

Renewing the American Commitment to The Common School Philosophy: School Choice in the Early Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

The common school philosophy of the nineteenth century in the United States is revisited from a contemporary perspective. Is the basic ethos of the philosophy of Horace Mann and others still relevant today? This question is examined and applied to the conservative advocacy of free markets, individual freedom, and school choice in order to assess the extent to which the delivery of government-supported education is done in a way that upholds the values of the past while simultaneously addressing paramount issues related to social equity, diversity, and social cohesion today.

Keywords

common school philosophy; Horace Mann; school choice; education vouchers; conservatism; public good; charter schools; accountability; individualism; libertarianism; communitarianism

Introduction

The idea of free public education for all students did not begin with the leader of the nineteenth-century common school movement, Horace Mann. Prominent Americans such as Benjamin Rush, Thomas Jefferson, and Noah Webster, among others, espoused the notion in their writings long before the 1830s (Fife, 2013, pp. 2-8; Spring, 2014, pp. 78-79). Yet as Downs (1974) noted: “The impact of Horace Mann’s ideas and achievements has been profoundly felt in the educational world at home and abroad for well over a century. Few figures in our history have made such a pervasive and enduring impression on American culture and civilization. Many of the issues raised by Mann are as live and relevant today as they were in the eighteenth-forties, when he was a highly effective missionary for universal public education.” (preface). While a great deal of scholarship

exists on Mann’s education philosophy (e.g., Makechnie, 1937; Foster, 1960; and Litz (1975), the central purpose of this article is to highlight the pertinence and relevance of Mann’s ideals to contemporary debates over school choice, charter schools, and education vouchers.

Brief Biographical Sketch of Horace Mann

Horace Mann was born in Franklin, Massachusetts on May 4, 1796. He entered Brown University in 1816 and graduated with high honors in 1819. He was admitted to the Massachusetts bar and practiced law until 1837. In 1833, he was elected to the Massachusetts

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senate and served as president of the senate from 1835-1837, and was instrumental in the creation of the Massachusetts State Hospital for the Insane. In 1837, he left the state senate to become the first secretary of the newly established Massachusetts Board of Education. He served in this capacity until 1848 and wrote 12 annual reports that become highly influential in the common school movement. In 1848, he resigned his position as secretary of the Board of Education to fill a vacant seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. The vacancy was due to the death of John Quincy Adams, the former president who served in the House for almost two decades after his presidency. Mann was an outspoken abolitionist during his tenure in the House. In 1852, Mann ran for governor of Massachusetts as the Free-Soil candidate. After his defeat, he became president of Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. He served at Antioch until his death on August 2, 1859 (Fife, 2013, pp. 13-14).

In his final baccalaureate address to students that year, he offered the following challenge to students:

So, in the infinitely nobler battle in which you are engaged against error and wrong, if ever repulsed or stricken down, may you always be solaced and cheered by the exulting cry of triumph over some abuse in Church or State, some vice or folly in society, some false opinion or cruelty or guilt which you have overcome! And I beseech you to treasure up in your hearts these my parting words: *Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity* (Mann, 1891, Volume 5, p.524).

Indeed, as the champion of the common school movement of the nineteenth century, Mann did accomplish a “victory for humanity.” As Taylor (2010) put it:

Although the revolutionary generation spoke of the great need for education in a free republic, it was the generation coming to maturity in the middle of the nineteenth century that solidified the institutional form for meeting this need; Horace Mann and his colleagues cultivated, defined, shaped, and instituted the common schools as the location for this politically necessary education. These public schools would come to be thought of as the single most critical tool for building civic equality and producing responsible, productive, unified, and committed citizens (p.ix).

The common school philosophy is clearly under serious attack from the religious right and the school choice movement. One education researcher put it bluntly:

Choice, privatization, charter schools, and multicultural education put the final nail in the coffin of the common school. Choice, privatization of schools, and charter schools were promoted as a key to improving education and America’s competitive advantage in world markets. During the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations religious conservatives’ support of school choice began to attract a wide audience ranging from liberals to profit-making educational corporations. The basic idea of choice runs counter to the common school ideal of having all children receive a common education that inculcates a common culture and common moral and political values (Spring, 2014, p.432).

The entire philosophy and ethos of the choice movement are based on dubious perceptions of marketplace capitalism as it pertains to a public good: K-12 education.

Education as a Public Good with Requisite Accountability to the People

A public good is one where if it is consumed by one citizen, it cannot be withheld from others. In other words, all members of society cannot be excluded from consuming the good or commodity in question (Olson, 1965). Examples of public goods that typically will not render controversy include national defense/military security, police and fire protection, the criminal justice system, transportation/infrastructure, and the postal system. The common denominator in all of these public goods is that public officials are accountable to citizens and the people can hold their elected officials accountable for their actions and stewardship of the people's resources. Those seeking to privatize goods that have been traditionally delivered in the public sector have done little to address the accountability issue (Verkuil, 2007). Mann and his fellow visionaries included education as a public good because they felt that it was the only equalizer in a capitalist society, where formal education provided the opportunity for children to be upwardly mobile economically as adult citizens. To his contemporary critics of public education, Mann offered the following prophesy:

It is known, too, that our noble system of free schools for the whole people is strenuously opposed by a few persons in our own State, and by no inconsiderable numbers in some of the other states of this Union; and that a rival system of "parochial" or "sectarian schools" is now urged upon the public by a numerous, a powerful, and a well-organized body of men. It has pleased the advocates of this rival system, in various public addresses, in reports, and through periodicals devoted to their cause, to denounce our

system as irreligious and anti-Christian. They do not trouble themselves to describe what our system is, but adopt a more summary way to forestall public opinion against it by using general epithets of reproach, and signals of alarm (Mann, 1891, Volume 4, 298).

