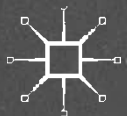


*No One Way to School*  
Pluralism and American  
Public Education

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# Pluralism and American Public Education

No One Way to School

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Ashley Rogers Berner  
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*For Abby and Hope*

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## Introduction

It is no secret that American education leaves many students behind intellectually, civically, and morally. Educational leaders disagree about *why* this is so. I argue in this book that much of the fault lies with two wrong turns that should be reversed: first, the nineteenth-century political decision to favor a uniform structure over a plural one; second, the early twentieth-century abandonment of a traditional, academic curriculum. We have been paying for these mistakes ever since. This book examines those mistakes in context and suggests a way to fix them.

The last 20 years have seen impressive movement in the right direction. Nevertheless, for most families, the structure of public education remains largely unchanged: the majority of American children still attend geographically determined, state-run schools. State-sponsored uniformity is problematic, not merely for the role it plays in lackluster educational results, but also for its incongruity with American principles of freedom.

Our students will continue to languish until we address the foundational problems that limit their future: a political arrangement that privileges the state above civil society, and a persistently entrenched pedagogy that unintentionally reinforces class divisions and disadvantages the neediest children.

Our state-operated system is held in place by three longstanding but mistaken beliefs: first, that only state schools can create good citizens; second, that only state schools can offer equal opportunities to all children; third, that any other arrangement is constitutionally suspect.

The evidence contradicts each of these claims. On citizenship: longstanding research suggests that private schools, particularly Catholic ones, often provide better civic preparation than public schools. On equity: non-public schools, and religious ones in particular, have met with success in closing the academic achievement gap. On constitutionality: in *Zelman v Simmons-Harris* (2002), the Supreme Court held that if funding for religious schools is the result of parental choice and not state action, it does not violate the US Constitution.

State laws and constitutions vary considerably, but many states have been able to enact tax credit or voucher programs that pass legal muster and support a more diverse array of educational options.

America's restrictive public education system stands in sharp contrast to the educational pluralism that other democratic nations take for granted. Most democracies have adopted what Charles Glenn calls a "civil-society" approach to education, not a "state control" one.<sup>1</sup> These countries assume that families should determine the atmosphere in which their children are educated, even while the government funds and regulates each school. For example, the Netherlands supports 35 different types of schools on equal footing; England, Belgium, Sweden, and most of the provinces of Canada also provide mechanisms for parental choice. The United States is the outlier among its democratic peers in financially supporting only state-operated schools.

These contrasts and this body of research are familiar to scholars who work in educational history, comparative education, and constitutional law. Many Americans, however, are unaware that other democracies fund religious schools and suspect that "the separation of church and state" would make such arrangements impossible here. Americans often associate traditional public schools with democratic citizenship, private schools with privilege. Few Americans know the story of our former pluralistic school systems and the religious prejudice that made them go away. I wrote this book to tell that story. *No One Way* represents less a new contribution than a translation. I hope it generates new conversations in boardrooms and school board meetings, around dining room tables, and on talk radio shows.

The problems of our public education system are not merely theoretical but urgent and material. A major restructuring of K-12 education is imminent, as the bills begin to come due on the massive municipal and state unfunded pension liabilities. Public education as it is currently structured is unsustainable. Now is the time to develop a new model that keeps faith with our democratic ideals, improves academic and civic outcomes, and uses financial resources responsibly.

Ultimately, the strongest argument for changing our definition of public schooling is neither financial nor academic, but rather philosophical: supporting diverse school types comports with American principles, with the American experience in every other field of public life, and indeed with our stated desire for educational equity and excellence. I will make this case more explicitly in chapters to come.

## WHAT HAPPENED?

Our school system took its current form because of unfortunate political decisions that were made 150 years ago. My background is in history. One of the tasks of historians is imagining ourselves in a different time and place and, with as much compassion as possible, trying to understand why real people acted as they did, even if we ultimately criticize their decisions.

