

What Is Public about Public Education?

Paul T. Hill

Some say that public education is threatened and beleaguered. In big cities, where many parents have lost confidence in their neighborhood schools and want out, public education might cease to exist. The threat comes from initiatives like vouchers, charter schools, schools provided by for-profit firms, and private scholarship programs that let disadvantaged children attend private schools. These concerns are familiar to any moderately attentive reader of newspaper editorial pages.

How can this be so in a nation that has long been committed to universal education? What has come of America's belief that an educated population is the bulwark of democracy? Have we given up on the idea that free people must be able to inform themselves, understand arguments in light of their own interests, and support themselves economically so they can avoid economic coercion? If public education is threatened, does this mean we have abandoned these commitments?

I argue that America's commitment to public education is stronger than ever and that the initiatives claimed to threaten it do nothing of the sort. Our commitment to universal education is sustained, not threatened, by initiatives that try to create new schooling options for children in low-performing schools. Willingness to disrupt existing institutions shows that we as a people can

tell the difference between an unchanging commitment and a changeable instrument. Existing schools—and alternatives like voucher programs and charter schools—are neither good nor bad in themselves. Their value, or lack of it, comes from the purpose they serve. Schooling institutions that educate children effectively and prepare them for full participation in a democratic society have great value. Institutions that do not fulfill that purpose have little or no value.

In everyday language we identify a public school as a building that provides instruction for children in a particular neighborhood. But no one would seriously contend that a building is what makes a school public. Buildings can be abandoned, and they can even be sold or leased to businesses and to schools run by religious groups. So, what makes a school public? Being overseen by an elected school board? Being supported by tax dollars and offering instruction at no cost to parents? Serving absolutely any child who lives in a defined attendance zone? Accepting any form of behavior or degree of effort that any child cares to exhibit? Being subject to laws and regulations promulgated by the state legislature? Being free to employ only those teachers who belong to a particular union? Being perfectly racially integrated, so that the student body and teaching force exactly reflect the ethnic composition of the local community? Having a fixed curriculum so that all teachers cover exactly the same material on the same schedule?

In fact, none of those attributes identify a public school. Not all local school boards are elected. School districts can and do assign some students (usually those with special needs) to attend schools run by churches or other private organizations. Some schools run by local school boards charge tuition and fees. Some occupy privately owned buildings. Some have admissions priorities and can turn down students who lack prerequisite training or to enhance racial balance. Some have strict attendance and behavior codes, and all can require unruly children to go elsewhere. All schools, including those run by churches and for-profit organizations, are governed by state laws and regulations protecting children. Some states forbid teacher collective bargaining and closed union shops. Few schools run by local school boards exactly mirror the ethnic

composition of the surrounding community, and many diverge far from it. Some school boards authorize magnet and experimental schools that use distinctive methods of instruction and follow their own schedules.

Public education cannot be defined in concrete terms as an activity that is done by specific people in a particular place or via a particular method. Public education is a goal, ensuring that every American knows enough, and has all the required skills, to take a full part in our country's social, economic, and political life. Public education is not a fixed institution but a standard against which institutions are measured. Thus, a school does not accomplish the goal of public education just because it is provided by government.

The current condition of our inner-city schools proves that government is capable of providing schools that do not give children what they need to become full participants in modern society. Nor does faithfully implementing the decisions of a majority ensure that schools will produce graduates who have all the knowledge and skills necessary for full participation in our country's social, economic, and political life. Majorities can decide to run all schools in ways that fit their members' values and serve members' children effectively but that do not meet the needs of families in the minority. Majorities can also mandate that all teaching will be done in a particular way even if other feasible methods would be better for some children. These outcomes can be called democratic but they do not achieve public education's goal, to help every child gain the knowledge and skills he or she needs to be a fully functioning member of an open, diverse, economically prosperous and fair society.

However obvious these points may be, there are those who would not agree with them. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson write approvingly of a communitywide deliberation in which parents from the religious right were rebuffed in their objection to certain instructional modules in social studies.¹ They endorse the

1. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement; Why Moral Conflict Cannot Be Avoided in Politics, and What Should Be Done About It* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 63–66.

conclusion reached via deliberation: the majority offered these parents an ultimatum—accept these materials for your children or leave the publicly supported schools and pay for your own. However Gutmann and Thompson offer no evidence (because none exists) that the instructional materials in question would have had the desired effects on children’s attitudes or that students who did not encounter these materials would somehow become less desirable citizens.

Defining public education as a result of deliberation whose results are binding on everyone eliminates the possibility of differentiated solution—where parents who object to a particular sequence of instruction would not have to subject their children to it. Gutmann and Thompson are right that the dissident minority could not legitimately prevent the majority from using social studies materials that they believed good for the community and for children. However, a differentiated solution, possibly including a new school with an approach to instruction acceptable to the dissident parents, or simply an option in social studies, might lead to more effective educational experiences for all the community’s children. The solution would have taken extra work, but it would not have been as costly as a protracted conflict where dissident parents disrupt the school and where those families’ children attend school under a cloud.

There is, in short, no reason why “public” must mean “uniform” or coercive. Of course, politics and government matter in education. Government uses its authority to compel children to attend school, and all citizens are taxed so that all children can be taught. But that does not mean that schools *are* government or that politics should determine everything schools do. Like the human body, which needs certain chemicals such as salt but can be destroyed by too much, public education needs government and politics but can be destroyed by them. Some attributes of government—inflexibility, caution, and focus on procedure—work against the flexibility and individualization required by effective education. Some attributes of politics—turbulence, self-seeking by interest groups, and the expectations that winners take all—are in

tension with the idea that public education must prepare everyone, not just those on the winning side.

My objective in this chapter is to convince readers that everything “public” in public education is not captured by the term “government run”—that public education is not defined by school boards that act as little legislatures, by categorical funding, by civil service employment of teachers, or by a government monopoly. Public education rests on something deeper, a permanent American commitment to educating children by whatever means work.²

In areas of endeavor where there is great uncertainty about what is needed and what will work, constant creation and testing of options is not merely permissible but necessary. In light of these facts—that different children need different things and that the links between a particular approach to instruction and results are uncertain—the cause of public education is served, not harmed, by allowing parents to seek what their children need and encouraging multiple competing organizations to provide options.

That is why I argue that current efforts to experiment and create options for children, going under many names from vouchers to charters and school contracting, are signs of the health of our national commitment to public education, not threats to it.

