

MODERN AMERICAN EDUCATION: A PRODUCT OF IDEAS

By Christine Cooke

SUMMARY

Every human being is created to do great things. But each has different talents, weaknesses, and interests, and each learns in ways particular to him or her. Sutherland Institute believes that keeping in mind the unique potential of individuals can help us create an ideal education system. We understand that ideas have consequences.

Our philosophy contends that to create an educational system that meets the unique needs of children, we must first combat three widespread ideas that are holding us back: (1) all students are the same, (2) schooling is primarily about social and political objectives, and (3) the government is responsible for educating children.

This paper describes how these ideas stem from popular philosophies and traditions but says that asking big bold questions about our approach to education can lead us to a change in thinking and new ideas. In doing so, we can transform education to meet the needs and potential of the individual student.

THE POWER OF IDEAS

Every human being is created to do great things. Yet each has different strengths, weaknesses, talents, and interests in which to do so, and each learns in ways particular to him or her.

An ideal education system would reflect these ideas. It would provide for diversity in how children learn; recognize parents as decision-makers; invite education entrepreneurs to create options; and empower educators with resources necessary to meet unique needs. It would liberate human potential.

In practice, this would look like a vibrant education market that offers a wealth of choices in schools, programs, services and therapies. Accompanying the market would be an environment that equips parents and students with accurate information about their options, and policy mechanisms that allow families to choose a learning path for their student.

Unfortunately, the modern American education system has a ways to go before it reflects this diversity in human need, spirit and potential.

Consider these questions. Why, in our current education system, do we believe that students are best categorized by age-based grade levels? Why do we believe a single mode of instruction – usually listening to one teacher while sitting in desks – will meet the learning needs of diverse students? Why do we believe that standardized tests can measure competency for a range of students? Why do we look to state schools to address social ills? The reason is simple: we have inherited education ideas that teach us to be comfortable with these practices.

POPULAR IDEAS THAT SHAPE AMERICAN EDUCATION POLICY

Ideas are powerful. Our education system is as much a reflection of law as it is our philosophy and culture. We know that the philosophical ideas that elected officials bring to policy dialogue drive the debate that ultimately determines policy.¹ Similarly, the pedagogical and administrative beliefs that teachers and administrators bring to their jobs influence how policies will be

implemented in schools. Likewise, ideas adopted by the public affect the kind of education we demand. Ideas have real consequences.² If we want to create the best education system possible, we have to evaluate the ideas that go into our policymaking, and base our philosophy on principles.

There are at least three widespread ideas that are preventing the current American education system from being a dynamic, robust marketplace of options that meet the needs of all students. These are that: (1) all students are the same, (2) schooling is primarily about social and political objectives, and (3) the government is responsible for educating children.

INHERITED IDEA: ALL STUDENTS ARE THE SAME

An idea embedded in American thinking is that all students are the same – particularly those of the same age. This concept is apparent in one of the most recognizable characteristics of schools – age-cohorts called “grade levels.” Very often in our culture, age and grade are synonymous. Without realizing it, we’ve adopted the viewpoint that children of a similar age also share the same intellectual, emotional and social needs or interests. We’ve done so even though most people would agree that every individual is unique.

The idea that children are all the same affects our approach to education in even deeper ways. In our culture, “education” generally means “going to school.” The term “school” usually evokes images of students sitting in desks for eight 50-minute periods. Likewise, “testing” makes us think of bubble sheets, where all kids are assessed using a uniform measurement.

Some of these practices are traceable to philosophies passed down from influential thinkers like Horace Mann. Mann, known as the Father of the Common School Movement, helped create much of what we know about today’s public school.³ Prior to the 1830s, the idea that parents took care of educating their children was still popular.⁴ But around that time, Mann championed the common school, a place where all students would come to learn.⁵ He believed that education should be universal, free (read tax-subsidized), and nonsectarian.⁶ These are

features of our public school system today.

However, Mann’s most visible contribution to the public school is its distinctive, factory-like organization, which he helped bring to America from Prussia.⁷ After the publication of the influential book on Prussian education, written by French philosopher Victor Cousin, Mann visited Europe and reported:⁸

“The first element of superiority in a Prussian school ... consists in the proper classification of the scholars. In all places where the numbers are sufficiently large to allow it the children are divided according to ages and attainments, and a single teacher has charge only of a single class.”⁹

We already know the Prussian model of “dividing according to ages” with “a single teacher” is widespread in America.¹⁰ It’s a feature in nearly every school. Even so-called reforms fit within this framework. For instance, the popular reform called “standards-based education” requires education bodies to create grade-level standards and administer grade-level standardized tests.¹¹ Thus, the current implementation of standards-based reform is rooted in the idea that children’s needs can be best identified by their age instead of interest, or academic strengths and weaknesses. It’s worth questioning whether grade levels by age have academic value or whether they’re simply traditions of efficiency.¹² There is something to be said for developmentally appropriate curriculum, but not all students meet developmental benchmarks at the same age.¹³ Some children of a particular age are gifted in math, some struggle with dyslexia, and others may have social challenges. Through Mann, Prussian concepts about education have influenced American education culture, which has constructed a system of learning with similarly arbitrary rules.