Opponents to the common school in Mann's era sought to undermine it by using hyperbole to advance their own political agenda. How is this different than the school choice movement today? The negative commentary about public education is consistent, then and now, and the lack of tangible evidence about the common/public school experience by opponents is very similar when comparing the 1850s to the 2010s. Politically, it has been particularly poignant since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983. Ever since the study was made public, choice advocates have advocated their vision of educational reform using free market principles, though the conclusions rendered by the participants in this study have been rebuked as hyperbolic, self-serving, and based on faulty data analysis. In fact, one researcher described the National Commission on Excellence in Education's work in this manner:

As I previously have written, we should consider *A Nation At Risk* to be the greatest lie that the state has ever produced regarding our America's public schools. *Risk* was more than a document. In the first place, it was the most efficacious educational report ever issued by the federal government, judged in terms of the scope and scale of educational reforms that it engendered over the past twenty years. It was also a well-designed and orchestrated propaganda campaign that actually began 18 months prior to its release when Secretary of Education Terrel Bell established the National

Commission for Excellence in Education (NCEE). If we examine the tactics of the NCEE as they are described by the Commission's Executive Director, Milton Goldberg, and senior research associate, James Harvey, and if we even minimally analyze the verbiage used in their descriptions of those tactics, we recognize some rather disturbing patterns in their work (Gabbard, 2003, p.54).

Efficiency is an important goal in both the public and private sectors. Finite resources must be managed in a plausible manner. Yet there are times when there is more at stake than simply an input-output ratio. Mann effectively operationalized a conception of free public schools that had been articulated in the late eighteenth century.

Public policies that permit and promote private entrepreneurs to operate and manage schools (charter schools exist in most states and education vouchers in some states) amounts to a form of outsourcing that poses a number of fundamental challenges in a constitutional republic. As Verkuil has eloquently stated:

The government exercises sovereign powers. When those powers are delegated to outsiders, the capacity to govern is undermined. A government appointment creates a public servant who, whether through the oath, the security clearance, the desire to achieve public goals, or the psychic income of service, is different from those in the private sector. The office itself is honored. This is why many in our democratic system live in a dual reality, decrying the president, whether it be Bush or Clinton, Reagan or Roosevelt, but respecting the presidency; the office of George Washington, the first among the heroes of our Republic. Those offices that fall under the president deserve similar respect. Anyone who has served in

government, from a buck private to a cabinet official, knows this feeling. And they also know that the public and private sectors have different boundaries. Outsourcing tests these boundaries. By doing so, it pushes government to justify delegations of public power in private hands (2007, 1).

Public education officials should not be in the practice of delegating and abrogating their duties and responsibilities to private officials who are motivated by profit first and foremost. Public sector officials are supposed to focus on the promotion of the greater common good as the ultimate policy objective in the course of their duties. Values such as justice, equity, fairness, diversity, and equality are those that motivate those in public service the most; can the same be said about their counterparts in industry? Is the application of general business principles to education policy reasonable? Will it result in a better education system for all students in the country?

The values embodied in the business model, including the premise that public goods should be open to competition and privatization, have been in existence since at least the end of the nineteenth century. According to Gawthrop, "For well over the past 100 years, public administrators have been admonished to adopt the techniques, to reflect the attitudes, and to embrace the philosophy of their private-sector counterparts. The drive for civil service reform that began in the wake of the Civil War was simply the running salvo of a much more extensive and intensive campaign designed to shape the managerial operations of government in the image of the private sector" (1998, 126). A very famous American was instrumental in promulgating this philosophy in the early stages of the Progressive Era and it has been remarkably durable ever since.

Political science professor Woodrow Wilson published an article titled “The Study of Administration” in 1887. In describing public administration during his time period, Wilson prophesied that

the field of public administration is a field of business. It is removed from the hurry and strife of politics; it at most points stands apart even from the debatable ground of constitutional study. It is a part of political life only as the methods of the counting-house are a part of the life of society; only as machinery is part of the manufactured product. But it is, at the same time, raised very far above the dull level of mere technical detail by the fact that through its greater principles it is directly connected with the lasting maxims of political wisdom, the permanent truths of political progress (Wilson, 1887, 209-10).

Wilson’s emphasis on efficiency during his scholarly career is quite transformational in nature since little has changed since the late 1880s. The importance and special attention to efficiency in public administration and politics, including the delivery of public education, may actually be gaining since the days of Woodrow Wilson. As Gawthrop noted

Indeed, if the present mood in the United States is any gauge, there appears to be a strong current running in favor of an increased reliance on the *private* sector for the implementation of public policy. This attitude seems to reflect an enticing conviction that the private sector, governed as it is by clearly focused managerial strategies dictated by an entrepreneurial spirit is more reliable than a commitment by the public sector’s career bureaucracy to the spirit of democracy. The “bottom-line” argument

inherent in this assumption is that the pragmatic, “no-nonsense” rubrics of private-sector management are certain to yield greater efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability than are obtained from the kaleidoscopic attitudes and values reflected in the public-sector bureaucracy (1998, 125).

