



## Public schools have forgotten what makes good schools (Part 1 on 3 Jan. Part 2 on 4 Jan. 2024)

*Part one of a two-part examination of the decline of the American educational system  
By Stephen F. Gambescia*

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We are forty years from a major American education system status report warning that if we did not take serious steps to reform our schools, we would be a “nation at risk.” Since that time, teachers, school administrators, educational policy wonks, and policymakers, and even several “education presidents,” have offered major reforms that could change the direction of teaching/learning outcomes, which were falling. Entrepreneurial saviors using money to reform the system, such as Bill and Melinda Gates and foundations big and small, have had to admit to sobering results in student and overall school cultural change, especially in our public schools.

While schools are mostly run at the local level, Washington has not been idle in trying to change the direction of student achievement in American schools. George H. W. Bush gave major attention to boosting student performance with six goals for improving graduation and literacy rates; student achievement; school readiness; and the elimination of drugs and violence in schools. Bill Clinton launched a Goals 2000 initiative drawing from state and local success programs to reward schools that made “systematic reform of K-12 education.” It focused on testing reading and mathematics skills to a defined set of standards.

George W. Bush created the mantra type program “No Child Left Behind” that not only focused on student outcomes but gave major incentives for state and school district accountability. Washington policymakers have learned that no matter how enthusiastic they are in speaking about and funding federal initiatives to improve our schools, state and local authorities will go their own way in managing schools.

So, what makes a “good school?”

In their 1990 book *Politics, Markets & America's Schools* John Chubb and Terry Moe for the Brookings Institute undertook a robust look at schools across the country and concluded that the variables that make for good schools are those that support innovative school leaders, allow for a high level of parental involvement, and competition — including parental school choice. The combination of these variables called for local, generally autonomous schools, avoiding centralized control from large distant boards, state officials, and the federal government.

Their work rocked the educational establishment. They noted that progress in reversing the downward trend to student achievement was not about poor students and bad teachers, but “the system itself” was the barrier. The bureaucratic, distant, and obstinate centralized control design stymies our public schools to move out of their lack of achievement funk.

Naturally, among these seminal reports and school reform initiatives, faculty and researchers from schools of education, foundations, nonprofit institutes and centers, and think tanks offered ideas on how to improve American schools, that were clearly falling behind other nations. While there is a myriad of ideas on what to do about elementary and secondary schooling from teacher preparation to a host of pedagogical approaches, to curriculum fads, to extending school hours or eliminating summer vacation, to when to start and end the school day, and funding, the back-to-basics formula still holds merit. High-performing schools are those with outstanding leaders, challenging teachers, purposeful curriculum, high expectations of students, agreed upon values, and high parental involvement in their children's schooling.

As with the gestation of any major idea, historians will argue about who is the *founder* of the school choice movement. Depending on your definition of school choice, alluding to school choice may not be a new idea for families, but as a major education reform movement in the US it is fair to say that it began in the late 1980s. Thomas Sowell, a highly prolific writer, commentator, and educator who has worked in all three sectors, published a recent treatise on the virtues and the vices school choice attracts in *Charter Schools and Their Enemies*.

Public policies for giving parents choice to where they send their children to school has taken several measures such as having them enroll in a government sponsored charter school, giving them tax credits for sending their children to a non-government school, scholarship programs to boost support of parents sending them to private schools, having a family's tax dollars "follow the students" to whatever school they choose, and even sending them to a religious school.

Regardless of what type of student is sent to what type of school and how much money the family can use for their children's education, school choice has received major and enduring pushback from teachers' unions and a significant number of public policy makers and government officials.

Enduring arguments against any type of school choice program are:

- School choice takes money away from government-sponsored schools, some of which need more money as it stands.
- Students and their families will abandon poor performing schools.
- Giving resources to religious schools violates separation of church and state.

- School choice creates or exasperates racially and economically segregated schools.
- School choice invariably will take the “good” high performing students and caring families away from established public schools.

