

# Trump's Educational Reforms Threaten to Destroy American Public Schools—Is That Such a Terrible Thing?

Ironically, President Donald Trump's proposal to dramatically increase *school choice* threatens the very institution he is trying to reform: public schools. If Trump funnels millions of dollars into charter schools, school vouchers, and education savings accounts, then students currently enrolled in public schools would move to charter or private schools, resulting in massive public school closures and teacher layoffs. The result? Fewer public schools, fewer public school teachers, and more students enrolled in private and religious schools at taxpayers' expense.

But perhaps this is not so bad, right? As long as the kids and their parents are happy, what's the problem?

The problem is that this approach to educational reform chips away at American public schools, literally starving public schools of the students and funding they need to function. This raises a perplexing question: What is the purpose of public education in the United States? Stated another way, why do Americans agree to tax ourselves every year to fund public schools, regardless of whether or not we have children enrolled in these schools? What are public schools for?

Historically, Americans have answered this question in different ways, but most answers fall into one of two categories. The first emphasizes public schools as places that prepare young people for college and future employment. This is usually the answer my undergraduate students provide and it tends to be the dominant one today among both Democrats and Republicans. Even President

Barack Obama's educational policy emphasized *college and career readiness*. Indeed a formal education is required for most middle-class jobs and has been for some time. Today's college graduates earn nearly double what the average high school graduate can make. Therefore, it is no surprise that many Americans today believe that the function of public education is to provide all children with the training they need to get the best job they possibly can (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017).

However, such a narrow focus misses the larger and more essential function of public education in a democracy.

Americans did not originally establish public schools to train students for future jobs, but instead to protect and fortify our democratic way of life. The nation's founders were concerned that the voting masses would be susceptible to what they called *ambitious men* or demagogues who would seek votes by appealing to popular desires and prejudices rather than rational argument. Thomas Jefferson wrote at length about the need for "the more general diffusion of knowledge" (Jefferson, 2014, p. 20) to prevent the rise of demagogues. In 1779 he argued that the best way to prevent tyranny was to educate the citizenry so Americans would recognize and reject demagogues.

Unfortunately, support for public education did not catch on until the mid-nineteenth-century when elite white reformers insisted that American democracy faced a grave threat in the form of millions of immigrants arriving from distant, non-English, non-Protestant shores. As reformer Catharine Beecher put it in 1835,

[a]ll these ignorant native and foreign adults are now voters, and have a share in the government of the nation . . . And we must educate the nation, or be dashed in pieces, amid all the terrors of the wild fanaticism, infidel recklessness, and political strife, of an

ungoverned, ignorant, and unprincipled populace. (Beecher, 2014, p. 52)

Although Beecher's warning sounds fraught and somewhat desperate, it is clear she viewed public education as a means to secure American democracy, not prepare young people for college and career readiness.

Reformer Horace Mann put the matter more diplomatically in 1846. He wrote, "[u]nder a republican government, it seems clear that the minimum of this education can never be less than such as is sufficient to qualify each citizen for the civil and social duties he will be called to discharge" (Mann, 2014, p. 45). Mann insisted schools could prepare all children to do their duties as future parents, taxpayers, jurors, and voters.

Inspired by a peculiar combination of patriotism and xenophobia, Americans agreed to tax themselves to support public schools.

By the turn of the twentieth-century, a new generation of progressive reformers envisioned a public school system that was capable of securing what Margaret Haley eloquently called *the democratic ideal* (Haley, 2014). Philosopher John Dewey suggested that public education could give students their first taste of the wonders of the arts, sciences, and world history (Dewey, 2014). As W. E. B. Du Bois put it, "The object of education was not to make men carpenters, but to make carpenters men" (Aptheker, 1973, p. 61). As these examples illustrate, generations of American reformers have acknowledged that while it is important to educate youth for future employment, it is even more important to train them to be thoughtful and engaged citizens.

Today, it is clear we have been derelict in our duty to educate our young people for democratic citizenship. Many Americans are currently unaware of how our constitutional government works or

how freedom of religion, assembly, and the press are vital to a free society. As Jefferson forewarned, many citizens are unable to distinguish honest political candidates from those ambitious men who win votes by appealing to popular desires and prejudices rather than rational argument. For too long we have viewed public education as a springboard to the best colleges and jobs, a strategy that has narrowed the curriculum to focus on high-stakes standardized tests in reading and math. While public schools have a solemn duty to prepare students to go to college and find jobs, our national obsession with this single objective is shortsighted and perilous to the health of our democracy.

History shows us that American public schools can educate our youth for democratic citizenship as well as for college and career readiness. We have historical examples of teachers like Jonathan Kozol in Boston and Layle Layne in New York City who taught students about black history and culture even though it was considered radical when they did so in the 1960s. If you wanted to see an example of democracy in the social organization of a school, you could look at the Rough Rock Community School in Chinle, Arizona, which integrates the experiences of Navajo youth with the expertise of their parents and friends in the surrounding community. And perhaps it is impossible to envision how children will learn to get along as adults when they are so rarely today educated “in common” given our staggeringly high rates of racial and socioeconomic school segregation. To see what a more democratic school system looks like, you only have to visit the public schools in Montclair, New Jersey, which were desegregated in 1977 when school catchment zones were eliminated and a magnet system ensured that all schools represent the diversity of the surrounding community.

In closing, I would like to note that there are more than two ways to answer the question of why a democratic society requires public education. In the African American tradition, education is not

primarily for either job or citizenship training. Instead, African Americans have viewed education as a source of liberation that is inseparable from the larger black freedom struggle. To take just one example, when the abolitionist Frederick Douglass was enslaved as a child in Maryland, he had the unfortunate experience of standing in the room while his so-called “master” explained why it was dangerous to teach enslaved people to read. His master said, “if you teach that slave . . . how to read there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master” (Douglass, 2014 p. 97).

Many years later, Douglass reflected on what it was like to hear those words spoken aloud. He wrote,

[t]hose words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man’s power to enslave the black man. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. (Douglass, 2014, p. 97)

For Douglass, and for many other Americans, the pathway from slavery to freedom is education, and that education is provided through our public schools. Unlike charter or private schools, public schools are charged with fortifying American democracy. Our public school finances, curriculum, hiring, promotion, and disciplinary procedures are subject to local, state, and federal oversight to ensure that no student faces exclusion or discrimination because of his or her sex, gender identity, family income, special education needs, English language ability, or immigration status. The same

cannot be said for charter schools, private schools, or religious schools.

The more we chip away at public education in America, the more we reduce access to local, equitable, and accountable schools that educate all our community members in common. We fight for public schools not to only secure better jobs for our children, but also to safeguard our democratic way of life and liberate young minds.