The value of efficiency tends to attract undue emphasis to the detriment of others, especially equity and fairness. For about 130 years or so, many have touted the application of private sector managerial techniques to public service as if this were both plausible and prudent. The major shortcoming with this philosophical approach, however, is aptly noted by Gawthrop when he concluded that “[t]he ethos of public service, so essential to the spirit of democracy to flourish, can be realized only if directed by a moral imperative bound to the common good” (1998, xiii). The moral imperative in education policy is the promotion of the common school ideal articulated by Mann in the mid-nineteenth century.

The Twentieth Century Conservative Philosophy

Long after the passing of Horace Mann, a number of intellectuals in the twentieth century were instrumental in the creation of a theoretical focus on the individual and away from a communitarian notion of the greater common good, albeit in the philosophical tradition of Adam Smith as articulated in *The Wealth of Nations*. In 1776, as Thomas Jefferson and his colleagues drafted the Declaration of Independence, Smith espoused the plausibility of laissez-faire economics. To him, the private marketplace, with limited interference from government officials through the regulatory process, adjusts to most economic realities. This

idea has been a dominant paradigm in U.S. history (Fife, 2013, 43-5).

As Hursh (2011) aptly determined:

In the United States, neoliberal doctrine is often described and defined as free-market capitalism in which economic prosperity is best achieved through unregulated or free markets, the withering away of the state as the government's role in regulating businesses and funding social services are either eliminated or privatized, and encouraging individuals to become self-interest entrepreneurs. Under neoliberalism, economic inequality does not result from unequal social structures that privilege the already advantaged but instead, from differences in individual choices and efforts. Inequality, therefore, is deserved and should not be a concern of government (p.7).

This doctrine has had a profound effect on American politics and public policy, as is evidenced by the work of a number of influential conservative thinkers in the twentieth century. Modern conservatives such as Friedrich Hayek, Leo Strauss, and Milton Friedman have extolled the virtues of the free enterprise system (Fife, 2013, 45-63). Hayek (1899-1992) concluded that it was the abandonment of values such as individualism, freedom, and laissez-faire capitalism that led to socialist or fascist oppression and tyranny. He envisioned a substantial divide between a free market economy and one which is socialistic and heavily regulated:

The choice open to us is not between a system in which everybody will get what he deserves according to some absolute and universal standard of right, and one where the individual shares are determined partly by accident or good or ill chance, but between a system where it is the will of a few persons that decides

who is to get what, and one where it depends at least partly on the ability and enterprise of the people concerned and partly on unforeseen circumstances (Hayek, 1944, 101-2).

During World War II, Hayek envisioned causality between extensive government intervention in the economy and society and a concomitant decline in individual freedom. In a later work in 1960, he argued that far reaching government intervention in the economy, especially through social programs for the indigent, resulted in negative unintended consequences. His philosophical views were central in the conservatism of Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom in the 1980s and 1990s. Hayek did not oppose all forms of regulation; he perhaps could be described as a minimalist in this regard, at least in the context of the modern libertarian movement.

Leo Strauss (1899-1973) was a prominent neoconservative from the University of Chicago. While Strauss had similar views to Hayek when applied to economic and regulatory matters, he also believed that federal officials should impose their will on the citizens in order to promote a more moral society. Neoconservatives, such as George W. Bush, perceive themselves as moral crusaders seeking to impose a moral character on the masses in order to promote stability and order. One scholar concluded that:

In short, neoconservatism is the legacy of Leo Strauss. It echoes all the dominant features of his philosophy—the political importance of religion, the necessity of nationalism, the language of nihilism, the sense of crisis, the friend/foe mentality, the hostility toward women, the rejection of modernity, the nostalgia of the past, and the abhorrence of liberalism. And having established itself as the dominant ideology of the Republican party, it threatens to

remake America in its own image (Drury, 1997, 178).

According to officials at the *New York Times*, Strauss was the godfather of the Republican party's Contract with America in 1994 that helped the GOP recapture both houses of Congress. The House of Representatives had been controlled by the Democrats for forty consecutive years at that time.

It was Milton Friedman (1912-2006) who provided much of the theoretical foundation for the school choice movement today. Friedman gained international acclaim for being the leader of the Chicago school of monetary economics, and was a member of Reagan's Economic Policy Advisory Board. He first extolled the virtues of privatizing schools and other public services in the mid-1950s (Friedman, 1955). In an important work published in 1962, he presented a spirited defense of laissez-faire capitalism. Not only did private enterprise result in economic freedom but to Friedman it was a necessary condition for political freedom as well. Government, to him, had two primary functions:

First, the scope of government must be limited. Its major function must be to protect our freedom both from the enemies outside our gates and from our fellow citizens: to preserve law and order, to enforce private contracts, to foster competitive markets...The second broad principle is that government power must be dispersed. If government is to exercise power, better in the county than in the state, better in the state than in Washington (Friedman, 1962, 2-3).

In a later work, Friedman and his wife both touted the virtues of the free market system. They were staunch and unabashed advocates for school choice. Though both have passed away, a website in their honor is

prominent in today's school choice movement: the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice (<http://www.edchoice.org>).