One example of the arbitrary standardized model failing to educate someone with unique needs is Jamie Martin from Park City High School.¹⁴ She struggled with dyslexia and attention deficit disorder, and during high school she transitioned from home school to public school.¹⁵ Her challenges in the traditional classroom left her feeling frustrated.¹⁶ Luckily, her school offered a rare hands-on, extended-period, STEM program that allowed her to work with students outside of her grade, collaborate with

groups and business communities, and create solutions to business problems.¹⁷ It was a nontraditional option that freed her to learn and later to be accepted to college – an option she had nearly ruled out.¹⁸

Fortunately, outside of their value as human beings and standing before the law – we don't need to adopt the idea that all children are the same. We don't have to be comfortable with a one-size-fits-all education. Instead, we can adopt a more powerful idea – that children are unique individuals with grand destinations, which they have the power to determine for themselves.

Understanding this, we will be less satisfied with access to an “equal” education and strive for an “equitable” education – meaning an education that takes into account the characteristics of the student.¹⁹ As a result, our policymakers will be more likely to enact policies that give options to parents and children to create an education fitted to their unique needs.

INHERITED IDEA: EDUCATION IS PRIMARILY ABOUT SOCIAL AND POLITICAL RESULTS

We've also adopted an idea that “going to school” can be primarily about social or political ends. It's true that education bears fruit on a societal level. This can be a wonderful and important side effect. In fact, there is a case to be made that the continuation of our nation depends upon education. Thomas Jefferson said, “Educate and inform the whole mass of the people, enable them to see that it is their interest to preserve peace and order, and they will preserve it. ... They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty.”²⁰

At the same time, we should understand that societal benefits are the natural result of adequately educating the individual, who can reason, innovate, and contribute of his or her free will. The idea that education is primarily about assimilation, unity, equality or socialization opens up the possibility of glossing over the academic needs of the individual for a collective cause. Modern problems such as widespread bullying, extreme political polarization, income inequality, and continued racism, despite more than a century of public schooling, suggests that public schools, on average, may not be very good at com-

bating these social or political problems.

One of the reasons Horace Mann promoted the “common school” was that he hoped the shared experience would bring greater political stability, improve social harmony, and mitigate class conflict.²¹

One scholar explains, “The term [common school] refers ... to a program of educational reform, indeed of social reform through education. The heart of this program ... is the deliberate effort to create in the entire youth of a nation common attitudes, loyalties, and values, and to do so under central direction by the state. In this agenda ‘moral education’ and the shaping of a shared national identity were of considerably more ultimate importance than teaching basic academic skills.”²² Improving social harmony and mitigating class conflict would be important results, but the primary purpose of education is the learning and improvement of the individual.

Mann's ideas paved the way for people like John Dewey, a succeeding education philosopher known for his ideas, which were central to the Progressive Movement in education.²⁴

Dewey said, “The assimilative force of the American public school is eloquent testimony to the efficacy of the common and balanced appeal.” He said, “Common subject matter accustoms all to a unity of outlook upon a broader horizon than is visible to the members of any group while it is isolated.”²⁵

One scholar wrote that in Dewey's mind, public education was about social transformation. “Dewey argues that the educational experience should be, as much as possible, a microcosm of social life. If the schoolhouse is society on a small scale, then the socialization, not the mere education, of the pupil becomes the primary task of the educator.”²⁶

Even Mann's and Dewey's philosophies have their roots in earlier philosophies; for example, the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a philosopher famous for his education text called *Emile, Or On Education*.²⁷ “Unification through common socialization” was a feature of the political theories surrounding Rousseau's work.²⁸

Making education accessible to students regardless of religious, class, or ethnic background is a profoundly important goal. However, school should not be viewed primarily as a social tool or an “assimilative force.” Neither should its primary purpose be a “unity of outlook” or “socialization.” For example, education policy bandwidth has been used to create unpopular nationalized academic standards to ensure fairness across demographics, complicated transgender bathroom policies to further a novel definition of equality, and clunky large-scale testing requirements for nationwide accountability.^{29 30 31} Education should be about allowing the individual to learn, grow and progress and we should be discussing innovations that help children learn at their pace and need.