Defining public education as a broad national commitment rather than a specific set of institutions raises as many questions as it settles. Children have finite amounts of time, so they must attend particular schools, not all possible schools. Similarly, communities have finite amounts of money available to pay for schooling, so some choices must be made. For any particular group of children or community, there must be some process of choice among all the possibilities. Public education is enhanced if community choice processes are open to differentiated solutions, amenable to evidence, and constantly revisited. Public education is diminished if community choice processes are arbitrarily limited to serve the economic interests of particular providers or consumer groups or to privilege certain political or ideological interests.

2. For a review of the many possible meanings of the “public” in public education, see Frederick M. Hess, “Making Sense of ‘Public’ in Public Education, University of Virginia (draft available from the author), 2000.

After years of stagnation, Americans' ideas about what public education should be and what it should accomplish are very much in flux. The question to be answered is clear: How can we as a society best use tax revenues, the regulatory power of the state, and the scarce time of children to create a more democratic, just, and economically secure society? Nobody has the answer, but people of goodwill, many of whom do not agree with one another, are searching for it.

This chapter explores these arguments more deeply in light of a particular case, as described below.

WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT SARIE'S EDUCATION?

Patricia has a daughter, Sarie, who attends second grade in a local district-run school. Patricia is worried about how well Sarie is learning to read. From early in the first grade, Patricia has known that Sarie was not reading as well as her sister's son who is the same age but goes to school in a different district. Patricia has gone to the school to see about what can be done about Sarie, and she has been worried about what she has seen. Teachers and the principal seem harassed, and though they are willing to talk with her, she gets the feeling that they don't see anything unusual about Sarie's reading level. She has observed classes and is never quite sure when the children are supposed to learn reading. She has talked to other parents, some of whom share her concerns, and she and three other parents have talked with the principal, who listened respectfully but said, "there is nothing I can do about this; your children have experienced teachers."

Patricia visits a religious school in the neighborhood, and sees a big difference. The place is peaceful and studious and it is obvious that children are reading. At the New Year's break, Patricia takes advantage of a publicly funded voucher program targeted on low-income minority children in low-performing schools, and enrolls Sarie in the religious school.

I address three questions that arise from the scenario:³

First, in pulling Sarie out of her first school and placing her in one run by a private organization, did Patricia weaken public education?

3. If the scenario were changed so that Patricia placed Sarie in an independently run charter school, these questions would be the same. The ensuing discussion emphasizes vouchers and private schools, but a focus on charter schools would not alter the analysis.

Second, was the voucher program harming public education by reducing by one the number of children for whom her former school could claim public funds?

Third, in providing an alternative to the school provided by the city school system, were the religious organization and its financial supporters working against the cause of public education?

Some readers might bridle at the implication that a mother who chooses a better school for her daughter is failing a civic duty; or that the teachers and administrators who toil for low pay in inner-city religious and independent schools are harming poor children who remain in the district-run schools; or that individuals and institutions that put money into such schools are enemies of public education. However, these points are definitely in dispute.

In one day, three letters to the editor of the *New York Times* defined the range of ways people think about these questions.⁴ Commenting on an April 15, 2000, op-ed piece in which Samuel G. Freedman argued that New York Schools Chancellor Harold O. Levy should be required to transfer his children from the private schools they now attend to schools run by the city school system, one writer says that Levy “should give his children the opportunity he had as a boy to experience the racial, cultural, and economic diversity that is available in the New York City public schools. . . . Imagine a world in which the governing elite enrolled their children in public schools: just think how conditions would improve for the children and their teachers!” A second writer pointed out a parent’s responsibility to do the best possible for his or her own child: “If he [Mr. Freedman] were appointed administrator of public hospitals would he similarly rely on public hospitals if he or his family members were seriously ill? If he became the top Housing Authority administrator would he move his family to the projects?” A third writer, a New York City high school teacher, agreed that Mr. Levy’s obligation depends on the quality of the schools. “He should want the best for his children, and the New York City system should provide it. The problems are many, and

4. “The Schools Chief, and a Parent,” editorials/letters, *New York Times*, April 19, 2000, p. A22.

he should immediately make every effort to enlist talented people of character, sensitivity, and leadership into the system. Perhaps when there is improvement in the public domain of education, Mr. Levy will then enroll his own children.”

I will try to eliminate the confusion evident in the argument about parents’ choices by showing that Patricia, Mr. Levy, and other parents who leave failing schools in favor of schools that they conscientiously believe will be more effective with their children are acting in the public interest; that the voucher program that paid for Sarie’s schooling in a parochial school is not harming but advancing the cause of public education; and that schools providing these options are advancing the cause of public education. The common premise from which all these conclusions follow is that whatever educates the public’s children is public education.

PARENTS CHOOSING EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS ARE ACTING IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Does Sarie’s mother have an obligation to keep her child in a school in which she is not learning? Some would say yes, that she has an obligation to serve the public interest, which is promoted by ensuring that all children are educated together, whether or not an individual child learns. They recognize that parents worry about their own children. “As parents we want [our children] to do well in school—both academically and socially—so they will find a satisfying job and get ahead in life. This is a *private* purpose of schooling.”⁵

These authors exhibit confusion about a distinction that economists and political scientists draw between private and public

5. Bruce Fuller, Elizabeth Burr, Lisa Huerta, Susan Puryear, and Edward Wexler, *School Choice: Abundant Hopes, Scarce Evidence of Results* (Berkeley: Policy Analysis for California Education, 1999), p. 9. See also Valerie E. Lee, Robert B. Croninger, and Julia B. Smith, “Equity and Choice in Detroit,” in Bruce Fuller and Richard F. Elmore, eds., *Who Chooses? Who Loses: Culture, Institutions, and the Unequal Effects of School Choice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996), p. 88.

goods.⁶ In this distinction a private good has two attributes: it can be enjoyed by some individuals and not by others, and its supply is limited so that consumption by one person reduces the opportunities of others. A public good, on the other hand, is one whose use and benefits cannot be limited to just a few individuals, but which affect everyone. Thus, national security is considered a public good; a candy bar eaten by one person is a private good.

Is children's learning to read, work, analyze, and advance themselves a private or a public good? It is both: an individual and his or her family benefit from learning these things but so does the broader society.⁷

The position that an individual child's learning to read is a purely private good is easy to articulate, but it does not hold water. Consider the possibility that all the parents in a city chose to keep their children in district-run schools, despite such severely dwindling quality that eventually none of the school graduates could read and debate well enough to take part in community life or perform a productive job.⁸ In that case, the whole city would be harmed, by a whole generation of people not prepared for democratic citizenship and unable to sustain a modern economy. Any one individual's skills (or ignorance) has a small but real impact on the community as a whole.

