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## AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOL IDEOLOGIES: A NEED FOR REFORM?

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Historically, American education has been based on the democratic ideologies that education will provide equality of opportunity and enhance economic benefits. However, public education has not been very successful in achieving these goals. Because of this, disillusionment has grown and alternatives to monopoly public education, such as vouchers and tax credit plans, have been offered. Criticism and analyses directed toward these new options for public schooling are discussed. Effects they could have on public education, expected and unexpected, are addressed. It appears that public education is at a critical discussion point in its ideological history. Some of the choices facing American education today are presented.

...Education is not only a moral renovator and a multiplier of intellectual power, but ...also the most prolific parent of material riches ...It is not only the most honest and honorable, but the surest means of amassing property.

Horace Mann  
*Fifth Annual Report of  
the Secretary of State  
Board of Education,  
1842*

Following compulsory attendance laws which made the schooled audience captive, it became necessary for a variety of social groups to compete to see those world view and values would be adopted (Arons, 1983; Everhart, 1982; Tyack, 1974). As majoritarian ideologies took hold, public education policy was transformed into a battleground with immigrant and ethnic groups, social reformers, and class interests struggling to have their sets of values legitimized by the schools. Most historians agree that many of the struggles over schooling have been, and

continue to be, attempts to gain control of the socialization process and values transmitted in the public schools (Arons, 1983; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Tyack, 1974).

The support given the school system has never been free of class and class-related values. The content of public education that benefits from political and financial backing of a pluralistic society understandably reflects the ideologies of the groups of which this pluralism is composed (Berg, 1970; Reller and Morphet, 1962). Class politics have been seen as the basis for both our commitment to specific ideologies in education and the disparities among components of the educational system. The effects of pluralistic ideological struggles can be seen today in the attention given to alternative forms to public schooling (Everhart, 1982). Many report that public schooling, which was designed on the One Best System model (Tyack, 1974) by centralizers around the turn of the twentieth century, is losing its effectiveness.

Originally public education was viewed

as the most humane form of social control, and safest method of social renewal (Tyack, 1974). To achieve these goals the school took on the "melting pot" mission to make all children alike through efficient schooling (Everhart, 1982). The philosophy of the common school was to mix all kinds of children under the unifying roof of one public school system (Tyack, 1974). The schools were to serve as unifiers of pluralistic belief systems. The majoritarian belief system that "controlled" the schools was explicit. Tyack (1974) describes it this way: "It was the mission of schools to imbue children of the immigrants and the poor with uniformly WASP ideals (p. 35)."

The One Best System was established with the belief that education would allow all citizens, regardless of background, race or creed, to have access, or opportunity, to a "quality life." This paper will consider two of the fundamental ideologies of the One Best System: Education should provide equality of opportunity (Tyack, 1974), and education should be tied to economic benefits (Tyack, 1974).

This paper will attempt to demonstrate that public education has not been very successful at either of these aims. Consequently, disillusionment has grown and alternatives to monopoly public education, such as voucher and tax credit plans, are being offered. Criticisms and analysis directed toward these new options will be discussed. Effects they could have on public education, expected and unexpected, will be presented. Finally, a discussion of some of the choices facing public education today will be outlined. It seems evident that public education is at a critical decision point in its ideological history.

### *I. An Unequal Society*

Historically Americans have held a romantic belief that education should provide equality of opportunity. Several definitions

of this elusive term have served educators through the years: providing equal treatment for all, allowing all to be equally capable of benefiting, providing schooling experiences equally appropriate for each student, and providing equal opportunity for social mobility. Americans believed that schools were the most logical institutions to "rectify" social ills of poverty and racism (Tyack, 1974). The democratic dream of the equalizing powers of education resisted change until the efficacy studies of the 1960's and 1970's were completed giving Americans a realistic portrayal of their success rate (Coleman, 1966; Jencks, 1972; 1978). The results of these reports will be briefly described.

#### *A. Education and Class*

Despite a rapid increase in the average level of schooling in the labor force, income distribution in the United States has not changed significantly since 1944 (Carvoy, 1974). Schools have acted as agents in the economic and cultural reproduction of an unequal society (Apple, 1982b; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Everhart, 1979). In the schooling process people are "taught" where they belong socially and economically.

