Public Schooling for Democracy
A Book Review of *Public Education: Defending a Cornerstone of American Democracy*

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The Horace Mann League, founded in 1923, dedicates itself to protecting America’s public schools and to perpetuating the ideals embodied and espoused by Horace Mann. To commemorate the league’s centennial, David Berliner and Carl Hermanns (2021) have gathered 29 essays on public education in the US from a diverse range of education scholars spanning practice and theory. The essays are relatively short and cover a wide range of topics, from the central place occupied by public schools in the communities they serve, to the powerful democratic example set by Black teachers in the US, to a comparison between public and private schools. To quote its editors, “This volume, much like our pluralistic democracy, is wide-ranging, expansive, and a bit unruly” (p. 4).

Across the volume’s 29 essays, the complex and, at times, fraught relationship between public schooling and democracy comes into view. If there is one question uniting these essays, it would have to be, how can we equitably and effectively prepare all young people for full and equal participation in public life? Authors took a variety of approaches to answering the various versions of this question they tackle—some historical, some personal, some social scientific. This diversity of approach is a strength of *Public Education*. It helps us to understand not only how effectively (or not) our public schools support the education of democratic citizens but also how the system we have has developed over time and what public schools have meant to the actual people who have inhabited them and who ultimately make up our democracy. The picture of public schooling and of democracy that emerges is multifaceted and, unsurprisingly and appropriately, reveals both points of agreement and disagreement. A number of points of agreement do emerge, however. We need to insist for the sake of our democracy that our public schools actually be public—that is, inclusive of the entire demos and responsive to the myriad democratic publics they serve. We need to face up to the historical legacy of racial injustice that has harmed so many students of color as well as the ongoing racial injustice that keeps us from realizing our firmest democratic commitments. We need to support teachers so that not only do they have the skills they need to provide meaningful civic education in our troubled times but also so they have the institutional support they need to take risks in the name of providing an education fit for citizens of a democracy.

The essays are loosely grouped into six sections. A central idea or historical moment introduces each section. For example, the first three sections are introduced by, respectively: the founding of Boston Latin, America’s first public school; the elimination of fees in public education; and Ruby Bridges’s first day at William Frantz Elementary school. These introductions don’t name the key themes of that section so much as they operate as a lens through which one

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can read that section’s essays. To give one example, the section opening with the famous image of Ruby Bridges flanked by US Marshals on her first day of school centers on five essays exploring the possibility for public schools to serve as, in Mann’s words, “the great equalizer of the conditions of men.” Read through the lens of Ruby Bridges’s integration of William Frantz Elementary against a deluge of racist protest, these essays encourage us to ask how far we’ve come since 1960 and question what it would take for us to achieve the vision of equality named by Mann and embodied by Bridges’s brave walk to school. Some of the essays are skeptical. Kevin Welner argued that “Horace Mann was right to argue for the power and potential of schools. But he oversold the product, and children suffer from the Great Equalizer myth” (Berliner & Hermanns, 2021, p. 92). In another essay, Prudence Carter broadly agreed. She wrote, “Education—specifically as schooling, an oft-touted panacea for America’s various social, health, and economic woes—won’t save us” (Berliner & Hermanns, 2021, p. 119).

Their skepticism, however, is paired with critical hope. Carter, for instance, went on to explain how developing culturally competent teachers can help ensure America’s teachers are positioned to inspire and nourish all children, irrespective of background. Sonia Nieto’s intensely personal essay about her and her family’s experiences with the American public school system during the 1960s also centers on the importance of culture to genuine learning and expresses a similar critical hopefulness. While she was unsparing in her criticisms of the schools her and her siblings experienced—with little support or respect for bicultural, bilingual students or students with special needs—she noted that there has been meaningful progress and that more students today receive supports she and her siblings never did. Not every student who needs such supports receives them, however. Nieto argued that we must continue to push for change because “all young people deserve to be taught in equitable, humanizing, and caring educational contexts” (Berliner & Hermanns, 2021, p. 117). At their best, these essays offer a multi-perspectival view of the issue at hand. By giving readers a view of key educational issues from multiple angles, the essays collected in Public Education offer something that can be much harder to find in a single, extended analysis.

