

# The Changing Landscape of U.S. Education

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Since the 1960s, the educational landscape of the United States has been swept by the winds of change. Old educational forms have been reformed and new ones created. For example, the public sector now includes magnet and charter schools, while the private sector has further diversified the development of various kinds of independent Christian schools, Muslim schools, and a revival of the virtually extinct practice of home schooling. Despite standardizing pressures driven largely by recent accountability reforms, alternative forms of schooling are increasing in number and popularity. Other innovations, such as experimental voucher programs in Milwaukee and Cleveland and various kinds of tax credits for educational expenses and donations, suggest that the trend toward institutional diversity is being paralleled by a blurring of the line between the state and private sectors. If these two trends continue, the educational landscape of the future may bear a resemblance to that of the distant past.

## COLONIAL EDUCATIONAL PLURALISM

Prior to the advent of modern public education in the mid-19th century, institutional diversity dominated U.S. education, and the line between “public” and “private” schools was often blurred. Colonial education consisted of an incredible variety of institutions, including a significant amount of home education. From the town schools of var-

ious types, dame schools—where women taught reading skills in their homes for a small fee—and private-venture schools of New England; to the various denominational, charity, and pay schools of the Middle Colonies; to the old-field schools and Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts missionary efforts in the South; to academies that appeared throughout the provinces in the 1700s, the colonial educational landscape was dotted with many kinds of institutions. Classifying schools as purely public or private is problematic from a historical perspective. To most colonials, a school was public if it served a public purpose, such as promoting civic responsibility. Public education, therefore, did not necessarily require public support and control (Bailyn 1960; Carper 2000).

Indeed, colonial institutions were supported from various sources, including taxation, land grants by the colony to a town for school purposes, private subscriptions, bequests and donations, endowments, tuition, lotteries, rents, and income from public utilities, such as fisheries. It was not unusual for educational institutions to depend on support from a variety of public and private sources. Often, schools administered by public officials charged tuition to students able to pay, while institutions under the control of boards of trustees or religious bodies received public funds or land grants, frequently for providing charity education for the poor, and were often perceived as public schools.

For example, “public” town schools in Massachusetts, mandated by the famous 1647 “Old Deluder” school law, were often funded by tuition charges to parents of school children as well as by taxes. Entrance fees and firewood charges were also levied occasionally. On the other hand, schools not under town control and heavily dependent on tuition charges received local and colonial land grants and

appropriations as well as a share of town taxes. In 1660, for example, the privately endowed Roxbury Grammar School received 500 acres of land from the General Court. Dame schools likewise often received public aid. This pattern of mixed support of schools was common in New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts. Although schooling opportunities in Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia were fewer than in New England, patterns of school finance were similar. In Virginia, for instance, schools considered orthodox (Anglican) could obtain public funds to defray the costs of educating children too poor to pay tuition charges (Carper 1991; Gabel 1937).

Reflecting the religious diversity of the region, denominational schooling was prevalent in the Middle Colonies. Dutch Reformed, Lutherans, Mennonites, Amish, Moravians, Quakers, Baptists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Catholics established schools throughout the region for members of their respective congregations and occasionally opened them to all children in a given locality. For instance, the Quakers opened the William Penn Charter School in 1689; the school was chartered in 1697 as a *public* grammar school to instruct the rich at “reasonable rates, and the poor...for nothing.” With the exception of the Dutch Reformed schools in New Netherlands, these denominational institutions apparently received little tax support during the colonial period (Carper 1991).

This broad concept of education persisted without major modification throughout the Early National Period (circa 1780s to 1820s). Almost every state provided land grants or financial aid to academies. Primary religious and private schools also received public support in many states, including Pennsylvania, Georgia, Connecticut, Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia, South Carolina, Indiana, New York, Illinois, and Maryland. Usually tax support was conditional upon providing charity education for poor students. Even privately organized Sunday schools received public funds from at least three states—Delaware, Virginia, and Maryland (Carper 1991; Gabel 1937).

By the 1820s, private and quasi-public schooling was widely available to children of European-American citizens in most settled parts of the country, though less so in the South. This was due primarily to the efforts of parents, churches, voluntary associations, entrepreneurs, and local communities rather than state mandates. In some areas, school attendance was nearly universal, though often irregular. Despite some references to common pay schools as private and charity school systems as public, these terms still lacked their modern connotations. Public funding of privately controlled institutions was a common practice. During the next three decades, however, this multifaceted educational arrangement inherited from the Colonial Era would be significantly altered (Cremin 1977; Kaestle 1983; Reese 1995).