There is no escaping the reality that in the United States the political and social influences of an individual are bound to economic opportunity. Jencks' work (1979) documents that economic payoffs from schooling are twice as great for individuals who are aligned with an advantaged class. Finishing high school, in the Black population, does not bring significant economic benefits (Jencks, 1979). Thus, even if we could alter the schools to equalize achievement, the evidence suggests that this may not make a significant difference in equality of opportunity.

Berg (1970) argues that educational credentials have become the new property of an unequal society. Credentials are used to

transmit a set of values concerning degrees and diplomas which reinforce formidable class barriers and maintain class distinctions. The requirement of credentials effectively consigns a larger number of people, especially young people, to the social limbo of the peripheral labor market.

Originally the One Best System envisioned that public education could change the many into one people, minimizing class differentiations (Tyack, 1974). Because variables beyond the immediate controls of public education such as family background (Coleman, 1966) have a high predictability of the actual opportunity offered by education, American schools have not been able to diffuse class divisions and provide sufficient opportunities for social mobility.

#### *B. Education and Jobs*

The disappointing results of the War on Poverty and the continuation of discrimination have left an impact on many educational critics. Bowles and Gintis (1976) in their book, *Schooling in Capitalist American*, state it this way: "Record of educational reform on the poverty issue has been short of catastrophic (p. 35)." A Rand study commissioned to assess the efficacy of compensatory educational programs concluded that the results demonstrated no benefits on the average (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Coleman's (1966) significant report suggested that educational resources or quality had virtually no relevance as determinants of educational outcomes.

The American conviction that schooling would lead to jobs for all, irrespective of background, has been undermined. The initial assumption was that due to the great discrepancy in student performances which tended to fall along racial and class lines, the establishment of specifically designed compensatory programs could eliminate the performance variability. The belief was that once student performances were regulated, all students could compete for equal

work and institutionalized inequalities would be eliminated. However, the results from those special programs were far from satisfying. In fact, Bowles and Gintis (1976) stated that the direct transfer of income to the poor would have accomplished considerably more equilibrium than the compensatory educational programs achieved.

The distribution of schooling years has improved over time, but the children of fathers who have less than a high school diploma still find themselves disadvantaged in the job market (Carvoy, 1974). The egalitarian ideal of a direct link between schooling and work has been empirically found to be invalid (Jencks, 1972). Because of this evidence, this ideological underpinning of the One Best System has received enormous attention in the past decade.

#### *II. Alternative to Public Schooling*

The criticisms directed toward schools in the last two decades have made educators more sensitive to the role schools play in reproducing a stratified social order that remains strikingly unequal by class, gender and race (Apple, 1982a). However, this attention has caused most to see schools as the issue, instead as just one part of a larger framework of social relations that are structurally exploitive (Apple, 1982a).

A growing position seems to be that the public schools had a chance to operationalize the American democratic ideals and were unable to accomplish them. Reformers indicate that a new model of public education is needed. They suggest that since the One Best System was not able to actualize these goals, the individual citizen should be given the means to control personal educational decisions. However, alternative plans to public schooling must be examined closely to assess if they actually offer an improved design. The voucher and tax credit plans will be discussed.

### *A. Prospects for Education Vouchers*

Educational vouchers have been defined as a means of supplying public funds in educating a child to the private or public school of the family's choosing (West, 1982). The vouchers would allow people to choose schools that may not be as "overpowerful, large, unimaginative and grossly inefficient (West, 1982, p. 383)" as public schools have been described. West (1982) maintains that vouchers have not been well received due to their conflict with the economic self-interests of the educational bureaucracy.

Supporters of vouchers hope that vouchers could lead to reorganization of instruction by getting people involved in the day to day planning and operation of instruction. Erickson (1982) found this active participation to be an important ingredient in private schooling success. The voucher plan would allow families currently excluded from private schools to attend and gain additional control over their child's school experience.

