligation to present a nonsectarian vision of a life that concerns our shared fate, as a people, across our diverse backgrounds (Ben-Porath, 2009).

Originally, in the history of public schooling, this notion of shared fate was bound up in nationalism, as in the shared future of those who were part of the same nation. Early public school advocates like Noah Webster believed that a common education, like a common language, was

required for a people to become citizens of a nation. The concept of shared fate is now considerably expanded, as our consciousness of inhabiting a shared and finite planet has grown in the last century. As important as a peaceful future is for us as members of a nation-state, our sense of shared fate now also includes the understanding that we as a nation must share essential and limited resources with those within our country and around the world.

And so a public good is created through education that prepares citizens for sharing fates together, collectively enduring unforeseen problems, crises, and challenges in large part because they wish to peacefully share neighborhoods, access to fresh water, breathable air, and so on. Public schools do not create public goods like access to clean water or air, but they can create the conditions for an educated citizenry with the knowledge and capacity for working with diverse others in negotiating our common fate together. Public school curricula and programs reflect and help us prepare for our shared fate as communities and a nation.

Beyond choice and competition

Choosing an educational institution for my children is a much longer-term project than choosing a breakfast cereal. Its social consequences can last a lifetime. What matters is not that there is a grocery aisle full of choices, but that there are some choices that help promote the economic and the civic values we care about, including protecting our democratic ideals. If my children do not understand, appreciate, and learn how to value the shared liberties built into our political system, their individual and social futures are diminished. The pleasures of Sugary Corn Pops aside, schools create public goods when they balance individual interests and preferences with the common goods of protecting our shared liberties.

Images of supermarket competition and vast choices to suit our individual preferences may be appealing. But when considering whether schools constitute a public good, applying a civic rubric enables us to see how our shared liberties, shared governance, and shared fate are essential to and can be protected by our public education system. Insofar as our public schools are under attack, taking up the task of public work and fulfilling our responsibilities to those schools requires us to respond to those attacks. We must create new metaphors for public education that enlarge our notions of a public good and highlight the many practices within schools that bear considerable social and political benefits. Working together, we can reestablish and revitalize a public education system with lasting civic value. K

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