## COMMON SCHOOL REFORM

The middle decades of the 19th century marked a period of intense debate and reform focusing on issues of control, finance, and curriculum that led to major changes in educational beliefs and practices. The modern concept and practice of public schooling was gradually emerging in the United States. Distressed by the social and cultural tensions wrought by mid-19th-century urbanization, industrialization, and immigration—that included many Roman Catholics—and energized by the values and beliefs of republicanism, Protestantism, and capitalism, educational reformers like Horace Mann touted the messianic power of tax-supported, universal common schooling. Common schools, proponents argued, would create a moral, disciplined, and unified population prepared to participate in U.S. political, social, and economic life. Private schools, which reformers believed would sabotage the goals of common schooling, were often cast as divisive, undemocratic, and inimical to the public interest (Glenn 1988; Kaestle 1983; Reese 1995).

With the exception of a few groups, such as Lutheran and Calvinist bodies that designed schools to preserve cultural or confessional purity, Protestants generally supported the common school movement. Indeed, many were in the vanguard of the reform effort. Rather than sharing public funds with Roman Catholic schools, as Bishop John Hughes proposed in the early 1840s in New York City, they united behind the “non-sectarian” (in reality, pan-Protestant) common school as the sole recipient of government funds for education. Catholic schools and those of other dissenters from the common school movement were thus denied tax dollars as well as legitimacy (Carper 2000; Curran 1954; Jorgenson 1987).

Reformers’ efforts in the antebellum North were generally successful. By 1860, state legislatures had created common school systems. Common school reform led to a clear line of demarcation between private education and public schooling as states eliminated tax support for private schools, increased expenditures for public schools, and experienced a marked expansion of enrollment in the public sector.

As noted earlier, the distinction between public and private was still fuzzy in the early 19th century. By the 1860s, however, the label “public” became increasingly associated with free, tax-supported schools under government control. Driven to some degree by anti-Catholicism, Michigan (1835), New Hampshire (1848), Ohio (1851), Massachusetts (1855), Illinois (1855), California (1855), and New Jersey (1866), eliminated government funding of private schools by either statute or constitutional provision. Though these restrictions were neither ironclad nor consistently enforced, particularly as applied to secondary

schools, tax subsidies for private schools dropped precipitously after the Civil War as expenditures for public education increased markedly. In 1850, for example, only 47 percent of the \$16.1 million spent on schools and colleges came from the public purse. By 1870, however, expenditures for schooling at all levels surged to \$95.4 million, with 65 percent coming from public sources and more than 90 percent of the public school funds derived from public sources (Carper 1991, 1998; Cremin 1980).

Paralleling the sharpening distinction between public and private education, and a growing commitment to public funding, was a shift in enrollment from more or less private schools to public schools as free common schooling became more accessible and acceptable and charity schools came under the public aegis. This trend accelerated in the late 1800s as the modern definition of public was extended to secondary education and many academies were incorporated into expanding public systems. Academies that were not transformed into public high schools or state normal schools either went defunct or redefined themselves as colleges or elite boarding schools (Cremin 1980; Kaestle 1983; Reese 1995).

By 1890, then, there was far less institutional diversity in U.S. education than 100 years earlier. Ninety-two percent of school children in the country were enrolled in state school systems; 65 percent of the remainder attended the burgeoning Roman Catholic schools, with most of the rest in Lutheran, Reformed, Episcopal, or independent institutions (Carper 1991).

As had been the case with the common school movement, protean educational reform in the Progressive Era impacted private as well as public schools. Although pedagogical progressives stimulated the creation of independent schools devoted to active, child-centered learning, such as Marietta Johnson's School of Organic Education (1907) and Caroline Pratt's Play School (1914), administrative progressives influenced efforts to regulate alternatives to the public schools or simply to abolish them. Roman Catholic and Lutheran schools bore the brunt of these initiatives during the late 19th and the first quarter of the 20th centuries. Restrictions on foreign-language instruction were the most common form of state regulation of nonpublic schools, but several states attempted to go much further. In 1922, for example, Oregon required that, with few exceptions, all children between the ages of eight and 16 attend public schools. Drawing upon *Meyer v. Nebraska* (1923), which overturned restrictions on foreign-language instruction in nonpublic schools, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925) declared Oregon's law unconstitutional. In this case, the court asserted the right of private schools to exist, affirmed the fundamental right of parents to direct the "education and upbringing" of their children, and maintained that the state could "reasonably"

regulate nonpublic schools (Cremin 1988; Randall 1994; Ross 1994).