What is a parent's obligation? Should Sarie's mother (or for that matter New York City Schools Chancellor Levy) sacrifice her own

6. See, for example, Paul A. Samuelson, "The Pure Theory of Public Expenditures," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 36:387–89, 1997; James S. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 34; and Dennis W. Carlton, and Jeffrey W. Perloff, *Modern Industrial Organization* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), p. 116.

7. Charles Wolf has called education a "quasi-public good—quasi because although the whole community benefits from having individuals who are smart and capable, those individuals also benefit personally." See Charles Wolf Jr., *Markets or Governments: Choosing between Imperfect Alternatives* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), p. 38.

8. Tragically, exactly this result has occurred in some areas of our greatest cities, where only half the children complete high school and many graduates are marginally literate.

child's learning? Again some would claim that individual children must be sacrificed to the public interest. In discussing a case very like Sarie's, education researcher Valerie Lee and others comment that the removal of more than a few such children (and their parents) "from inner-city schools would have a noticeably negative effect on schools that enroll large proportions of disadvantaged children." The same authors "urge policymakers, educators, and families to consider the potential effects of such social policies [i.e., in the authors' earlier words, valuing the free will of individuals to seek a better life] on all poor and minority families, even if those policies seem to offer some benefit to individuals and families."⁹

These authors would argue that Sarie should not have left her neighborhood district-run school for two reasons: first, because her departure could hurt the school and, second, because Patricia's efforts on Sarie's behalf might have led the whole school to improve.

Do the departures of individuals hurt schools? There is rhetoric about this topic but no firm evidence. For every anecdote about teachers being discouraged by the departure of the child of a caring parent, there is a counteranecdote about children who, on the departure of a child who was the apple of the teacher's eye, benefited by receiving more attention.¹⁰ Arrayed against stories about how a particular school has been weakened by declining enrollment are studies showing that competition strengthens all the schools in a community.¹¹ For every story about a heroic parent's effort to turn

9. Lee, Croninger, and Smith, *Equity and Choice in Detroit*, p. 89.

10. The literature on tracking (assigning children to different instructional programs based on proxies [or race] taken to indicate academic ability) shows that minority children who attend school outside their neighborhoods are *more* likely to be assigned to less challenging tracks than similar children in predominantly minority schools. See Jeannie Oakes, *Multiplying Inequalities: The Effects of Race, Social Class, and Tracking on Opportunities to Learn Mathematics and Science* (Santa Monica, Calif., RAND, 1990).

11. Caroline M. Hoxby, "Does Competition among Public Schools Benefit Students and Taxpayers?" *American Economic Review*, 2000. See also Mark Schneider and Paul Teske, "School Choice Builds Community," *The Public-Interest*, fall 1997. See also Schneider and Teske, "Institutional Arrangements and Social Capital: Public School Choice," pp. 86–90. *American Political Science Review*, 1997.

around a low-performing school, there are stories of parents who have tried for years to improve a bad school and failed, to the detriment of their own children and to the benefit of no one.

Some parents may choose altruistically to stay in weak schools despite possible risks to their own children. But when parents subject their children to unnecessary risks, altruism can look more like abdication of responsibility. Consider a parent who can afford to move out of a violence-ridden neighborhood but decides to stay, hoping to minister to the fallen and possibly to provide, in the person of his orderly and nonviolent child, an example to others. If that child were maimed or killed by neighborhood gunfire, wouldn't many people of goodwill think she had sacrificed her own child to a dubious principle? Of course, clear evidence that the children of such pioneers were never injured, and that their presence always helped others, might change the argument.

The idea that a parent like Patricia has an obligation to fight for others' children has some moral appeal. We are right to admire parents who do this, up to a point. They are justified in standing and fighting if they have a practical chance of making a difference quickly enough to prevent harm to their own child's education.

Debate about parents' rights and obligations toward choosing schools often hinge on ideas proposed by A. O. Hirschman. He identified three ways that customers (including school parents) can influence the quality of goods and services offered by business firms and government agencies: *exit* (when dissatisfied, finding another provider), *voice* (demanding improvements), and *loyalty* (staying with a provider and working to improve its performance). In general he argues that the three modes of influence go together; in particular, the effectiveness of voice and loyalty is enhanced by the ever-present possibility of exit. However, he makes a special argument for schools, saying that middle-class parents should use voice rather than exit because their demands for school quality can lead to improvements that benefit all students.

Hirschman assumed that the quality of a school's services is indivisible, so that an improvement made to satisfy a vocal parent benefits all. That turns out to be wrong, at least most of the time.

Schools have limited supplies of things parents want—access to the best teachers, the most prestigious programs, competent instruction in science and mathematics—and these assets are frequently rationed on the basis of parental assertiveness.¹² Thus, demanding parents who stay in a troubled school might not raise its overall quality. They can corner the best it has to offer, possibly leaving the remaining students with below-average classes and teachers.

Some things about schools can be indivisible and enjoyed by all. Examples include safety and the attractiveness of building and grounds. These do seem to benefit from the efforts of vocal parents. But the things that matter most about schools often do not improve across the board.

Clearly, a commitment to voice without exit does not eliminate competition and self-seeking. Aggressive and sophisticated parents use voice to get what their children need. And they can feel justified in doing so. But they should not deceive themselves that their presence helps other students who might in fact get less of what the schools have to offer. Sophisticated parents' activism can even weaken the position of less sophisticated parents who might, if the more aggressive parents exercised exit, be taken more seriously by teachers and principals.

But what if many other parents imitate Patricia: Wouldn't the school Sarie left then have so little money that it could not continue to run all the programs it offered before families started leaving? This can and does happen. Schools of all sorts, including schools run by churches and private organizations, have suffered declines in enrollment due to loss of family support. Some have adapted their programs to provide effective instruction to the children remaining, and others have continued to decline until all families left them. In the former cases, the children left behind are frequently better off in schools that have faced their weaknesses and rethought their programs. In cases where troubled schools have ultimately closed, children served by the abandoned schools have then enrolled in other schools.

12. See, for example, Alfie Kohn, "Only for My Kid: How Privileged Parents Undermine School Reform," *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 1998, pp. 569–77.

Whether enrollment decline in a school harms or benefits children depends more on the actions of teachers and administrators—both in the schools left behind and in other schools in which the children might enroll—than on the actions of families who left in search of a better option. Similarly, whether the ultimate collapse and abandonment of a school harms or advances the goals of public education depends on what happens to the children. An individual school is not public education but an instrument that is either effective or ineffective in promoting the goal of ensuring that all children learn enough to be able to take a full part in our country's social, economic, and political life.