Those critical of the voucher plan argue that the voucher plan will fragment schools and teachers (Apple, 1982a). Others state that vouchers are simply Utopian ideas that probably will not be able to outweigh differences in schools and unequal benefits. Control by an individualistic market, which vouchers would encourage, could make exertion of power of school systems even more difficult (Apple, 1982a). It appears that disillusionment with the present One Best System has grown so deep that some critics are contending that nearly any alternative system might be an improvement.

### *B. Prospects for Educational Tax Credits*

Tax credits would mean a reduction of the tax liability of individuals who elect to send their children to non-public schools (Freeman, 1982). Some fear that such a

system would unleash the diversity that a pluralistic society tries to control through a centralized school system. Four decades after Holland adopted a similar program, enrollment in public schools declined from 75% to 20%, with only Protestant and Catholic systems expanding (Everhart, 1982). Any proposal that brings more equitable funding to private schooling raises suspicions, and directly confronts the One Best System's mission of the "unifier," the "melting pot."

Supporters indicate that tax credits were designed to allow schools to respond more adequately to a structural crisis. With a crisis in the economy and in many of the state's institutions the state begins to lose legitimacy. Extending "freedom of individual choice" to the selection and organization of schools might be seen positively by members of a particular class and racial group (Apple, 1982a). Contrary to common belief, in general private schools have outperformed the public schools on economic and racial integration (Vitulo-Martin, 1982). The hope is that the plan would produce different results and benefits. At least with a new selection of educational options there is the hope of trying to recreate some of the original American educational ideologies.

Nonetheless, tax credits may merely extend an unequal system. Arons (1983) reports that a family with an income of \$20,000 per year would owe less than \$400 in state taxes. Working class and poor families would have the benefit not of \$1,200 per child as has been suggested but as little as \$200 per child. A family of 4 would therefore be at a continuous disadvantage in the attempt to purchase education suitable to its own values. Like the existing educational system, the individuals who have traditionally been kept from exercising educational choice by the economic structure of schools would end up with even

less determination over their childrens' education than they now have (Arons, 1983). Parents who have minor influence by voting about public-school policy now would find with the proposed tax credit plan, they would have no influence whatsoever (Arons, 1983). Additionally, the present tax credit plans provide no definition of what constitutes racial discrimination nor include the statement that racial equality in all phases of schooling was critical (Arons, 1983).

Although hopefuls contend that alternatives to the One Best System will open schools up to greater responsiveness to societal goals and reinforce the basic pluralistic nature of the American culture, the actual impact of nearly all state policies has shown a reliable pattern in which the top 20 percent of the population consistently benefit more than the bottom 80 percent (Navarro, 1976). The same individuals who consistently miss out on the benefits of education and social mobility, and education and work, in the present educational organization could inadvertently find themselves in new structures perpetuating the same inequalities.

#### *IV. Public Education in the 1980's*

All reform is dependent on the balance of forces within the specific arena (Apple, 1982a; 1982b). Analysis of all variables, and the impact of all unintended consequences of educational change, is essential for appropriate evaluation of any reform. The world of educational change is to be found largely in the political forum (Everhart, 1982). Political forces interact and create the educational institutions of the state which are housed within the equally powerful social and economic centers of the society. All these forces must be considered when discussion of reform is entertained.

Proponents of public schooling, in advo-

cating the preservation of the One Best System as a unifier of pluralistic value systems, argue their case on the basis of the establishment and continuance of schooling within a common framework to which all will subscribe and which will best serve the collective interest (Everhart, 1982). Even in the inner city, where conditions in schools are often the worst, polls suggest that residents are basically committed to public education.

American education has been systematically unable to teach children of the poor and provide them equal opportunities (Coleman, 1966; Jencks, 1978; Tyack, 1974). The burden of criticism resulting from failure to make educational liberty available to all families grows heavier. If the present system does not offer equality then the hope is that alternatives systems such as the tax credit and voucher plans may. The contention is that the new options would perform at least as well as the One Best System. The hope is that the alternatives will provide "more effective" schooling. Given the pattern of policy making within the educational monopoly, reformers would have to be very cautious to insure that alternative forms of schooling did not lead to re-creation of new, or an extension of the same inequalities.