Policy makers understandably want to know if school choice programs, in any form, “work,” *i.e.*, are students’ academic performances any better. From the first set of reports, it has been an iterative “Yes it does; no it doesn’t” volley. Aside from the important academic performance, parents remind policymakers that their choice of school is not just academic performance. They send their children to non-government sponsored schools for other reasons such as school safety, avoiding teacher indoctrination, location of school, academic and co-curricular or extra-curricular offerings, and wanting a school that matches the norms, mores, and values of the family.

While this debate continues as either an academic, legal, or philosophical question, what is true is that parents of children who need the most help in schools, and who are in many cases minorities, want school choice.

Among the many school reform programs, approaches, initiatives, and policies at all levels (federal, state, and local), it is fair to say that at the least school choice has many elements of what education researchers say makes for good schools: local control, high student expectations, rigorous and purposeful curricula, teacher involvement, competition, and expected and welcomed parental involvement in their children’s education. The bad news is we now see that those who influence the workings of government-sponsored schools are going in the opposite direction of the elements that make for good schools.

***[This is the second half of a two-part article. Read part one of this article here.](#)***

Part two of a two-part examination of the decline of the American educational system  
By Stephen F. Gambescia

**Public schools are moving away from what makes for good schools. Here are some things they should consider.**



High expectations for students:

A growing list of actions at all levels of education in the US shows that school policymakers, administrators, and some educators counterintuitively aspire students' achievement to be even below mediocre. Under the mantra of equity, schools are implementing no-grade policies, assigning fewer challenging assignments, and dismissing summative judgments of a student's academic performance.

Universities demand fewer and fewer standard assessments of a student's high school work and have stopped requiring some type of admission exam. They defer to a student's demographics, type of high school, and from what neighborhood they come from as useful information in the admission process. Standards and high expectations in learning seem to be fading.

A long-time educator and "teacher of teachers," E. D. Hirsch, Jr, in his *magnum opus* at age 90 warned that as a country we are losing our "power of shared knowledge." The "child-centered" pedagogy coming out of our teacher training schools has it all wrong. Hirsch writes that we need purposeful, consistent, and standards-driven *content-centered learning* in elementary and secondary schools, to be successful as a nation. We need to get back to our common school, not focus on issues that will divide us.

Strong leadership that supports positive student outcomes:

Universities graduate a plethora of students with advanced degrees in educational leadership, with little variance in ideological approaches to the curriculum, from the small St. Elsewhere type colleges to research-intensive universities.

Strong school leaders that have captured the attention of the public are those that have created a teaching/learning environment that has a purpose-driven curriculum, establishes high academic standards and performance of students, demands discipline and accountability of students, gives teachers a lot of latitude in the classroom to serve students' needs, while fostering a shared vision for goals and values of the school. Additionally, the leader communicates this vision consistently and confidently to parents and is appreciative of parental involvement in their children's education.

Parental involvement in the curriculum and instruction.

During their children's remote learning given the Covid-19 home sequester, many parents were shocked to learn what was being taught to their children.

Parents began paying more attention to what was on the students' reading list, what books were in the libraries, and what co-curricular activities they were asked to attend. Concerned parents took to their advocacy rights by attending and testifying at school board meetings. They were not only not welcomed by these elected public servants, but board members called the police on parents to detain these "disruptors."

The US DOJ and FBI colluded with teacher unions and national school board leaders to surveil and research names of parents who complained about what was taught in their public schools. Often the issue was not so much the topics taught, but what was age-appropriate subject matter. DOJ and FBI officials put parents who attend school board meetings looking for accountability on their expanded "existential threat list."

Government-sponsored schools have recently demonstrated a lack of interest in parental involvement in schooling. Dissatisfaction over school board responsiveness to parental involvement in what is taught in public schools prompted the US House of Representatives to pass a Parents Bill of Rights in late March of this year.

Parental involvement in students' health and welfare.

Reaching children where they go to school is a natural place to impart health education messaging and select mental health and healthcare services. Healthy children make for healthy learning in schools. Educators, parents, and healthcare providers are in agreement that physical education and healthy diet instruction is time well spent for students in schools.

Most adults are familiar with our country's commitment to raising healthy children since the establishment of the President's Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition dating back to a 1963 initiative of President John F. Kennedy. How one cares for oneself, and by extension how parents care for their children, is a personal matter. Courts historically have given parents a lot of latitude in how they care for their children's health and welfare. Recently, parents have become concerned about what teachers are saying to students regarding health issues, but not divulging to the parents what messages they convey to the student.