Thus we reach a negative answer to the question “Do the parents of children who are not well served by their neighborhood schools have an obligation as citizens to stand and fight?” The answer is surely no. Individuals should not have to sacrifice their own children's futures for a vague possibility of helping others and are certainly not compelled to engage in a fruitless effort. No public purpose would have been served by Sarie's staying in a school that was not teaching her to read. The principle of democratic theory that one accepts an adverse decision in the hope of prevailing later does not apply here: a mother who sacrifices her daughter's one opportunity to learn as a child can never regain what has been lost.

In a situation where a parent has no assurance that her actions can improve schooling for other children, her private interest and the goals of public education point in the same direction. Patricia should do anything she can to make sure her child learns the skills and habits necessary for full membership in adult society.

PEOPLE GIVING CHILDREN CHOICES ARE ACTING IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Are private individuals who put their own money into vouchers (or put their time and money into creating new charter schools) harming public education? What about state legislators who enact state-funded voucher or charter school programs that send public funds to independently run schools? Some would say that such

people are doing mischief, drawing students away from existing district-run schools and also, by reducing district-run school enrollments, affecting the amount of state funds public schools receive. On that basis, critics claim that voucher sponsors are working against the public interest in education. On the other hand, groups promoting choice claim that competition can inspire greater effort and effectiveness on the part of all schools, both those in the conventional public system and the charter and private schools that offer families alternatives.

Studies of the effects of competition on district-run schools in general show that it has positive effects. As Hoxby has shown, schools in localities with many private schools, and many options provided by nearby district-run school systems, have higher test scores and other indicators of quality.¹³ Newspaper reports of the improvement processes in schools facing competition show how improvement happens.¹⁴

Competition can make all schools better, or it can send some into decline. Much depends on whether all competitors are free to improve. If district-run schools are able to take advantage of reduced enrollment by cutting administrative expenses, intensifying teacher collaboration, and limiting the range of instructional offerings, they might become better, not worse. After all, charter and parochial schools typically operate with far less money per pupil than does the conventional public school system, and most can maintain a reasonable instructional program and adapt, albeit painfully, to changes in student enrollment.

Research on schools' response to competition shows that everything depends on the actions of teachers and principals in the schools experiencing loss of pupils. Those schools whose staff have habits of collaboration and joint problem solving adapt readily to marginal changes in enrollment and funding. Schools with nonco-

13. Carolyn Minter Hoxby, "Do Private Schools Provide Competition for Public Schools?" National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 4978, December 1994.

14. See James Dao, "How to Make a Poor School Change: A Well-Financed Exodus of Students Is Countered by a Flurry of Fixing," *New York Times*, September 29, 1997, p. B1.

operative cultures (weak leadership, poor labor relations, little collaboration among teachers) adapt poorly.¹⁵

Ultimately, the argument about whether vouchers or charters harm district-run schools turns on the question of whether all the rules that limit district-run schools' adaptability are necessary. Is it the essence of public education that every school has a fixed administrative overhead or that a school must not be free to change its teaching staff or instructional program as funding and student needs change? An affirmative answer to this question implies that these rules, which many public educators agree are barriers to school quality, are necessary elements of public education. If these rules are not necessary—if instead they are the accidental result of politics and bargains made over time, as different groups gained leverage in the courts or state legislature—then it is not inevitable that competition will harm district-run schools.

Schools whose reputation for “goodness” is based on their vast and diverse course catalogs may be forced to reduce the numbers of exotic language and arts courses they offer. Schools that cannot marshal community support or whose teachers cannot learn to collaborate in the face of external competition will probably get worse. So will schools that lose so many students that they can no longer afford to occupy their buildings. These results, however, put the finger on very weak schools whose “success” depends on the coerced patronage of families that would have preferred to send their children elsewhere.

Most of the children eligible for private or public vouchers cluster in particular low-income neighborhoods. School districts affected by competition have offered no evidence on the effects of children's departures for these schools—possibly because there are no visible effects due to the fact that the affected neighborhoods

15. Frederick Hess, Robert Maranto, Scott Millman, “How School Leaders Respond to Competition: The Mitigating Effects of School Culture,” paper prepared for presentation at the Conference on School Vouchers, Charters, and Public Education, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, March 9–10, 2000. See also Paul Teske, Paul Schneider, Sara Clark, and Jack Buckley, “Does Competition from Charter Schools Leverage Change in Traditional Public School Systems? A Tale of Five Cities,” from the same conference.

might also be the first settlement areas for new in-migrants. The best evidence about the financial effects of children's departures comes from the experience of small school districts that have become home to several charter schools. Marblehead and other small cities in Massachusetts lost as many as 20 percent of their pupils and had to eliminate part-time art teachers and nurses. Other neighborhood schools losing enrollment have also increased class size (sometimes only temporarily until the school gained enough students to justify allocation of an additional teacher).

Evidence of adverse effects on children is hard to find. To date, the numbers of children lost to any district-run school system, including those with large voucher programs like Cleveland and Milwaukee, have been far smaller than the numbers of children who leave district-run schools because of family moves and individual dropout decisions. During school year 1998–99, for example, six thousand Milwaukee children used vouchers to enroll in private schools while more than twenty-five thousand dropped out. Most cities have growing student populations, so that the current financial effects of students leaving to accept vouchers are essentially nil. Charter schools have similarly modest effects, except in a few cities (Mesa, Ariz., Marblehead, Mass., where more than 10 percent of students have left district-run schools).

Other evidence about the effects of lost enrollment comes from New Zealand, where, according to Fiske and Ladd, schools that lost enrollment quickly declined due to parent and teacher flight.¹⁶ Whether these findings apply directly to the U.S. context is unclear since New Zealand made it virtually impossible for declining schools to adapt their policies or programs. Declining schools were not allowed to reconfigure their administrative structures, recruit or choose teachers, or combine with other schools to share resources or programs.

What the New Zealand findings do demonstrate is that schools that are not free to change the ways they use staff, time, and

16. Edward B. Fiske and Helen Ladd, *When Schools Compete* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2000).

money are in no position to improve or to cope with changes in financing or student needs. That is nothing new: it has long been the basis of dispute within the public school system, between people running successful magnet schools (which typically enjoy considerable freedom to reconfigure their staff and schedules and can pick among large numbers of teacher applicants) and more highly regulated neighborhood schools.

To return to the case of Sarie and Patricia: in the short run, whether the voucher with which Patricia paid private school tuition harms the broad cause of public education depends on the actions of the public school system itself. If the system allows Sarie's former school to adapt to change, the consequences are likely to be positive, not negative.