Interestingly alternatives to the One Best System have been attacked not on educational grounds (most seem to assume that educational goals will be at least equally met), but on social grounds. A fear exists that if the American society were encouraged to be a fully heterogeneous culture where each race, creed, and social class member selected their own educational agenda and doctrine, social upheaval could naturally evolve. Without the influence of the majoritarian culture, communication between extreme groups might be dramatically curtailed and perhaps, eventually extinguished. Some express concern

that alternative plans would also allow many diverse interest groups, large and small, to have clear access to the value and socialization process currently performed for most children by one centralized system. They worry that this could have enormous social, political, and cultural implications. The idea of a fragmented social and educational ideology is distasteful to many.

Public schools provide unity of cultural traditions and keep excessive diversity that could upset social control in check (Everhart, 1982). There is no way to insure that multiple forms of schools, would or could, continue this role. There is also no evidence that today's society does not require some institutional force to assume this responsibility.

#### *IV. Conclusion*

American public education is facing a serious dilemma. Proposals suggesting total abolition of the One Best System continue. Previous tactics of hiding the issues and requesting more funding to perpetuate essentially the same product may not work in the 1980's.

Some suggest that one possible solution to the present crisis in confidence in public education is to reject or modify some of the ideologies that education has been expected to accomplish. A re-definition of what public education could legitimately be expected to achieve could assist in gaining new public support. Education could distance itself from the "efficiency/pragmatic model" (Callahan, 1962) which argued that schooling could provide social mobility and employment. The present educational structure would have to convince the American public that social mobility and work, at this point in time, cannot be systematically manipulated by schooling because they are directly linked to a family's economic and social background (Cole-

man, 1966; Jencks, 1979). These are parameters currently outside the influence of education.

To date alternatives to monopoly public education have not received sufficient grassroots support to allow them to be viewed as imminent threats to the One Best System. Nevertheless, they have been noticed. Their effect on education has been subtle. Their very emergence into the agendas of school planners and policy makers has allowed them to serve as unexpected impetuses to educational change.

Public education appears to be making subtle changes in educational aspirations as a result of these "counter offers." The old challenges of mobility and employment have not been abandoned but their visibility as key purposes has been reduced. "Access with excellence" has come to be the theme of the 1980's (Michaels, 1984). The implication appears to be that quality schooling will be provided but it is up to the individual to explore the social and economic value of that schooling.

Harold Hodgkinson, former director of the National Institute of Education recently made this comment: "Schools are in pretty good shape...What's changed are people's expectations. Every 10 or 15 years, Americans say everything is awful, then turn around and set higher aspirations (Michaels, 1984)." Last year increases in SAT scores for college-bound students occurred after a twenty year decline (Michaels, 1984). This improvement was due primarily to significant gains in minority group scores (Michaels, 1984). For most minority groups, the improvement from 1981 to 1982 was larger than the overall national gain and was largest for Blacks, whose verbal scores rose 9 points and mathematical scores 4 points, compared to a 2 point gain verbal and no gain in math for the white majority (Michaels, 1984). Some might say that just the presence of

alternative plans has prompted public education to improve.

Public education has handled transmission of the dominant culture, socialization, and perpetuated social conformity. However, it has been ill-equipped to deal with the democratic ideologies of equality. Although brief statements of improvement in the system are being printed, many persist in their perception of our current educational crisis. Public education is at a major turning point. All the options available require significant reform.

Public education may redefine its objectives and modify the public's assessment of what the schools can be expected to achieve. Public education may change its structure to better serve the interests of nonmajoritarian citizens. Social change outside the educational system may be put into place to offer concrete rewards for excellence, or the public schools could face increasing pressure to dissolve the present system. Iannaccone (1982) summarized his assessment of public education's future like this: "The outcome of conflicts ahead will either be a fundamental redesign of the educational policy system or a repeal of major aspects of recent school reforms (p. 322-323)." Whatever choice is made, it appears clear that significant change in public education is inevitable.

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appears to be of primary concern are who are our prospective teachers and where are they coming from. As Boyer (1987) indicates baseline data allows us to measure what we know now in order to improve the future.

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