After the passions of World War I and the "Red Scare" subsided and immigration rates fell precipitously, major private school groups became more accepting of the public school model and associated accreditation and certification standards. As a consequence, disputes between the state and private schools in general and religious schools in particular declined markedly after 1930. For nearly four decades, guidelines for state regulation of private schools laid down in *Meyer* and *Pierce* were widely accepted, and, at least in the realm of state regulation, peaceful coexistence was the rule.

## DIVERSITY REDIVIVUS

Private as well as public institutions have been affected by both the tumultuous, two-decade-long period of reform that commenced in the late 1950s and the era of reform that began in the mid-1980s (Tyack and Cuban 1995). Equality concerns of the earlier period certainly have impacted alternatives to the state system. While the federal government provided funds for services for disadvantaged students in private schools, it also threatened some of them. In particular, the "segregation academies" founded in the South between the mid-1960s and early '70s—in response to court-ordered integration of public schools—lost their tax-exempt status for failure to abide by civil rights regulations (Nevin and Bills 1976; Skerry 1980). At the same time, however, many private schools voluntarily opened their doors to minorities who sought alternatives to public schools. As early as 1982, James Coleman (1982) had asserted that the private sector was more racially integrated than the public sector.

Besides the increase in minority enrollments, the nonpublic sector has been shaped by three additional trends since the 1960s. First, though enrollment in the private sector has fallen from about 15 percent of the elementary and secondary student population in the mid-1960s to around 11 percent currently, enrollment patterns within the sector have shifted markedly. Although Catholic school enrollment has increased slightly since the mid-1990s to approximately 2.5 million, it is down considerably from the high watermark of 5.6 million students in 1965. On the other hand, enrollment in other religious and nonreligious school groups has increased significantly, to 35 and 15 percent, respectively, in 1995. (Carper 1991; National Center for Education Statistics 1998; 2000).

Second, since the mid-1960s, many evangelical Protestants and their churches have forsaken their long-standing commitment to public education and founded at least 10,000 independent Christian day schools, including a

small but growing number established by and for African Americans. In the 1970s and '80s, these Christian schools were occasionally embroiled in legal battles over the extent to which religious educational institutions must abide by rules and regulations applied to public schools (Carper 1983; 1985; 1997). In the mid-1990s, enrollment in these schools had topped one million.

Finally, adding further to the diversity of educational institutions in the United States, a growing number of middle-class parents, a majority of whom would be classified as conservative Christians, have chosen to teach their children at home since the 1970s. Their decision to revert to a practice common 300 years ago has been influenced by the same factors that contributed to the growth of the 1960s and '70s alternative school movement—objections to the rigidity of public school pedagogy and structure—and the aforementioned Christian day school movement—objections to the religious, moral, and academic climate of public education. Like other patrons of private schools, home school parents have often clashed with government officials regarding regulation of home education. Such conflict has not slowed the growth of this alternative to public and private schooling that now embraces more than 1 million children as compared to a mere 10,000–15,000 in the late 1970s (Carper 2000; Ray 1997).

Counting children taught by their parents, enrollment in the private sector, including at least 30 different groups of religious and nonaffiliated schools, now exceeds the 1965 level. Alternatives to the traditional school are also thriving in the public sector. For example, since the first charter school was founded in 1991, the number of these quasi-independent public schools has increased to more than 1,700, with an enrollment of about 400,000 students (Center for Education Reform 2000).

Accompanying the increasing diversity in both public and private sectors, experimental voucher programs and tax credits for educational expenses and donations suggest the line between the two sectors is becoming more blurred. With its 2000 decision in *Mitchell v. Helms* upholding government provision of computer resources to students in nonpublic schools, the U.S. Supreme Court appears to have adopted a strong position that government aid may be directed toward the education of children regardless of their enrollment status. Some observers of the court believe that this decision suggests that it would uphold a carefully crafted voucher program. Such a reform would certainly further blur the line between the nongovernment and public sectors (Bork, Smolin, Kmiec, George, Uhlmann, and McConnell 2000).

Often, the future is merely the past in different garb. If the aforementioned trends continue, perhaps the educational landscape of the United States will come to resemble that of the Colonial Era, with a variety of educational institutions sharing equally in public resources and contribut-

ing in different ways to the accomplishment of public purposes. Education of the public, rather than public education, might become the primary concern of the state. The winds of change continue to blow.

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