# A School for the Common Good



*by Lawrence Baines and Hal Foster*

> The proponents of the common school were seeking the nurture of a common core of sentiment, of value, and of practice within which pluralism would not become anarchy. They were seeking, in a sense, a means of constant regeneration whereby the inevitable inequities arising out of freedom would not from generation to generation become destructive of its very sources. . . . They were seeking to build and inculcate a sense of community which would function, not at the expense of individualism, but rather as a firm framework within which individuality might be most effectively preserved.
>
> —Lawrence A. Cremin, *The American Common School*

The Common School Movement reformers of the 1850s envisioned schools that would serve as linchpins of the community. They were to be tuition free and open to everyone, places "where the rich and the poor meet together on equal terms, where high and low are taught in the same house, the same class, and out of the same book, and by the same teacher" (Taylor 1837).

In the nineteenth century, it was assumed that good schools were essential to the survival of democracy. After all, a government "of the people, by the people, for the people" meant that the future would be determined by the collective wisdom and character of the citizenry. Although schools have yet to evolve into the kind of Utopian institutions that reformers envisioned, common-school ideals still resonate with many of us today. For example, President Bush was invoking the common-school ideal of learning as a transformative experience when he stated at last year's National Teacher of the Year ceremonies: "When young people become good students with big dreams, they become better citizens. Our country is better off as a result of our teachers instilling passion and hope" (Bush 2005).

Political sound bites notwithstanding, public schools are in actuality becoming less and less places where all citizens meet under one roof, on equal terms, in pursuit of a mutual goal.

## De-localized Schooling



Central to the concept of the common school is its symbiotic relationship with the community in which it is located. Common schools were funded and maintained by community residents who, in turn, took great interest in their progress and pride in their accomplishments.

Today, curriculum is controlled by the state and a school's effectiveness is measured according to criteria established by the federal government. Uniform testing and reporting requirements have turned superintendents and boards into little more than intermediaries between schools and enforcement agencies. Local control, once considered an indefeasible right, has suddenly vanished.

Only private schools and selective charter schools maintain any semblance of local control. For example, Dallas charter schools serve the technically inclined who wish to work on computer products made by Cisco Systems; Milwaukee charter schools serve African-American males who wish to study an Afrocentric curriculum; and Southern California online charter schools serve students who would rather complete high school at home than rub elbows with their peers at school. Ironically, charter schools' singular educational visions and enrollments restricted to special populations (U.S. Department of Education 2000) often undercut the "everyone welcome" ideology of the common school.

More than one million students (more than 2 percent of the school-age population) are currently enrolled in K–12 charter schools, and the number is expected to grow as a deluge of new, "pro-charter" bills wends its way through state legislatures. Thus far, forty-seven states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have enacted laws that encourage continued expansion of charter schools (U.S. Charter Schools 2005).

Much like charter schools, "school choice" allows students to enroll at any number of institutions within a geographic area. In 2004, more than six million students (12 percent of the school-age population) exercised their right of choice.

Additional options are opening up for those wishing to attend private schools. New laws, such as South Carolina's Put Parents in Charge Act, give tuition tax credits directly to parents. Tuition tax credits are already in effect in Minnesota, Iowa, Florida, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Arizona. Voucher systems of one kind or another are in the works in state legislatures across the country (*Economist* 2005).

If such trends hold, private schools, which have enrolled 10 to 15 percent of the student population for the past several decades (Archer

1996), are likely to experience an abrupt increase in enrollments. A federal study of differences between public and private schools accorded a dozen advantages to private schools, including higher levels of achievement and happier, safer students (National Center for Education Statistics 2004). In another study, two of three parents indicated they would send their children to private schools if they could afford to do so (Golay 1997).



Parents who prefer to keep their children home all day constitute the fastest-growing segment of alternative education providers. More than one million students, or 2 percent of the total K–12 population, are home schooled (Jablonski 2004).

Expressed in mathematical terms, student enrollments can be represented this way:

*Charter (2%) + Home schooled (2%) + Choice (12%) + Private (12%) = 28% of the student population*

Today, some fifteen million students, more than one in four, no longer attend the neighborhood school. That number is unprecedented in the history of public education. Schools across the country are finding themselves in an unfamiliar role: serving a dwindling proportion of the constituents in their locales. The disengagement comes even after researchers have established how a neighborhood's cohesiveness contributes to lower levels of crime and a higher quality of life (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997). However, the evolution of the public school from its communal roots is consistent with the disintegration of community-based social structures described by Putnam (2001) and Skocpol (2003).

## The Condition of Neighborhood Schools

Although recent data indicate a dramatic drop in school crime and, in fact, reveal that students are safer in school than out of school (National Center for Education Statistics 2005), 80 percent of Americans still perceive public schools as rife with violence (Horowitz 1997).

Too often, substandard infrastructure makes it difficult to assuage concerns about neighborhood schools' safety. In 1995, the General Accounting Office estimated that $112 billion was needed just to make America's school buildings habitable again. Yet over the past decade, minimal funding has been appropriated for capital improvements. Obviously, buildings must remain in operation, so schools have learned the crude art of deferred maintenance, postponing indefinitely into the future repairs of broken toilets, faulty wiring, and inadequate heating systems (Kozol 2005).