The policy implications of the market-based ideology are quite profound. In economics, conservatives embrace the core assumption that private and parochial schools are better than their traditional public school counterparts. Setting aside the reality that the definition of an effective school is typically absent, conservatives generally believe that the private sector can outperform the public sector on a regular and ongoing basis. Intertwined with this vision is the basic understanding from the conservative community that if traditional public schools had to compete with nonpublic and charter schools, the overall quality of public K-12 education would be enhanced. Yet it is important to remember that the basis of comparison (public versus private) is a complicated phenomenon, as industry officials tend to focus singularly on efficiency whereas their counterparts in the public and nonprofit sectors generally must contend with efficiency, equity, and effectiveness in an omnipresent manner. Some critics of traditional public schools have labeled them "government" schools. The great crusader for the common schools, Horace Mann, believed in the plausibility and morality of schools run by public sector entities. An educated populace was an essential condition in a republican form of government. To Mann, education was a public good that had to be provided by public entities that were accountable to the people, not the marketplace as if it were a common commodity.

The School Choice Movement

The philosophical essence of the school choice movement is presented in the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice website: "School choice gives parents the freedom to choose their children's education, while

encouraging healthy competition among schools to better serve families' needs. School choice lets parents use the public funds set aside for their children's education to choose the schools—public or private, near or far, religious or secular—that work best for them” (Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, 2014).

The focal point for school choice advocates is individual freedom, which essentially entails the freedom for parents to send their children to a school of choice. There is also a sense that people have a right to profit from choice enterprises. The entire emphasis is on the individual and freedom of choice as a positive feature in contemporary society. In some ways, school choice is popular. In the most recent annual survey administered by *Phi Delta Kappa*/Gallup Poll, 70 percent of respondents indicated that they supported charter schools (nontraditional but public schools) and only 29 percent opposed. However, only 37 percent favored education vouchers and 63 percent opposed (*Phi Delta Kappa*/Gallup Poll, 2014). Clearly, citizens endorse the notion of choice when it is strictly in the public arena; support for it plummets when the notion of using taxpayers' money to fund parochial and/or private education is entered into the equation.¹ Yet, popularity is really not the issue here. It is the contention that the individual has the right to choose the school for her or his child, regardless of the implications and consequences for the rest of society. On this subject, Mann offered a dichotomy a long time ago. First, he made the following observation about the public's support of the common school:

Another topic, in some respects kindred to the last, is the apathy of the people themselves towards our Common Schools. The wide usefulness of which this institution is capable is shorn away on both sides, by two causes diametrically opposite. On one side, there is a portion of

the community, who do not attach sufficient value to the system to do the things necessary to its healthful and energetic working. They may say excellent things about it, they may have the conviction of its general utility; but they do not understand, that the wisest conversation not embodied in action, that convictions too gentle and quiet to coerce performance, are little better than worthless. The prosperity of the system always requires some labor. It requires a conciliatory disposition, and oftentimes a little sacrifice of personal preferences (Mann, 1891, Volume 2, 408-9).

It is important to heed Mann's commentary. While there are Americans who rhetorically support the notion of public schools, many who fit Mann's description are passive by definition and not prone to be overly proactive, at least when it comes to politics and elections. The other group that he references may be strikingly similar to choice advocates today, especially supporters of education vouchers:

Opposite to this class, who tolerate, from apathy, a depression in the Common Schools, there is another class, who affix so high a value upon the culture of their children, and understand so well the necessity of a skilful preparation of means for its bestowment, that they turn away from the Common Schools, in their depressed state, and seek, elsewhere, the helps of a more enlarged and thorough education. Thus the standard, in descending to a point corresponding with the views and wants of one portion of society, falls below the demands and the regards of another. Out of different feelings grow different plans; and while one remains fully content with the Common School, the other builds up the

private school or the academy (Mann, 1891, Volume 2, 410).

A universal belief transcends ideology in the United States. Progressives, liberals, moderates, conservatives, and libertarians alike all embrace the premise that education is central to professional and economic development and growth. Nothing has changed since the days of Mann in this regard. How plausible would it be, given our shared values with regard to the importance of education in the modern world, to further stratify educational opportunities by creating public policies that promote vouchers and charter schools to the detriment of the common schools?

What Mann articulated by way of vision in the nineteenth century, once manifested with the passage of compulsory attendance laws, still has significance in contemporary society. The vast majority of children in his time attended public schools, and that is still true today. At best, advocates of public education today typically will get a modest level of support from the general public. A vocal minority has always vigorously pursued its agenda, which in both time periods in question, has meant that the politics of self-interest has trumped the greater common good and an intense, well organized group has generally been very successful by some criteria vis-à-vis a generally reticent populace.

Those who concur with the Friedman philosophy are confident that private and parochial schools are generally “better” than their traditional public school counterparts. The problem with this assumption is that it remains largely untested into the early twenty-first century. The basic premise is that if traditional public schools had to be competitive with their private and nontraditional public school counterparts, the overall quality of public education would be enhanced. Traditional public school officials would actively seek to improve

the quality of their schools so that they could compete with their counterparts in the private and charter school arenas.