This task is difficult, not least because of the inescapable nature of culture, the taken-for-granted backdrop to our individual experiences and social encounters. Speaking in sociological terms, culture consists of the ideas and institutions in which we operate, the sea in which we swim. Cultures change, of course; a groundbreaking technology or powerful idea, translated into new systems and vocabularies, can alter the texture of our lives. But once the innovation becomes established, we cease to attend to it. In this sense, culture is both liberating and limiting: it liberates us from perpetual deliberation but limits our sense of what is possible.

An example: ask yourself how long it takes to get from New York to Boston. Three or four hours, right? Yes, if you live in the modern era of planes, trains, and automobiles—but not if you are traveling on foot or horseback. Or when was the last time you heard a vigorous argument for an American monarchy? Probably never. We no longer believe in the divine right of kings or use horses to transport ourselves, and our conceptual universe has adjusted accordingly. Constitutional democracy and automobiles are part of the texture of our lives, and we pay them no particular notice. We forget, of course, that neither was inevitable. Things could have developed quite differently.

In a similar way, our imaginations have adjusted to the current educational model, and we have forgotten how it evolved. It seems inevitable when in fact it is historically contingent. But to see this clearly, and to envision a different future, requires imagination and perspective, the twofold process of zooming in to examine core principles and then panning back to look at how other societies have addressed the same issues. That is what this book intends to do.

## WHAT NOW?

This is what I mean by educational pluralism: changing the structure of public education so that state governments fund and hold accountable a wide variety of schools, including religious ones, but do not necessarily operate them. Such educational pluralism provides a better way to train an increasingly diverse generation of young people in the habits of academic excellence, moral clarity, and democratic citizenship. Educational pluralism offers a *different way of doing public education* by accommodating both individual belief and the common good. And it suggests a way out of the winner-takes-all mentality that characterizes so many educational debates today. Within this new framework, we must also continue to raise academic expectations by embracing a content-rich, subject-oriented liberal arts curriculum. Initiatives such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are a necessary but insufficient step in this direction.

This book focuses more on the structure of education than on the content, mostly because the latter has been so well addressed by others. Diane Ravitch and E.D. Hirsch come to mind, but many scholars have demonstrated the benefits of a traditional curriculum for closing the achievement gap. Chapters 2 and 6 do touch on pedagogy, insofar as it pertains to educational philosophy and the limitations of a plural structure.

## WHY NOW?

The case for educational pluralism would have been impossible to make even 20 years ago. It is possible now only because some districts and states are correcting both wrong turns, despite political obstacles and persistent cultural reflexes.

Recent reforms have changed the landscape, particularly in big cities. Accountability structures, tougher standards, online education, charter schools, vouchers, and tax credits, have changed the educational experience of hundreds of thousands of children and their families. This makes it possible to contemplate rewriting the rules all the way down. In sociological terms, the plausibility structure has changed: what was inconceivable 30 years ago is now conceivable, because we have seen, experienced, and studied it. The challenge lies in arguing, against vested interests and against our cultural imaginations, that what families in some urban charter schools experience should be the norm across the country and, moreover, should be expanded to include religious and pedagogically distinctive schools as well.

The knowledge basis of a strong education presents a different challenge. The liberal arts curriculum (a rich and chronological engagement with literature, history, political philosophy, advanced math and science, plus fluency in at least one foreign language) was dismantled over a hundred years ago. The chief consequence is a particular dilemma for those who would deepen the academic content of K-12 education: the number of Americans who have experienced the liberal arts ideal is now quite small. This means that, in contrast to their counterparts in Finland or Singapore, far too few American adults ever master that depth of learning, or even understand what they are missing.

In the cases of both structure and content, the cultural force of habit is strong. It is not unprecedented, even in our young country, to challenge entire institutions and the attitudes that sustain them: slavery is the most profound example, but not the only one. It is my hope that, in clarifying and then questioning our system's historical and philosophical foundations, this book will provide a grammar for change.