To the degree students like Sarie who use vouchers (or enroll in charter schools) benefit at all—whether by learning more advanced material, scoring higher on standard tests, being motivated to attend school more faithfully or stay in school longer,¹⁷ or by gaining a label (e.g., graduate of a highly regarded school) that helps them get admitted to college or hired by employers—there is some addition to society's stock of people prepared to live successful adult lives. Although the jury is out on whether voucher users gain all these benefits, there is evidence for all of them. Most large voucher programs are too new to demonstrate long-term effects on students' life prospects, but there is some evidence that children participating in the older private voucher program have greatly enhanced long-term outcomes, including higher-level employment and completion of college degrees.¹⁸

17. Rigorously controlled studies of the links between vouchers and student achievement are ongoing. At present, the results are mildly positive in virtually every case. Although any results on vouchers, pro or con, will inevitably be controversial, the weight of evidence is definitely toward positive effects, with one exception—middle-school boys in the District of Columbia. See Jay P. Greene, "A Survey of Results from Voucher Experiments: Where We Are and What We Know," paper prepared for presentation at the Conference on School Vouchers, Charters, and Public Education, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, March 9–10, 2000.

18. Paul T. Hill, "The Educational Consequences of Choice," in Terry Moe, ed., *Private Vouchers* (Stanford, Hoover Institution Press, 1995).

There is no reason why a given school district cannot run a smaller group of schools that are at least as good individually as the existing district-run schools. (Many school systems were forced to do exactly that in the 1970s, when enrollments declined by more than 50 percent, largely due to middle-class flight from school busing.)¹⁹

The real question might be whether the private or charter school system can supply enough quality schools to serve all the children whose parents might wish to enroll. A great excess of demand over supply might allow many charter or voucher-redeeming schools of dubious quality to prosper; it would certainly create competition for slots in well-established private schools that could favor the most aggressive and sophisticated parents.²⁰

However, a concerted supply response, by private entrepreneurs, charter school sponsors, religious schools, or philanthropies (or, preferably, a combination of all of them) could mean that the quality of educational offerings available in the locality would rise, not fall. Major private investment in new schools would not be anything new: today, both private and district-run schools rely heavily on philanthropic donations for everything from new program development to teacher training. Due to constant pressures to maintain current service quality and pay teachers, public school districts have great difficulty sustaining expenditures on even such basic investment functions as teacher training and hiring, performance evaluation, school improvement, and building upgrades.²¹ Some districts rely heavily on philanthropy. Private investment in new schools is therefore not a new breach of the bright line be-

19. See Laura Kohn, *Priority Shift: The Fate of Mandatory Busing for School Desegregation in Seattle and the Nation* (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, March 1996).

20. For a more complete discussion of this problem, see Paul T. Hill, "The Supply Side of Choice," in Stephen Sugarman and Frank Kemerer, eds., *School Choice and Social Controversy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2000).

21. For an expanded discussion of roles for private investment in public education, see Paul T. Hill, Christine Campbell, and James Harvey, *It Takes a City: Getting Serious about Urban School Reform* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2000), chaps. 5–7.

tween private investment and public education. The only thing new is that new charter or voucher-redeeming schools will be controlled by entities other than the local school board.

A major supply-side effort associated with charters or vouchers would produce what some public educators fear: parents pursuing “the private purposes of education through a decentralized archipelago of independent schools.”²² The point, however, is that everything depends on the quality of the schools produced and chosen.

PRIVATELY RUN SCHOOLS THAT WORK ARE ACTING IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Do people who operate private or charter schools threaten the public interest in education? Aside from vindicating the principle of freedom of speech, is there any public purpose served by religious and independent schools? Are some private schools, as Bryk and Lee suggested of Catholic schools, the best exemplar of the common school that Dewey and others extolled?²³ Or are private schools, as James B. Conant suggested of Catholic schools, ultimately divisive?

No question in the field of education is the subject of as much confused discussion as this one. Some theorists hold for the district-run school as an integrating institution, one that assembles people from many different backgrounds and gives them a common experience. For some, such integration is good in itself and needs no justification. For others, however, the common school experience is instrumental: it is assumed to create tolerance and common understanding, which eliminate prejudice and lay groundwork for civil settlement of disputes among people who, in adulthood, might find themselves on different sides of partisan, neighborhood, or labor-management disputes. Unlike those who

22. Fuller, Burr, Huerta, Puryear, and Wexler, *School Choice: Abundant Hope*, p. 9.

23. Anthony S. Bryk, Valerie E. Lee, et al., *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

think diverse associations are good in themselves, and those that consider them instrumental would not approve of schools that educated individuals from many backgrounds, but bred distrust or conflict.

Still others are skeptical about the necessity, or even the value, of exposing students to people from a vast array of backgrounds. Although agreeing that schools serve as bridges between nuclear families and the broader society, these people think that, intelligently run, almost any school, including one made up of people of the same sex, race, and religion, can serve this purpose.

How diverse is diverse enough? No school, much less a child's group of frequent associates, can represent every dimension of diversity present in this country. Is it necessary for a white child to attend a school in which he can get to know children of both sexes from every major ethnic and racial group, political party, and religion? Is a school where a child does not get to know, say, a Mormon or a Cambodian worse in this respect than one in which these groups are represented? What about a school where no students are homosexual? What about personality types: Is it more or less important for a child to learn to deal with a person with tendencies toward passive-aggressiveness, obsessive-compulsion, or bipolar disorder than for her to encounter members of an ethnic group whom her parents have always despised? Do white Catholics need to encounter black Muslims, or is going to school with black Catholics good enough?

In this area the rhetoric is heavy and the definitions are light. Nobody can say when a school is diverse enough or too diverse. Moreover, nobody can say for sure in what ways diversity of contacts in school leads to desired adult attributes. There is reason to fear that isolation of poor and minority children will limit their ability to adapt to the broader society. But isolation in itself is not always bad: yeshiva graduates, who experience extremely distinctive schooling and have time for few friendships outside their schools, have extremely good track records of economic success, political participation, commitment to the disadvantaged, and so on.

Despite these grave ambiguities, diversity of contacts in school

and their assumed effects on student attitudes are the core objections that many educators raise against vouchers and other programs creating options outside the district-run school system. If these objections are so important, an objective observer might expect there to be evidence that district-run schools are better than other schools at creating these contacts and encouraging these attitudes. There is, however, little such evidence. To the contrary, most of the evidence points to the superiority of schools run by organizations other than public school systems.