Are these conservative assumptions about public education valid? Braun, Jenkins, and Grigg (2006) conducted a study comparing private and public school students using hierarchical linear modeling. These researchers did not find significant differences between the two groups:

In grades 4 and 8 for both reading and mathematics, students in private schools achieved at higher levels than students in public schools. The average difference in school means ranged from almost 8 points for grade 4 mathematics, to about 18 points for grade 8 reading. The average differences were all statistically significant. Adjusting the comparisons for student characteristics resulted in reductions in all four average differences of approximately 11 to 14 points. Based on adjusted school means, the average for public schools was significantly higher than the average for private schools for grade 4 mathematics, while the average for private schools was significantly higher than the average for public schools for grade 8 reading. The average differences in adjusted school means for both grade 4 reading and grade 8 mathematics were not significantly different from zero (p.v).

Many promises about education quality are made with regard to the advocates of school choice and market-based competition. The libertarian ideals touted by such scholars as Friedman, have the unfortunate consequence of emphasizing the choice of parents as to where their children attend schools as the ultimate objective rather than the creation of a corps of quality schools for all children, regardless of their background, because education is a public

good guaranteed to all children of all social classes. In short, the libertarian focus on freedom and choice obscures the fundamental fact that education would be allocated based upon a nineteenth century business model that may be harmful and relegates many traditional public school students, particularly those located in poor urban neighborhoods, to second-class citizenship with limited opportunities.

Peterson (2006) delineated the marketplace philosophy in a number of works. For example, he maintained that:

school reform has long been on the nation's agenda. Earlier strategies tried out new curricular ideas, new management techniques, or the commitment of additional financial resources. But, recently, two more sweeping reforms—one holding schools accountable for specific educational outcomes, the other introducing choice and competition—have been placed on the table. The first involves setting state standards and measuring student performance by means of standardized tests...The other option, choice and competition, is less well known, though some believe it to be the more promising reform strategy. It takes American business and industry as the appropriate model for schools to follow. In the private economy, consumers make choices, businesses make profits when they satisfy consumers more than their competitors do, and new inventions constantly drive the economy to ever-higher levels of productivity. Choice and competition: it's the American way—most of the time. (3)

Arguably, Peterson's latter point is reflective of a capitalist economy, where choice and competition may be suitable for various consumer choices. However, the business model applied to the delivery of education is

fundamentally dubious by definition, for it would result in the proliferation of outsourcing, or using private companies to deliver public education. The reliance of the delivery of public education on private, for profit, corporations is dangerous precisely because public accountability will be undermined.

Accountability does exist in the common schools; teachers, principals, and members of school boards are accountable to the people as well as state and local elected officials. The same type of accountability does not exist in the private sector. It is quite possible, and perhaps even probable, that the goal of efficiency, or profit, will supersede other matters such as social equity, fairness, and education quality.

Rejecting the Politics of Individualism

Americans have long had reverence for what many perceive as rugged individualism; the individual who succeeded in spite of significant challenges has always had particular appeal to many in American society. Individualism has been depicted favorably in literature and through the mediums of television and movies. As a result, it is not uncommon in this country that citizens view public policy debates from the perspective of the individual as opposed to embracing a more communitarian perspective. In other words, many people tend to ponder policy proposals in terms of how they may affect the individual and her or his family, as opposed to considering what implications the policy ideas may have on the greater common good. Scholars such as Hudson (2013) have noted that individualism is part of the American creed:

People in most other nations understand their national attachment in terms of a common historical experience, usually common ethnicity, and often religious belief. As a nation of immigrants, the United States contains a diversity of

people with different histories, ethnic backgrounds, and religions. What has held the nation together is a widely held commitment to the ideals symbolized in the founding events of the nation—the American Revolution and constitutional ratification—and the principles found in the documents connected to those events...What are these ideals—the American creed—that define American identity? For the most part, they are the ideals of classical liberalism: limited government, the rule of law, liberty, political equality, and individualism....Whereas John Locke may have understood liberal ideals to be relevant to the political goals of English gentleman property holders, the American revolutionaries applied them—especially political liberty, equality, and individualism—to all citizens, as is evident in the Declaration of Independence. The American Revolution produced a democratized version of classical liberalism that became the American creed (Hudson, 2013, 107-8).

Rugged individualism has deep roots in American history, and this reality was noticed by Alexis de Tocqueville when he came to America in the 1830s and used the term “individualism” in this manner:

Individualism is a reflective and peaceable sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of those like him and to withdraw to one side with his family and his friends, so that after having thus created a little society for his own use, he willingly abandons society at large to itself. Selfishness is born of a blind instinct; individualism proceeds from an erroneous judgment rather than a depraved sentiment. It has its source in

the defects of the mind as much as in the vices of the heart (Tocqueville, 2000, 482).

Americans at that time had a very positive perception of individualism, but Tocqueville had significant concerns about this aspect of American life. To Tocqueville, individualism taken to an extreme could actually undermine democracy. He maintained that “Selfishness withers the seed of all virtues; individualism at first dries up only the source of public virtues; but in the long term it attacks and destroys all the others and will finally be absorbed by selfishness. Selfishness is a vice as old as the world. It scarcely belongs more to one form of society than to another” (Tocqueville, 2000, 483). He determined that individualism taken too far could denigrate into egoism. A society of egoists does not prioritize the greater common good, if a consensus could be achieved as to what that may entail. To Hudson, Americans had not yet succumbed to extremist tendencies when it came to individualism in the 1830s. This is no longer the case in the modern era.