One key theme that extends across the six sections is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on schools and on the people—especially the children—who rely on them. Although not explicitly thematized by Berliner and Hermanns (2021) in their framing, it quickly becomes clear that many of these essays were written during the lockdowns, social distancing, masking, and political sniping that characterized so much of the past few years. Across the many essays that do touch on the pandemic, we see authors grappling with both the threats to and the possibilities for positive change in our public school system represented by the pandemic. Several essays discuss the unjust inequalities highlighted, and sometimes exacerbated, by the pandemic. Carter described the yawning digital divide revealed by the transition to remote learning. In an essay on civic education, Carol Lee described how the pandemic, alongside a major protest movement centered on racial injustice and global economic instability, contributed to “deep political divisions” and “extremist organizations publicly spouting racist and antisemitic claims” (p. 167). Michael Apple warned that the pandemic risked furthering the hollowing out of all things public and the rapid spread of privatization. He argued that the “contraction of the public sphere is even more dangerous now that the COVID-19 crisis and the move to online education are being used as an excuse to defund public education and to shift large amounts of money to private schools” (p. 305).

At the same time, many essays—including some of those warning of the threats we face—hold on to the critical hope that the pandemic can be an opportunity for learning and for reform. Lee noted that the significant challenge of clearly communicating public health information has revealed the importance of including statistical understanding among the key skills of civic education. David Labaree discussed how school closures underscored the central role schools play in promoting social welfare in a country with a weak social safety net. Ultimately, as Lee, Labaree, and other authors wrote, there’s reason to maintain a guarded, critical hope that we will seize this moment and use what we’ve learned to further the cause of social and educational justice. To quote the Indian scholar activist Arundhati Roy, whose powerful essay on the pandemic frames the volume’s final essay, the pandemic “is a portal, a gateway between our world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred. . . Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world” (Berliner & Hermanns, 2021, p. 311). As these essays point out, whether we seize this opportunity or allow it to slip away is up to us.

Nevertheless, I couldn’t shake the feeling that there’s a core tension at the heart of Public Education, that the volume is caught between its twin desires to commemorate Mann and to provide a broad, probing look at the state of our public schools today. As Berliner and Hermanns (2021) noted in their introductory framing, “genuine public schools” serve as the object of these 29 essays and probing the meanings of genuine public-ness constitutes one of the volume’s key themes (p. 3). A few essays do indeed explore how we ought to understand the public in public schools, especially today when charter schools, vouchers, and other alternative approaches to the provision of education to young people are gaining ground. A few points of agreement emerged. Among those authors who discussed them, charter schools were widely represented as a threat to public schools and a drain on money that ought to be directed toward the public school system. Similarly, those authors who discussed school governance broadly agreed that localism is a vital normative principle for distributing decision-making authority. A number of writers described racial integration in our schools as an indispensable tool for promoting educational justice.

Although each of these points arguably capture the ideals espoused by Mann over 100 years ago, none of them is beyond reasonable contestation. Charter schools, for instance, vary widely depending on whether they are for-profit or nonprofit, whether they were founded by a local coalition or a charter management organization, and the nature of the chartering authority in their state, among other variables. How do these differences affect the
extent to which a charter school can appropriately claim the mantle of “public”? It’s unclear, because none of the essays grappled with this question. Similarly, while localism in school governance is a longstanding American tradition, racial and class segregation alongside municipal fragmentation raise significant questions about whether localism represents an appropriate principle for distributing authority over schooling today. Finally, Black Americans have long had a complicated relationship to school integration. While generations of Black Americans fought heroically against the evils of legal segregation, many Black Americans—though certainly no friend to Jim Crow policies—remained wary of integration, worried about what it meant for the jobs of Black teachers and administrators and for the education of Black children. How should this wariness inform our thinking about integration today?

While honoring Mann and commemorating the good work of the Horace Mann League are noble goals, I worry that this focus may have left out important voices and concerns. To put the point simply, this volume may not be unruly enough to truly capture the pluralism of American democracy and our many vital debates over education and public schooling. That said, Public Education remains worth our engagement. Written at a moment of upheaval, these essays capture a range of essential issues and ideas we all must engage with if we hope to, as Roy wrote, step through to the other side, ready to imagine a new world.

References