## WHAT I AM NOT ARGUING

I am not proposing a libertarian, market-based approach to education. This is popular in some quarters and is compelling to some; see Terry Moe and John Chubb's classic book on bureaucracy or James Tooley's work on low-cost but high-achieving private education in developing nations.<sup>2</sup> Nor am I arguing for the "privatization of education," a term regularly used to describe (and decry) vouchers and tax credits. Educational pluralism does not mean casting common purpose to the wind; it does not mean leaving all decisions in the hands of individual parents or businesses. Rather, educational pluralism represents a middle path: it accepts that the education of the young is a community concern in which all of us have an interest—hence the government regulation and

oversight—but also that, because education entails moral commitment (see Chap. 2), it should honor the beliefs of the nation’s families (up to a point, of course). Because the “school choice” movement has an inevitably libertarian association, I avoid that term.

Second, I am not arguing that educational pluralism will, of itself, solve the spectrum of problems that plague our system; it cannot. Put differently, accommodation is not enough; it is necessary but not sufficient for educational excellence. A plural structure makes space for the best of what education can and should be. That space, however, must be carefully tended and wisely used (see Chap. 6).

Finally, I cannot claim that educational pluralism does not generate new problems, because, of course, it does. We will look at some of those problems throughout the book.

## THE BOOK

The book begins with educational theory and ends with practice. Chapter 2 discusses the three primary questions that schooling inevitably answers (intentionally or not): What is the nature of the child? What is the purpose of education? What is the role of the teacher? In answering these questions, educational philosophies draw upon deeper commitments and assumptions about human beings and what a life well lived looks like. The chapter then describes ways these questions are answered in different school contexts. I will argue that different approaches to education have deep significance, and that it is inappropriate (and intellectually dishonest) to enforce a uniform design.

Chapter 3 explores the dilemma of managing diverse beliefs within liberal democracies. I examine theoretical contrasts that play out in democratic societies through various angles: between pluralism and secularism, republican and liberal secularism, and what citizenship requires of our schools. I argue that a plural educational system rests upon a more democratic view of the relationship between the individual, the state, and society.

The next two chapters address Americans’ visceral objections to educational pluralism. Chapter 4 disputes the commonly held “separation of church and state” argument and sets out the nuanced trajectory of Supreme Court decisions. The chapter examines the historical context in which our country adapted a uniform public school system and in which states enacted constitutional amendments that shut down plural funding. Chapter 5 challenges the belief that non-public schools undermine democratic citizenship and fail to narrow the academic achievement gap. This chapter examines existing research on citizenship formation and academic outcomes, addresses concerns about public accountability, and concludes that, within certain constraints, plural institutions are more responsive to the public, not less.

Chapter 6 talks about what educational pluralism *cannot* do: of itself, it cannot automatically create strong academic outcomes, nor close the achievement gap, nor maintain the integrity of distinctive school cultures. This chapter

explores academic content and educational distinctiveness, with a dual focus upon how other democracies negotiate core curricula and examinations (and to what effect), and how other nations' intentional schools maintain (or fail to maintain) a unique mission and atmosphere. This chapter also sets out a theory of appropriate limits to educational freedoms, as well as some of the thornier issues that will pertain, including creationism versus evolution and the way that schools respond to LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual) lifestyles.

Chapter 7 provides examples of major changes in educational philosophies (England's educational psychology) and structures (Canada, Finland), and locates them within the Collins/Hunter/Smith theory of social change. The chapter then summarizes the argument and outlines how a new structure might develop, and what the barriers to change might be. The book concludes on an optimistic note: American education is already moving toward what other countries consider normative, and, with a political theory that affirms the importance of educational freedom and a vocabulary that honors both individual belief and the common good, structural change is very much possible for the first time in well over a hundred years.

A few caveats. While I have taught in a variety of contexts, I have never made education policy. My academic background is in modern history, specifically the history of modern social movements and what makes them successful—or not—in changing the world. Thus, my arguments in this book fly at 30,000 feet above the political realities that influence education in Memphis, San Diego, or Washington, D.C. My colleagues on the front lines of policy-making understand the difficulties of forging change in ways that I do not. My purpose is not to set out a coherent strategy by which to implement educational pluralism but, rather, to challenge the framework in which education policy is made in the first place.