Bellah (1985) and his colleagues documented the growing reality that individualistic tendencies had become extreme in the United States. In their study of middle-class Americans, the researchers determined that most citizens defined every aspect of their lives in highly individualistic terms. This is what they reported 30 years ago with regard to their findings of middle-class America:

We spoke of the belief of Madison and the other founders that our form of government was dependent on the existence of virtue among the people. It was such virtue that they expected to resolve the tension between private interest and the public good. Without civic virtue, they thought, the republic would decline into factional chaos and probably

end in authoritarian rule. Half a century later, this idea was reiterated in Tocqueville's argument about the importance of the mores—the “habits of the heart”—of Americans. Even at the end of the nineteenth century, when Establishment and Populist visions were the chief antagonists in the continuing argument about the shape of our society, Madisonian ideas were still presupposed. The tension between private interest and the public good is never completely resolved in any society. But in a free republic, it is the task of the citizen, whether ruler or ruled, to cultivate civic virtue in order to mitigate the tension and render it manageable. As the twentieth century has progressed, that understanding, so important through most of our history, has begun to slip our grasp. As we unthinkingly use the oxymoron “private citizen,” the very meaning of citizenship escapes us. And with Ronald Reagan's assertion that “we the people” are a “special interest group,” our concern for the economy being the only thing that holds us together, we have reached a kind of end of the line (Bellah et al., 1985, 270-1).

Choice advocates are politically savvy in their approach of marketing their product, whether it be through vouchers, charter schools, or some other mechanism. They encourage people to focus inwardly. In other words, parents have the right to send their children to “better” schools, regardless of separation of church and state issues, whether choice may result in more segregated schools, whether children from indigent backgrounds may end up doomed to attend dysfunctional schools with insufficient resources, or whether class conflict will actually increase as a result of freedom of choice. We need to develop our capacity to

analyze ideas and engage in political discourse in order to meet the challenges of the early twenty-first century. A rote acceptance of the premise that choice is good, without considering its implications on the republic, is a path that the early founders, Mann, Tocqueville, and a number of other political philosophers sought to avoid, for a society that is too inward in its worldview is one that ultimately succumbs to extremist tendencies.

Rugged individualism runs counter to the communitarian sentiment that was famously voiced by John F. Kennedy in his inaugural address on January 20, 1961: “And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country” (American Presidency Project, 2014). A communitarian approach to public policy debates would reflect the Kennedy vision of over a half-century ago:

Bringing about a better balance between the community and the individual in the United States requires a more communitarian approach to politics. Such an approach challenges the libertarian view that individuals are completely autonomous authors of their own existence; instead, it regards people as products of the many communities—from their families and neighborhoods to the national community—in which they live (Hudson, 2013, 133).

The politics of selfishness and inwardness will not preserve the noble common school ideal. They will certainly destroy it if it is allowed to happen. As Grant (2008) maintained, the new social compact of our time is for citizens to understand that they not only have fundamental rights guaranteed to them in a representative democracy, but also that they have equally important responsibilities to their fellow human beings as well.

Two researchers provided the following analytical summary of Mann and the common school ideal:

In spite of obvious disagreements and conflicts, Americans in northeastern and midwestern sections of the country rallied around the concept of “the common school” for several decades after the Civil War. Democrats and Whigs, workingmen and capitalists, and country folk and urban dwellers joined forces in sufficient numbers to create what many considered to be *the* indispensable institution of American democracy. Leaders of the movement, exemplified by Horace Mann of Massachusetts, generated enthusiasm for the idea of the common school by appealing to a variety of motives, not all of which were consistent or compatible. Essentially a movement that reflected the values of republicanism, Protestantism, and capitalism, the common school revival held out the promise that the educational frontier was an open and promising land itself. The common school movement unleashed a set of ideas and series of trends that are still in motion. Schools should be free, not based on fees. They should be open to all, not just a few. They should foster morality and ethics but avoid sectarian entanglements (Urban and Wagoner, 2000, 118).

While the common school ideal still persists in that most children attend traditional public schools, it is under serious strain from conservative free-market advocates who tout school choice as the optimum way to reform public education in America. Certainly the objectives of choice advocates are subject to debate, but it is also evident that the libertarian values embodied in the school choice, charter school, and voucher movements all fundamentally miss the mark on one crucial

point: Education is a public good and it should be addressed as one, otherwise, some rather sobering realities are likely to ensue.

Education vouchers are potentially very explosive in terms of further stratifying our society. Justice Stephen Breyer expressed this concern in his dissent in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* (2002):

The Court, in effect, turns the clock back. It adopts, under the name of “neutrality,” an interpretation of the Establishment Clause that this Court rejected more than half a century ago. In its view, the parental choice that offers each religious group a kind of equal opportunity to secure government funding overcomes the Establishment Clause concern for social concord. An earlier Court found that “equal opportunity” principle insufficient; it read the Clause as insisting upon greater separation of church and state, at least in respect to primary education....In a society composed of many different religious creeds, I fear that this present departure from the Court’s earlier understanding risks creating a form of religiously based conflict potentially harmful to the Nation’s social fabric.

Choice can have profound implications on American society if implemented *en masse* in a manner consistent with the Friedman philosophy. Social discord and enhanced levels of religious-based conflict would exact a high price for having more choice in the education sector.