Diverse Contacts

With respect to contacts, there is a growing literature about racial tensions in district-run schools, often leading students to limit even casual contacts to persons of the same race as themselves. The isolation of African American high school students—imposed by the students' own tastes as well as the actions of others—is particularly marked. Students active in sports and student organizations report more diverse friendships, but in large district-run schools these are relatively rare.

Studies of students in private, especially Catholic, high schools show much broader contacts between students of different races and social origins.²⁴ Private schools are, on average, relatively well integrated, in part because many deliberately seek diversity and dedicate scholarship funds so that low-income and minority children can attend. Few private schools have exactly the same racial mix as their surrounding school districts—but almost no district-run schools perfectly reflect their districts. Because housing is highly segregated, districts in which, say, one-third of the children are white and two-thirds African American have few schools that even approximate that mixture. In many such localities a majority of schools are overwhelmingly either white or black. Thus, as

24. Much of the evidence for this analysis comes from Jay P. Greene and Nicole Mellow, "Integration Where It Counts: A Study of Racial Integration in Public and Private School Lunchrooms, 1998," available at www.la.utexas.edu/research/ppc/lunch.html. See also Jay P. Greene, "Civic Values in Public and Private Schools," in Paul Peterson, ed., *Learning from School Choice* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1999).

Greene has shown, most private school students experience a more racially and class-integrated school than do most public school students.

In addition to the gross demographic facts, there is reason to think that, on average, private school students associate across race and class lines more than district-run school students. Private schools' small size and higher rates of participation in extracurricular activities probably explain some of the difference.²⁵ But, as Greene and others have shown, the facts that these schools were chosen by students and their parents and that the schools are free to state in advance what levels of decorum and effort are required for success in the school, build a basis for mutual trust among people from disparate backgrounds.²⁶ There is no question that the school's ability to expel uncooperative students creates strong incentives for compliance. Private schools rarely expel students because the boundaries are so clear that few students breach them. In contrast, district-run schools that have ambiguous boundaries experience more misbehavior and ultimately suspend or "involuntarily transfer" greater numbers of students.²⁷ But the fact that students and their families must make commitments before enrolling in a school is an important reason private school students and their parents trust one another.²⁸

All these results are based on small studies. No one has a nation-

25. In the author's own unpublished research, students who have moved from large public high schools to smaller private ones often remark on how much easier it is for students to "stick with their own kind" in large schools. As one tenth-grade male said, "At MI High there were many different groups of kids. People were all jocks or drudges or rich preppies or intellectuals or something else. Things were tense with African Americans, so we mostly avoided one another. I had some African American friends from drama, but that was about it. . . . Here the class is so small that you have to deal with everybody, there's no hiding. If you are in a bad mood everybody notices. If you don't like somebody you have to find a way to get along. If somebody is obnoxious the whole class has to let them know."

26. See Jacqueline Jordan Irvine, *Growing Up African-American in Catholic Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).

27. See Paul T. Hill, Gail E. Foster, and Tamar Gendler, *High Schools with Character* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1990).

28. See Paul T. Hill, "The Educational Consequences of Choice," in Terry Moe, ed., *Private Vouchers* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1995).

ally representative account of students' experiences in all kinds of schools. Perhaps a nationally representative study would show less difference between students' social experiences in district-run and private schools than these studies indicate. However, given how consistent current findings are, it is extremely unlikely that a national study would show that district-run schools are markedly better than private schools in creating opportunities for interracial and interclass friendships. Thus there is no factual basis for the argument in favor of public education, and against private schools, on the grounds of promoting such contacts.

Prosocial Attitudes

For many, the one goal that district-run schools can attain, and that private schools supposedly cannot, is to advance common knowledge and values.²⁹ These values are described in many different ways, but the common core include openness, willingness to negotiate differences, and tolerance of others' views. Some writers, as discussed above, consider these the distinctly public goals of education, as compared to the self-seeking and therefore private goals of learning skills necessary for economic success.³⁰

These are certainly important values for citizens of a diverse and democratic society. But the facts do not support the contention that district-run schools are the only, or even the best, means of imparting those values. Nor, as we shall see, is it so easy to distinguish a school's effectiveness in teaching basic skills and complex reasoning abilities from their ability to impart desirable values.

Studies of Catholic and Jewish schools have shown repeatedly that graduates have a better understanding of U.S. constitutional processes and rights guarantees, express greater commitment to freedom of speech, espouse more tolerant attitudes toward minor-

29. Fuller, Burr, Huerta, Puryear, and Wexler, *School Choice: Abundant Hope*.

30. Fuller and others take different positions at different times on this distinction between the public and private outcomes of education. At times Fuller labels "boosting the stock of skills necessary for sustaining economic growth" as a public purpose of education.

ity groups, vote more often, and participate more in community affairs than do similar graduates of district-run schools.³¹ This is no surprise; both sets of schools expressly teach American values, the sanctity of the individual, respect for the poor, and the unity of mankind under God. The author's own research on Catholic schools has turned up Catholic school readers from the 1940s that taught the value of neighborhood integration, cross-racial friendships, and preached against the evils of invidious comparisons between rich and poor.³² A yeshiva student's statement tells the story of Jewish education: "We are taught that Jews require a tolerant society, and that the only way to have such a society is to practice tolerance yourself."

New research on much larger samples of schools and students sheds further light on different kinds of schools' effectiveness in teaching prosocial attitudes. Wolf and others studied political tolerance among students at four Texas colleges, three public and one private.³³ They found that students educated in private high schools exhibit more tolerant attitudes about minorities and greater commitment to freedom of speech and open political processes than do students from district-run high schools, controlling for race, income, and other demographic factors. This leads them to conclude, at least for the relatively academically advanced population they studied, that the "assumption of a public school advantage in this area is undeserved. . . . While we should expect more from our public schools we should also fear our private schools less when it comes to instilling civic values in the next generation of Americans."³⁴

Campbell provides more telling evidence, from a study of stu-

31. See Andrew M. Greeley and Peter Rossi, *The Education of Catholic Americans* (Chicago: Aldine, 1966).

32. See the second-grade reader by Sister M. Marguerine, *These Are Our Neighbors* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1942). See in particular the story "Pretty Patches," pp. 189–94.

33. Patrick Wolf, Jay P. Greene, Brett Kleitz, and Kristin Thalhammer, "Private Schooling and Political Tolerance: Evidence from College Students in Texas," paper prepared for presentation at the Conference on School Vouchers, Charters, and Public Education, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, March 9–10, 2000, p. 21.