Second, although I refer to research that suggests an empirical advantage to distinctive schools and plural systems, I am not, in the end, arguing for the superiority of every school of choice and every plural system. There are simply too many factors that influence educational outcomes—from student demographics to teacher preparation and school funding—to make that claim. My argument to an American audience is more modest and straightforward: we should stop sentimentalizing the traditional public school and open ourselves up to a different way of doing public education. There is nothing to fear and much to gain from doing so.

## NOTES

1. Charles L. Glenn, *Contrasting Models of State and School: A Comparative Historical Study of Parental Choice and State Control*, 1st ed. (Continuum, 2011).
2. John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets & America's Schools* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1990), James Tooley, *The Beautiful Tree: A Personal Journey Into How the World's Poorest People Are Educating Themselves*, 1st ed. (Cato Institute, 2009).

## Educational Philosophies and Why They Matter

Education initiates and indoctrinates children into a particular view of the world and of their place in it. As Charles Glenn wrote in *The Myth of the Common School* (1988), “Formal education ... presents pictures or maps of reality that reflect, unavoidably, particular choices about what is certain and what in question, what is significant and what unworthy of notice. No aspect of schooling can be truly neutral.”<sup>1</sup>

### IN WHAT SENSE?

The school’s atmosphere and priorities, its traditions, the management of student discipline, the curriculum and how it is taught, the way adults relate to one another—all of these guide students’ experience with the world. High-poverty schools that set high academic standards are teaching children that they are intellectually capable and that they have a wide-open future. Schools in which teachers and administrators are in and out of one another’s classrooms, critiquing and challenging one another to improve, persuade children that lifelong learning is not only possible but also desirable and that excellence is something to be taken seriously. Middle schools that insist upon foreign-language fluency are informing students that the world outside their home is worthy of attention. Independent schools that let the children of major donors get away with cheating are persuading students that integrity can be sacrificed for financial gain. Religious high schools that encourage classroom debate teach students that curiosity, attentiveness, and disagreement are important aspects of the moral life; those that condemn “the wrong answer” teach students to hide from doubt. Public schools that eschew conversations about religion are teaching students that the search for God is either unimportant or too private to discuss publicly. School systems that enable a variety of beliefs and pedagogies, such as those in the Netherlands, Sweden, or many Canadian provinces, inform students that deep differences can be honored in civil society. In short, every aspect of formal education is potentially instructive about the human person,



the good society, the nature of authority, and the purpose of life itself.<sup>2</sup> This is true, whether or not it is intended; indoctrination can be explicit or tacit.<sup>3</sup>

Schooling is not the only formative domain in modern society; family, region, socioeconomic class, and media engagement—to name a few—also play a role. But schooling counts for a lot. As one English educator remarked, “Education is the only universal activity in British society, along with shopping and watching television. Education occupies at least 11 full-time years—for many people, with nursery and university, 16 years.”<sup>4</sup> This places the USA, as a country, in an uncomfortable position. Instead of examining the distinctions between educational philosophies, we enforce a public school system without routinely examining the truth claims that it makes and how these claims clash or comport with other truths we may hold dear. We have habituated ourselves against seeing schools for the meaning-making institutions that they are.<sup>5</sup> Making the case that education is morally rich and educational philosophies diverse and important is the purpose of this chapter.

### *What Are Educational Philosophies?*

Educational philosophies answer the questions of *how we should educate the child and why*. These questions do not stand on their own, however. They automatically engage deeper understandings of human nature, the meaning of human life, the source of authority, moral responsibility, and the just society. In fact, it is impossible to say almost anything about what we want our schools to *do*—for example to make good citizens or to create a pathway to prosperity or to enable socio-emotional health—without immediately asking deeper questions about what a civically responsible person looks like and why political community is important, whether capitalism is just, or whose notion of socio-emotional health we should trust.