Charter schools, by definition, are a form of public schools. While they are publicly funded, charter school officials are not bound by the same rules, regulations, and laws that apply to traditional public schools. By definition, there is a fairness question. Why should some rules

apply to some schools, but not others, which are both in the public domain? They do afford more choice for parents, but that choice also comes with definitive associated costs. Charter schools have provided a relatively easy path toward the privatization of public education. There is a growing reliance on private education management organizations in the operation of charter schools. In addition, charter schools are more segregated than traditional public schools, and they are less likely to admit children with special needs or whose native language is not English (Fife, 2013, 159-162).

With regard to charter school effectiveness, a great deal of attention has been focused on two studies conducted by evaluators at the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University. In 2009, researchers conducted a longitudinal study of more than 70 percent of all charter school students in the United States. They concluded that 46 percent of all charter school students have testing results that are no different than students in traditional schools. While 17 percent of charter school students outperformed their traditional public school counterparts, 37 percent did measurably worse (Stanford University, 2009). A follow-up study on charter school performance was published in 2013.

The follow-up study reflected an 80 percent increase in the number of students enrolled in charter schools in four years. Over 6,000 charter schools serving more than 2.3 million students were included (Stanford University, 2013). The researchers who conducted this sizable study which included 27 states and New York City concluded that less than one hundredth of one percent (<0.01 percent) of the variation in test performance in reading is explainable by charter school enrollment. There was no statistically significant difference on math tests between the two groups. Though CREDO officials publicly

reported positive gains by charter school students, critics contend that most empirical studies replicate what the CREDO researchers discovered, that test-score outcomes of traditional public school and charter school students are virtually identical, in spite of the manner in which the study was marketed to media outlets (University of Colorado, 2013).

The relative effectiveness of education voucher programs, particularly in Milwaukee and Cleveland, has been the focus of a contentious debate. As Hochschild and Scovronick (2003) delineated:

If vouchers substantially enhanced individual achievement, they would raise legitimate questions about priorities among the individual, group-based, and collective goals of education. But there is no solid evidence that they do. The first voucher program, in Milwaukee, has had three sets of evaluators. John Witte and his colleagues at the University of Wisconsin found over its first five years “no consistent difference” in test scores for students who used the vouchers and a matched set of students who remained in the Milwaukee public schools. Paul Peterson and his colleagues at Harvard University used a different comparison group and found statistically significant improvements in the scores of voucher students. Finally, Cecelia Rouse at Princeton University used another set of techniques and split the difference—finding improvements in math but not in reading. She also identified a set of Milwaukee public schools with small classes that outperformed both the choice schools and other public schools (pp.126-27).

Molnar (1998) also concluded that smaller classes do more to increase student achievement than vouchers. Officials at the Keystone

Research Center (2011) concluded that there was no measurable difference between students in public schools and voucher students and that there was a lack of accountability as it pertained to the use of tax credits for private and religious school tuition.

Home schooling and virtual schools are other forms of school choice. Similar to charter schools, increases in student participation levels have occurred in recent years (Fife, 2013, 167-68). The emphasis on choice takes the focus away from Mann's vision of common schools. Instead of bringing students from diverse backgrounds to provide equality of opportunity for all, to help young people embrace diversity so that they can learn to get along in the modern world, and to help train them to be better citizens in this republic, choice advocates are actually encouraging parents to isolate their children even more. Isolation, even if well intended presumably due, in part, to concerns about safety, will do little to make citizens more empathetic and willing to address the policy challenges that exist today and in the future.

Mann believed that education should be provided to all children evenly. In doing so, he touted a deeply-held American conviction that all children should be given an equal opportunity to succeed in life, regardless of their plight in this world. What children did with the education they were given was up to them. Yet there is a key reality that was applicable to Mann's world of the nineteenth century that is as important today as it was then. America is a very diverse country. Mann aspired to bring children from very different backgrounds together in the same school, impart knowledge to them, and teach them to be vigilant citizens in a republican form of government. In addition, he envisioned that the students would learn to get along in relative peace and harmony. Some seemingly ignore the reality that schools have multiple functions, one of which is to teach and practice

tolerance in an ever-changing world. Will school officials continue to address this aspect of education when parents choose to send their children to a more homogeneous school or isolate them to a greater extent than is presently the case?

Renewing the Common School Ideal in the United States

According to Mann, the general public should be taxed to fund the common schools but not taxed to fund religious schools. His premise is salient in the early twenty-first century, as some choice advocates embrace Friedman's voucher idea as a way to reform education in the United States:

The very terms "public school" and "common school" bear upon their face that they are schools which the children of the entire community may attend. Every man not on the pauper-list is taxed for their support; but he is not taxed to support them as religious establishment. But he is taxed to support them as a *preventive* means against dishonesty, against fraud, and against violence, on the same principle that he is taxed to support criminal courts as a *punitive* means against the same offences. He is taxed to support schools, on the same principle that he is taxed to support paupers,-- because a child without education is poorer and more wretched than a man without bread....But if a man is taxed to support a school where religious doctrines are inculcated which he believes to be false, and which he believes that God condemns, then he is excluded from the school by the divine law, at the same time he is compelled to support it by the human law. This is a double wrong. It is politically wrong, because, if such a man educates his children at all, he must educate them

elsewhere, and thus pay two taxes, while some of his neighbors pay less than their due proportion of one; and it is religiously wrong, because he is constrained by human power to promote what he believes the divine power forbids. The principle involved in such a course is pregnant with all tyrannical consequences (Mann, 1891, Volume 4, 312-13).