34. *Ibid.*

dents still in high school.³⁵ Based on an analysis of the 1996 National Household Education Survey, a large, nationally representative sample of students and their parents, Campbell studied the connection between the type of high school a student attends and several measures of prosocial attitudes and behavior. To isolate the effects of the school, Campbell's analysis controls for differences in family income and education, as well as for parents' attitudes about civic engagement, community service, participation in politics, confidence that their participation makes a difference, tolerance, and respect for civil liberties. In comparing students from several types of schools—public schools where students are assigned by neighborhood, magnet public schools, Catholic schools, non-Catholic religious schools, and secular private schools, Campbell does not find any set of prosocial attitudes on which public school students score higher than the other groups of students.³⁶ To the contrary, he finds that

Students in Catholic schools score consistently higher than students in all other schools even when differences in family income, parents' education, and social attitudes are controlled for.

Neighborhood-assigned public schools score lower than the other types of schools on participation in voluntary service, civic speaking and participation skills, confidence that participation makes a difference, and knowledge of facts about politics. Magnet public schools score lower than all private schools on every measure but tolerance and civic skills.

On only one measure—political tolerance—do students in neighborhood-assigned public schools score higher than students in any private school. Non-Catholic religious schools (a broad category covering the range between Christian fundamentalists to Quakers to Muslims) score lowest on this measure.³⁷

35. David Campbell, "Making Democratic Education Work: Schools, Social Capital, and Civic Education," paper prepared for presentation at the Conference on School Vouchers, Charters, and Public Education, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, March 9–10, 2000.

36. These findings closely resemble those of a smaller study reported by Christian Smith and David Sikkink, "Is Private School Privatizing?" *First Things*, April 1999, pp. 16–20.

37. This finding, though the only one that reflects poorly on non-Catholic religious schools' teaching prosocial attitudes, is nonetheless a matter for concern. Many educators specifically fear religious right schools for this reason. (See David C. Berliner, "Educational Psychology Meets the Christian Right: Differing

Perhaps Campbell's most important finding is that students' overall learning is not independent of their attitudes. In general, student attributes like having higher grades, expecting to attend college, spending more time watching or reading news are all highly correlated with the prosocial attitudes and behaviors he measured. Students in Catholic schools display these attributes far more often than one would expect given their family backgrounds; moreover, Catholic schools often place less emphasis on student government, current events classes, and other overt efforts to influence student attitudes. With respect to Catholic schools in particular, Campbell concludes:

This finding about the cognitive dimension of political engagement is perhaps expected, given the literature on the academic effects of attending a Catholic school. It is likely that if a school teaches math and reading well, it also teaches civics well. . . . The fact that the acquisition of political knowledge is a function of the same mechanism as the acquisition of knowledge about chemistry, math, and literature does not detract from its consequences for civic activity.³⁸

Campbell refers to the oft-reproduced finding that Catholic schools are especially effective in teaching academic skills and preparing students for college. Though Catholic schools' results for students of privileged homes are seldom better than those of secu-

Views of Children, Schooling, Teaching, and Learning," *Teachers College Press* vol. 98, no. 3 (spring 1997): 381–416. Although other research shows that graduates of such schools display tolerance and respect for rights (see Wolf et al. *Private Schooling and Political Tolerance*), there is very little research on what religious right schools teach and how the experience affects student attitudes. Such research is clearly desirable. In the meantime, concern about the negative effects of schools that might teach "fringe" ideologies has led the authors of every recent proposal for vouchers, charters, or school contracting to include a provision for government licensing and oversight, specifically to ensure that schools do not teach hatred, violence, or racial superiority. Thus, the safeguards against these evils would be the same under charter, voucher, or contracting proposals as under the present district-run model of public education. See, for example, John Chubb and Terry E. Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1990). See also Paul T. Hill, Lawrence Pierce, and James W. Guthrie, *Reinventing Public Education: How Contracting Can Transform America's Schools* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). See also Finn, Manno, and Vanoureck on charter schools, 1999.

38. Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

lar private schools or public schools in suburban areas, they are markedly better for low-income and minority students, including non-Catholics. These results have been reproduced by researchers from many different disciplines using many different methods and data sets and are about as well established as anything in social science.³⁹ Moreover, explanations for the effectiveness of Catholic schools are strongly consistent with Campbell's conclusions. The key attributes of Catholic schools cited in virtually all studies include focus on core academic skills; shared expectations that even the most disadvantaged can master complex material; a centripetal curriculum that draws all students toward mastery of core skills and disciplines; emphasis on reading, writing, analysis, and debate; community and climate of caring; and emphasis on development of a sense of responsibility for oneself and others.

Catholic schools are certainly not the only ones with these attributes. Other schools, including some district-run schools, also have them—what sets the Catholic schools apart is that they do so consistently. Moreover, it is hard to see how these schools fall short of the aspirations of people like Fuller and Hochschild who think prosocial attitudes are a primary purpose of public education. As Campbell comments, “Strong evidence has accumulated that private—particularly Catholic—schools are a private means to the very public end of facilitating civic engagement.”⁴⁰

However, for the purposes of this chapter it is not necessary to prove that Catholic schools or private schools in general are always better at inducing prosocial attitudes than are district-run

39. See, for example, Bryk, Lee, et al., op. cit.; James S. Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore, *Public and Private High Schools* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 1981); James S. Coleman, *High School Achievement* (New York: Basic Books 1982); James S. Coleman and Thomas Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); Paul T. Hill, Gail E. Foster, and Tamar Gendler, *High Schools with Character* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1990); Hill, *Educational Consequences of Choice*; Jacqueline Jordan Irvine and Michele Foster, eds., *Growing Up African American in Catholic Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997); and Derek Neal, “The Effects of Catholic Secondary Schooling on Academic Achievement,” *Journal of Labor Economics* 15, no. 1 (1997): 98–123.

40. Campbell, *Making Democratic Education Work*, p. 40.

public schools. It is enough to show that district-run schools are definitely not better.

School-based research by the present author and others reveals the great differences among high schools in the opportunities they offer for reading, discussion, reflection, and debate, especially about broad social issues and historical events.⁴¹ These activities do not happen in schools unless they are designed in to the curriculum, instructional methods, use of time, and incentives for teachers and students. These activities are also driven out by conflict, disorder, lack of teacher collaboration, requirements to cover large amounts of unrelated facts in a limited time, and pressures on teachers to avoid controversial topics. Unfortunately, too many district-run public schools—especially for seventh grade and above—have all these attributes. Large size, rapid student and teacher turnover, labor-management conflict, and weak home-school links make rich instruction difficult. Pressures to celebrate all points of view and to steer away from topics that might cause conflict further impoverish discussion. Regrettably, schools that profess to celebrate all groups and to accept all ideas are often forced to skate on the surface, treasuring differences but never exploring issues in any depth.