Today, the tab for capital improvements has escalated to $150 billion; 75 percent of all public school buildings have been identified as needing major renovation (Lewis et al. 2000), although the National Education Association places the price tag at $322 billion (*Education Week* 2005). Research confirms that safe, well-lit buildings and grounds can have exponentially positive effects on learning (Crampton, Thompson, and Vesely 2004), but the reverse is also true. A school building in poor condition can be a scourge on local property values and student performance. Yet with no fiscal boon on the horizon, few school buildings are likely to receive attention beyond minimal repairs anytime soon.

## Future Revenues

As the U.S. population ages, states have been forced to spend more money on social services. Currently about 12 percent of Americans are sixty-five or older, but by 2025, 20 percent of the population, or seventy million Americans, will be that old (U.S. Census Bureau 2005). More

retirees will mean fewer dollars collected from taxes on income and property.

Taxes on business and industry are producing less revenue, too (Berliner 1996; National Education Association 2005; Ohio Department of Taxation 2005; White and Johnston 1997). The multimillion-dollar incentives offered to domestic and foreign automobile manufacturers by various southern locales have set off bidding wars among states for new business. The currency employed usually consists of taxes states and cities are willing to waive. Although new industry may create jobs, tax abatements usually fail to generate new revenues for schools. In 1950, American industry contributed 30 percent to local tax bases; by 1998, the percentage had shrunk to 11 percent. With the relocation of plants and factories to foreign shores, taxes contributed by industry are likely to continue to decline (*USA Today* 1998).

Despite disappointing revenues, many states' expenditures have surged more than 500 percent over the past two decades (U.S. Census Bureau 2005). Proportional funding for education will decline—as it has for the past twenty years—when states are forced to spend more on welfare programs, roads, and prisons (Winters 2003). A predicted 12 percent annual rise in Medicaid costs will create even higher deficits (Madigan 2005).

Recognizing an impending fiscal crisis, forty states have planned significant budget cuts through 2010 (National Association of State Budget Officers 2004). But what impact might budget cuts have on the quality of public education? Perhaps no state illustrates the effects of budget cuts on student performance better than California.

The California tax revolt of 1978, exemplified by Proposition 13, severely limited property tax increases. Shortly after ratification of the proposition, student achievement, teacher quality, and college completion all began to decline (Carroll et al. 2005). Once the envy of the world, California public schools have become among the worst-performing schools in America. For example, reading and mathematics tests administered by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) from 1990 to 2002 ranked California forty-eighth, just behind Alabama and ahead of only Louisiana and Mississippi (Education Watch 2004). Before Proposition 13, though, student performance in California ranked the highest in the nation.

Many states have used profits from lotteries to bridge the gulf between revenues and expenditures. In New York, for example, lotteries pay 5 percent of public education expenditures. With forty-one states now selling lottery tickets and generating $14 billion in profit annually, the "lottery solution" would appear to have "maxed out" (North American Association of State and Provincial Lotteries 2005).

Even the most optimistic economic outlook does not foresee rescuing beleaguered schools with a large infusion of new federal money. Already saddled with the largest deficit in American history, the federal government is grappling with monumental expenditures for the military, homeland security, disaster relief, Medicaid, and Social Security.



## Common Schools at the Tipping Point

Public schools stand at the epicenter of four trends: delocalization, disintegration of capital infrastructure, taxpayer angst, and historic governmental deficits. For parents whose children get their education elsewhere than the neighborhood school, it is a confusing time. If a new tax referendum for revitalizing the battered old neighborhood school building comes to a vote, should it be supported or rejected? The dilemma is real—parents placed in the position of financially supporting schools that their children do not attend (Ray 2005). Although the impulse to "escape" a low-performing neighborhood school is understandable, what about the fate of the majority—those thousands of students who cannot transfer because of financial or family difficulties? And what about the prospects for the school, scraping by in a tough neighborhood, facing falling revenues and "bright flight"? What happens to a struggling school when its best students abandon ship? What happens to a community when its neighborhood school is declared low-performing and shuttered?

Undeniably, current legislation and popular sentiment are steering American education toward a social policy predicated upon the fluctuations of unfettered, free-market economics. As the gap between rich and poor widens, the tension between individual and community goals usually escalates (Wessel 2005). According to Galbraith (1998), "A high degree of inequality . . . is leading toward the transformation of the United States from a middle-class democracy into something that more closely resembles an authoritarian quasi-democracy, with an overclass, an underclass, and a hidden politics driven by money."

John F. Kennedy once admonished, "Our progress as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education." More than 37 percent of the national budget for 2006 is earmarked for individuals over sixty-five, while just over 1 percent has been set aside for children under eighteen. Despite the relatively low percentage of money set aside for public schools, many Americans believe that expenditures on public education are untenably high (DeRugy 2004).

Once upon a time, public schools were supposed to be nonselective, open, tuition-free institutions where all children were welcome to participate in a real-world exercise in democracy. The demise of the ideal of the common school is evident in the proliferation of specialized charter schools; in legislative support for vouchers and private school

reimbursements; in the burgeoning businesses ministering to home schoolers; in the empty classrooms and broken windows of neighborhood schools. Common schools once stood for equal opportunity, community, and pluralism, yet American education has become selective, specialized, and caste conscious.

Perhaps a more appropriate model for American education today is not the common school, but the gated community—and the barrios developing just outside its walls.



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