Thus, America's great common school crusader, Horace Mann, a person of very deep religious convictions, was vehemently opposed to the notion that taxpayers' money should be utilized to fund parochial education. In recent years, conservative politicians such as former governor Mitch Daniels and current governor Mike Pence in Indiana, among others, have espoused charters, education vouchers, homeschooling, and virtual education and have blamed bad teachers and teacher unions for education shortcomings, at least from their perspective. Any human endeavor can be improved; the principle applies to both the public and private sectors. But the callous and harmful denigration of public education advanced by these elected officials and many others across the country, has serious consequences and not just because taxpayers' funds are being utilized to fund parochial education. The justices upheld this practice as constitutional in *Zelman* as long as the policy in question provided for public and private school choice. The fact that 96 percent of parents in Cleveland chose parochial schools with their vouchers did not matter to the Court's majority because they had the option of sending their children to other public schools. The harm is in the denigration of a public institution, the common school, which is the very foundation of America's republican way of life.

Should we abandon a time honored institution such as public schools, without systematic inquiry, in order to promote an

ideological agenda when it comes to the education of America's children? Should we participate in the creation of a veritable theocracy, as some fundamentalists believe that religion should somehow be "returned" to the public schools? Americans today should consider the advice of Thomas Jefferson in his famous letter to the Danbury Baptists. He contended that

believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man & his god, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;" thus building a wall of eternal separation between Church & State (Library of Congress, 2013).

The separation of church and state advocated by Jefferson in the early nineteenth century has allowed a very diverse nation of immigrants to live together in relative peace for centuries. This policy has been enormously effective and ought to be preserved for future generations of Americans. In reality, there are fundamental implications to school choice, including, but certainly not limited to, social cohesion, promotion of diversity, racial balance, equity and fairness, separation of church and state, and basic republicanism. The great American experiment in democracy is predicated on a simple premise, tolerance. The diversity that exists in a nation with a rich immigration history has been maintained, though certainly not without challenges and periods of strife, past and present. Though many groups in human history have experienced social discord and violence for extended periods of

time, Americans have achieved and sustained a diverse republic that is relatively peaceful most of the time. Too much inward reflection, under the guise of school choice, is an unnecessary and unwarranted challenge to the relative harmony that has pervaded society a good portion of the time.

Now is the Time for Renewal

The educator Joy Elmer Morgan once offered the following insight with regard to Horace Mann on the centennial of his becoming the first secretary of education in Massachusetts:

In 1837 when Horace Mann came to the secretaryship of the Massachusetts newly-created Board of Education, a financial panic dominated the nation. Fear, greed, and confusion were everywhere. Unemployment, misery, and distress prevailed. Schools were poor, teachers unprepared and underpaid. The well-to-do were sending their sons and daughters to private schools. They felt little or no concern for the public schools which they thought only good enough for paupers. In such a time people needed especially to place a higher value upon themselves—to attach more importance to the homely virtues and to thinking as a way of life. In 1837 the time had come for an educational revival. Horace Mann—himself up from the soil—came forward to express the needs of the people in a language so clear that his writings are an important part of the national culture (Morgan, 1936, vii).

In another book on Mann's life at Antioch College, Morgan offered this message to the future teachers of America:

Into your keeping is given a sacred trust—the American School. The free common school is the house of the people;

the temple of democracy; the bulwark of self-government. To establish this house Horace Mann lived and labored triumphantly, even as Washington labored to establish the Republic, and Lincoln to preserve it. It is fitting that the Future Teachers of America movement should have grown out of the Horace Mann Centennial for you are the keepers of his great purpose, his noble ideals, his unconquerable spirit. May you ever study his inspiring life and follow in his steps (Morgan, 1938, 2).

For the past several years, economic hardship has been endured by many in this country; in 1837, many Americans were experiencing very daunting challenges. In spite of the hardships and vicissitudes of life, Mann found a way to put education at the forefront of the political and policy agenda during his lifetime. It was not a simple task, but it was not an impossible one, either. Americans today could replicate Mann's sense of mission and purpose with regard to education. A renaissance is in order and we must find a way to collectively renew our commitment to public education and the common school vision.

Hursh (2011) once commented that “[w]e need to imagine and work for a new future, one in which we rethink and reconstruct the role of government, the nature of the economy, our relationship to the environment, and the purpose of schooling” (p.19). The purpose of public education has not changed since the nineteenth century to a considerable extent, and the common school vision of Mann must be preserved for future generations. Instead of succumbing to the politics of individualism and selfishness, adults in this country owe it to children today and into the future to protect the common school vision and to uphold the sacred promise of public education. The key to addressing the politics of diversity in this

constitutional republic is to provide equality of educational opportunity for all children. Horace Mann understood this a long time ago and Americans would be wise to resist the lure of the libertarian emphasis on individualism and instead openly embrace policies that benefit society as a whole. After all, deeply entrenched in the American tradition is a notion that many citizens in this country have long cherished, *E Pluribus Unum*.

Notes

1. Charter schools are nontraditional, publicly-funded public schools whose officials are freed from some of the regulations and statutes that apply to traditional public schools. In return for the relaxing of various regulations, charter school officials are presumably held accountable for producing specific results, typically higher standardized test scores that are delineated in the charter, or contract, for each charter school. Education vouchers are certificates that are issued by a government that can be utilized by parents who receive them to apply those funds toward tuition at a private school rather than sending their children to an assigned traditional public school.

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