Sex education has historically been controversial; but parents and schools have had open dialogue, debate, and agreement on policies related to what is taught, by whom, and at what age for school children. A significant number of educators today, with support from school administrators, have gone well beyond discussing the sexual revolution to leaving open what sex a student belongs to and encouraging them to make the change, all without parental involvement.

Decentralized school structures.

The benefits that public schools bring to a society, similar to the benefits of public health measures, make this government service a public good. A major principle of those responsible for public health and public safety is that those who are closest to the people are in the best position to nurture the people and solve the problems of the people. Consequently, much thought should be given to how much influence the morass of federal and state bureaucrats should have over our community schools.

As with most government agencies, bureaucratic bloat inhibits diffusion of innovation. Additionally, teacher unions have become an all-powerful fourth estate influencing much of what takes place in the schools in our towns. Exemplary and flagship schools are most often those that innovate despite the long reach of federal and state authority.

A spirit of community.

Horace Mann (1796-1859) is considered the founder of today's public-school movement, via a common school philosophy. That philosophy meant teaching what knowledge is worth knowing and what values and virtues are most important to impart to young impressionable children — all to make for a better and productive citizen of the republic. As an Enlightenment thinker, he saw the outcome of education as children developing a scientific citizenship, learning a

common language of speaking and writing, and appreciating the value of a common culture. Citizens should be literate and develop habits of industry, not just for their own good or the good of the family, but for the common good.

As America matured and became a melting pot, economic, socio-cultural, and political participation success followed. Not long ago, schools held banners in the gym and school hallways espousing shared values such as truth, respect, honesty, and integrity. In just a short time since, the focus has been ostensibly on diversity, equity, and inclusion in an effort to gain benefits from any “otherness,” but in practice it has created a culture of self-loathing, victimhood, and segregation, void of any gratitude.

Play fair and by the rules.

Students are being exposed to team, and at some point, competitive, sport at younger and younger ages. They will hear a host of adages to play by, such as play fair, obey the rules, don’t argue with the referee, don’t be a poor sport, have fun, and it is not whether you win or lose but how you play the game that matters. Girls and women’s sports at all levels have advanced in many ways.

Surprisingly, boys in scholastic and collegiate sports have encroached on girls’ and women’s competitions, as school administrators and league officials have looked the other way. Having girls and boys compete together in sporting events certainly should be considered; however, events that have clear rules on who is eligible to compete should be respected as a matter of fair play.

Rules for who competes against whom by sponsoring schools and clubs are well beyond girls’ leagues or boys’ leagues. Wrestling has participants compete in weight classes, as does pee wee football, and boxing. Golf tournaments have golfers register their handicap. Road races seed runners at the start of a race according to their demonstrated finish times; jumping the queue of a seed in road races is poor form. Schools have deviated from their historical message to students to “play by the rules.”

Conclusion

We are decades from a major report on the future of education in the U.S., a report that says if we don’t reform the basic three elements of any education — 1) What do students need to know? 2) How to teach it? and 3) How do the students know what was taught? — then we are a nation at risk.



Since that time, stakeholders have not been at a loss to create initiatives that improve public education in the US. In fact, a common set of characteristics that make for good schools has been identified as those that: 1) support innovative school leaders; 2) give latitude to and reward excellent teachers; 3) provide a purposeful-driven curriculum that aims to educate good citizens; 4) sets high standards for students and accountability for their performance and behavior; 5) expects a high-level of parental involvement; and 6) allows for competition, including school choice.

Surprisingly, many public schools in recent years have been running counter to the characteristics of good schools. They have successfully eliminated anything related to *pro deo et patria*. A founding goal of public education is to foster good citizenship and civility. The search for *veritas* is fading for many schools today. Public school leaders seem to devote more time to choosing sides in the enduring socio-cultural and political wars in our country, as student academic performance in other countries surpasses that of the students in the US.

The nation's risk is not from an outside invader, but from influencers from within, who have an aversion today to truth, justice, and the American way.

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