The structure of America’s public school system makes such interrogations difficult. Why is that? Some 87 % of American K–12 students attend traditional public schools,<sup>6</sup> and for the vast majority, this means the zoned neighborhood school.<sup>7</sup> Of the rest, 4 % attend charter and 9 % private schools.<sup>8</sup> These numbers obscure the amount of switching between schools that goes on, since an increasing number of districts permit intra-district choice, and since parents who have the means can move their families to “better” school districts.<sup>9</sup> Parents want to exercise choices about their children’s education and do so when given the opportunity,<sup>10</sup> but their criteria usually revolve around school safety and attendance first, academic attainment second.<sup>11</sup> Most American parents have neither the luxury nor the opportunity to explore philosophical criteria such as:

- What kind of person does this school aim to encourage and why?
- What values will my child be taught along with the mathematics table and world literature?

- How does this school make sense of success and failure?
- Am I comfortable with the school's rationale for patriotism or its framework for human sexuality?

Unlike their European counterparts, American families have become habituated not to ask.

Educational philosophies, however, are hiding in plain view. State constitutions, school district budgets, and the Supreme Court's rulings on education engage with normative (i.e., morally prescriptive) claims about human life and the just community. In *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925), for example, the Court overturned an Oregon statute that required all parents to send their children to public schools under penalty of law. Aimed at outlawing Catholic education, the Oregon statute drew upon deeper beliefs about the superior "fit" of Protestantism with democratic life.<sup>12</sup> When the Supreme Court overturned Oregon's law, it did so not only on instrumental terms but also on philosophical ones: "The child is not the mere creature of the State; those who nurture him and direct his destiny have the right, coupled with the high duty, to recognize and prepare him for additional obligations."<sup>13</sup> In a later case, the Court supported the right of Jehovah's Witnesses *not* to perform the Pledge of Allegiance in schools, in equally strong language: "Freedom to differ is not limited to things that do not matter much. That would be a mere shadow of freedom. The test of its substance is the right to differ as to things that touch the heart of the existing order."<sup>14</sup> When the Court limited the purview of the government in *Pierce* and *Barnette*, it also asserted particular things about human beings and the good society: that our loyalties are complex, not monistic; that we can and do hold distinctive and even opposing views about ultimate reality; that democratic life requires us to honor these differences in practice as well as in theory.

The American conflict over school segregation also brought educational philosophies into relief. In the early twentieth century, fully half of the American states either required or permitted "separate but equal" schools for black and white children. These laws in turn reflected deeper beliefs about racial differences and the inherent superiority of whites. For instance, in 1879 the Kansas legislature allowed towns and cities to "organize and maintain separate schools for the education of its white and colored children, except for the high schools...."<sup>15</sup> Separate schools remained the norm when, in 1948, Topeka's Superintendent of Negro Schools claimed that, "Negroes are not ready for equality."<sup>16</sup> Such laws and comments are shot through with assumptions about racial capacities. When the Supreme Court overturned these laws (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954), it did so on philosophical grounds:

To separate them from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.

Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law, for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the Negro group ... Any language in contrary to this finding is rejected. We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.<sup>17</sup>

The battle over school integration was, first and foremost, a philosophical one that highlighted opposing views about the significance of race upon the value of human beings and their standing before the law.

Educational philosophies are also evident in school mission statements and policies, and when we look closely, we see that they differ. The website of a Muslim school in California, for instance, states: "The mission of Granada Islamic School is to provide quality academic and Islamic education in a community that nurtures a strong Muslim identity, fosters brotherhood, and strengthens moral character."<sup>18</sup> This mission statement conveys the Muslim belief in the unity of the human person and the inseparability of spiritual, intellectual, and community life. A parent looking at the school would expect to find, at a minimum, teachers who are religiously observant, instruction on the tenets and sacred texts of Islam, and an approach to learning that values faithfulness above ability. She would not expect to find a libertarian approach to sexuality or a winner-takes-all attitude about school sports.