The conclusion that district-run public schools are probably not better at preparing children to be democratic citizens—and might even be worse than private alternatives—throws a new light on the debate about the goals and meaning of public education. Critics have long argued that mechanisms of government oversight hamstring district-run schools and make many, especially in big cities, unable to concentrate on effective teaching and learning. This analysis has been the basis of reform proposals for public vouchers, charter schools, and school contracting, all of which intend to free government-sponsored schools from the burdens of

41. See, for example, Hill, Foster, and Gendler, *op. cit.* See also Ted Sizer, *Horace's Compromise*; Richard G. Niemi, and Jane Junn, *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). Also see Paul T. Hill, Lawrence Pierce, Paul Schneider, and Sara Taggart, *Schools' Integrative Capital* (Seattle: University of Washington Center on Reinventing Public Education, 1998).

regulation in return for accountability for student learning. The present author, in particular, has argued for reinventing public education, so that elected officials would set goals and standards and hold schools accountable for performance; but school boards would not hire teachers, and bureaucracies would not operate any schools. Every public school would be an independent organization, operating under a performance contract. Schools would receive a set dollar amount for every child they enroll, and be free to use money to hire teachers and administrators, and buy instructional materials and services. A public school would thus be any school that operated under a performance contract with a state or local education authority, accepted public funds as full tuition for its pupils, and was open to all students.

The strongest arguments against these proposals have focused on their supposed effects on racial and class integration and students' ability to learn prosocial attitudes.⁴² Some critics have also claimed that such reforms would do little to make schools more effective, but none have found a basis for claiming they would be worse.

Now it appears that academic learning is not separable from the other purposes of public education: schools that teach effectively can be—and normally are—better at providing diversity of contacts and imparting prosocial attitudes. There is, moreover, no evidence that schools that emphasize attitudes and social experiences are at all effective either in imparting skills and knowledge or in forming students' attitudes.⁴³

Thus we return to the question at the beginning of this section: Do groups that provide alternatives to district-run public schools threaten the goal of public education? The answer must be in the negative. To the contrary, many such groups appear to serve the end of education very well indeed, at least as well and often far better than government-run schools and districts.

42. See, for example, Carol Ascher, Norm Fruchter, and Robert Berne, *Hard Lessons: Public Schools and Privatization* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1996).

43. Hill, Pierce, Schneider, and Taggart, *Schools' Integrative Capital*.

CONCLUSION: WHAT IS PUBLIC?

The foregoing sections answer the questions posed at the beginning:

- First, a parent who transfers her child from a district-run school in which she is not learning to a privately run school where the child has a better chance to learn is not harming public education but advancing it.
- Second, a private group that makes such a transfer possible by paying tuition in an independently run school is also not harming public education. Whether the benefits it creates accrue only to the individual children who transfer or benefit all other students by raising the average quality of education in a locality depends on supply-side responses by district-run and private schools, not on the people who pay for vouchers.
- Third, private entities that offer instruction are not harming public education. In many cases, given the deficiencies of district oversight and school operation, privately run schools may be serving the goals of public education far better than government-run schools.

The reason government is justified in paying for education and requiring school attendance is that all Americans share an interest in children's learning to read, compute, think for themselves, and live as productive and tolerant adults. A school that does not teach children all these things effectively does not serve the public interest, whether it is run by government or by some other entity. A school that teaches children effectively does serve the public interest, whether it is run by government or by some other entity. Similarly, parents who take the initiative to find a school where their children will learn are acting in the public interest, and parents who needlessly let their children remain in a school where they are not learning are sacrificing their own children to no particular end.

The problem with defining public education as a specific set of institutions or processes is that doing so confounds means and ends. In the case of the school Sarie left, it would be public because it was controlled by an elected school board and government bu-

reaucocracy. But did government control mean that Sarie's school advanced the cause of public education? Or for that matter did any legitimate community representative consciously want it to operate as it did? No public deliberative process overtly decided that Sarie's school would become a sick organization and a dumping ground for incompetent individuals. Those outcomes were accidental results of rules and processes created for other reasons: to facilitate politicians' control of public funds, to allow powerful individuals to find jobs for and protect individuals loyal to themselves, to allow senior teachers to teach in the best places, and so on. In the case of Sarie's school these processes created a school that was not public in any real sense, one in which Patricia and other parents could do nothing to get a decent education for their sons and daughters.

The fact that a given school's condition can be traced back to the actions of an elected board or legislature does not mean that it is public. As Terry Moe has argued,⁴⁴ policy and legislation reflect the temporary ascendancy of one coalition of pressure groups after another. Each successful coalition leaves behind rules and procedures that favor its members, so that in the long run the actions of government agencies are constrained in ways that current majorities would never choose. Over time, ironically, past majorities can become more influential than current ones.

There is, moreover, little reason to think that bureaucratic routines and rule-driven practices are compatible with goals of public education. There is a need for some form of public oversight of schools to protect children from schools that do not teach effectively and to make sure taxpayer funds are not stolen or used to advocate violent solutions to social problems. Public oversight need not result in coercion or uniformity. The key is to redefine the powers of local school boards so that they can authorize but not run schools, and oversee schools solely on the basis of whether students learn, not on the basis of rule compliance.⁴⁵ A school

44. See Terry E. Moe, "The Politics of Bureaucratic Structure," in John E. Chubb and Paul E. Peterson, *Can the Government Govern?* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1989).

45. See Paul T. Hill, Lawrence Pierce, and James W. Guthrie, *Reinventing Public Education: How Contracting Can Transform America's Schools* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

board so empowered could tend a diverse portfolio of schools, creating new alternatives as needs arose and reassigning public funds from ineffective providers to effective ones.

Defining public education as a commitment to a goal of universal competency rather than as a fixed set of institutions requires a continual search for the best way to educate children and is open to the possibility that any locality might pursue many different approaches. It makes public education a constant topic of discussion and experimentation, not a set of permanent arrangements. It is consistent with a democratic society that can innovate, trying new structures and methods and discarding old ones.

Public education is a set of goals: universal education, focused on learning, economic, social, and political opportunity for all, community, citizenship, and tolerance. Americans rightly celebrate public education as a bulwark of democracy. But when we confuse the goals of public education with the means by which we provide it, we can give undeserved protection to unproductive institutions that are nothing more than accidents of politics and history.