PS 8, a magnet middle school in Brooklyn, also emphasizes the values it seeks to promote: "PS 8 is a learning community dedicated to creativity, academic excellence and intellectual curiosity, with the aim of developing life-long learners and engaged citizens. We are committed to the intellectual, artistic, moral, emotional, social and physical development of each child."<sup>19</sup> A visitor might expect to see a tight-knit community, lots of hands-on learning, a project-based curriculum, and teachers who care about children's social and emotional needs. The spiritual or religious needs of the children are neither mentioned nor, one expects, explored in the classroom. Unlike Granada Islamic School, PS 8 rests upon a secular foundation.

Boston's Pacific Rim Charter School offers still another ethos, drawn from very different philosophical reserves: "Our mission is to empower urban students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds to achieve their full intellectual and social potential by combining the best of the East—high standards, discipline and character education—with the best of the West—a commitment to individualism, creativity and diversity."<sup>20</sup> Pacific Rim has selected the values from both East and West that it wants to nurture; its public ceremonies, curricular offerings, and articulated vision reinforce both individual responsibility and commitment to community.<sup>21</sup>

These three schools are distinct from one another. In contrast to PS 8, Pacific Rim articulates the rationale behind the virtues it wants to enjoin; in contrast to Granada Islamic School, Pacific Rim welcomes—and affirms—

diverse viewpoints among its students and faculty. The extent to which any school fulfills its mission is a separate question. The point is that ideals differ.

Educational philosophies are also present in classroom routines. David T. Hansen's elegant piece, "From Role to Person: The Moral Layeredness of Classroom Teaching," explores the philosophical dimensions of how a teacher manages her students' turn-taking. The management of turn-taking is "moral" in the sense of *mores*, the Latin term for "custom," or "an encompassing customary way of regarding roles and their occupants," he writes. This "usually implicit, often invisible moral order" establishes the teacher's authority, his relationship with the students, and theirs with one another.<sup>22</sup> Such practices are "moral" in another sense: They reflect the teacher's personal qualities, regard for individual students, and reason for being in the classroom in the first place.<sup>23</sup> Whom the teacher calls on, how she corrects students who talk out of turn, and how attentive she is to the varying needs of individual students influence how her students experience the classroom and themselves. For example, Ms. Smythe is "alert" to a sixth grade girl who was not called on in a given class, "acknowledge[ing] publicly her hopes and expectations, even if she cannot, in the name of fairness, cede her the floor immediately." In *seeing* this student, writes Hansen, Ms. Smythe not only honors the individual student but also helps all of them "recognize ways in which their personal conduct and their opportunities for learning are bound up with one another."<sup>24</sup> Likewise, Father Maran's response to a student's snapping his fingers for attention not only instructed the student in considerate behavior but also illuminated Father Maran's sense of dignity and self-worth:

During one of Father Maran's eleventh-grade math lessons a student eager to be called upon snapped his fingers loudly as he waved his hand. Father Maran cut his behavior short: "Uh-uh!" he declared while shaking his head, "Father Maran the teacher' is here today, not 'Father Maran the puppy.' I don't respond to that." As classmates grinned and chortled, the rebuked student spontaneously straightened himself and raised his hand again, at which point the teacher nodded permission to speak.<sup>25</sup>

Hansen calls such interactions "moral threads," because they "illuminate ways in which feelings about rights and obligations lie just beneath the surface of the behavior."<sup>26</sup> Hansen writes elsewhere that, "Many classroom exchanges typically discussed in instrumental terms can be perceived as symbolically important."<sup>27</sup> Based upon years of classroom observations, he argues that, "It is impossible to teach a subject in a classroom without also teaching, or at least inviting, dispositions toward that subject and toward one's fellow human beings."<sup>28</sup>

Sociologists sometimes call the tacit moral messages of the classroom "the hidden curriculum," or the "routine, embedded practices of classroom life that shape children's orientations in ways that are consistent with the demands of adult life." This curriculum "directs students' attention through invisible