Fortunately, we don’t have to be comfortable with the idea that schooling is a social tool. Instead, we can keep in mind the principle that education is about the potential of the individual. Learning is a human endeavor that existed long before formal education systems and will continue to do so outside of it. When we adopt this idea, we are more likely to make policies that give parents and students the opportunity to meet their specific academic needs. We are more likely to do away with policies that make sense for political purposes but which distract from addressing a person’s development. In so doing, we would create an American education system that refocuses on the student.

INHERITED IDEA: THE GOVERNMENT IS RESPONSIBLE FOR EDUCATING CHILDREN

A third idea we’ve adopted is that the government is primarily responsible for educating children. Citizens’ reliance on elected officials to reform education, and their deference to those officials, demonstrates this emphasis on the government’s role in education. Additionally, the vast majority of American students are enrolled in public schools, so it may appear that educating children is a privilege of the state.³²

Overemphasizing the role of government in education is an idea that likely stems from statutory and constitutional provisions, but it’s a misunderstanding that can be easily addressed. The truth is parents

are responsible for the learning of their children.

For instance, nearly every state constitution requires the state to provide a free education.³³ The Supreme Court of the United States has said that education is “perhaps the most important function of state and local governments” because “it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education.”³⁴ The Court has said, “[p]roviding public schools ranks at the very apex of the function of a State.”³⁵

At the same time, according to the United States Supreme Court there is no fundamental right to an education.³⁶ Additionally, constitutional law says that parents have the right to raise and educate their children as they think is best. For example, the Supreme Court of the United States, in the 1972 case *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, said, “The history and culture of Western civilization reflect a strong tradition of parental concern for the nurture and upbringing of their children. This primary role of the parents in the upbringing of their children is now established beyond debate as an enduring American tradition.”³⁷

Likewise, in the 2000 case *Troxel et vir. v. Granville* the Court said that a parent’s interest in the care, custody and control of his or her children is “perhaps the oldest of the fundamental liberty interests recognized by this court.”³⁸ The court continued, “More than 75 years ago ... we held that the ‘liberty’ protected by the Due Process Clause includes the right of parents to ‘establish a home and bring up children’ and ‘to control the education of their own.’”³⁹ Some states have even codified in state statute that parents are primarily responsible for educating their student while the state plays a secondary role.

The key here is that states must provide a public education, but parents do not have to choose it. The establishment of a school system does not remove a parent’s right to control the education of their child. Public school must be available, but for parents, it should be an option among many.

The idea that government holds the ultimate reins in education is a misunderstanding that we need not accept. Instead, we can focus on the truth that parents are responsible for education. With this principle in mind, we will be less likely to simply defer to

elected officials on issues like curriculum, standards, testing, or controversial issues like sex education. We will demand parents have a role in policy decisions as well as political processes so their voice can be heard before unwieldy regulations or reforms are adopted. Keeping in mind correct principles, parents will be more able to take their place as directors of education.

CONCLUSION

Ideas are powerful. Law, policies and practices start as thoughts, which is why we should be aware of the philosophies we adopt. At Sutherland Institute we believe that in order to get education right, we need to focus on ideas grounded in correct principles: that each child is created to learn, that systems of education are about the child, and that parents should be treated as decision-makers in education. Influenced by these, our policies can align to create a marketplace of options that fit the myriad unique educational needs and circumstances that exist, past outdated ideas and limiting philosophies to a new way of thinking about education – one that respects the uniqueness of the pupil.

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¹ Richard M. Weaver, "Ideas Have Consequences," The University of Chicago Press (1943), 3.

² Ibid.

³ "Only a Teacher: Schoolhouse Pioneers – Horace Mann," KUED 7, PBS, accessed October 13, 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/onlyateacher/horace.html>.

⁴ "Common School Movement," Encyclopedia.com, accessed October 13, 2016, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/history/united-states-and-canada/us-history/common-school-movement>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Lawrence A. Cremin, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Horace Mann," accessed May 12, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Horace-Mann>.

⁷ Charles Leslie Glenn, Jr., *The Myth of the Common School* (The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 109.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Second Annual Report of the Board of Education together with the Second Annual Report of the Secretary of the Board (1843).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Standards, Assessments, and Accountability," National Academy of Education (2009).

¹² Glenn, 113.

¹³ "Developmentally Appropriate Practice" (DAP), National Association for the Education of Young Children, accessed May 12, 2016, <http://www.naeyc.org/DAP>.

¹⁴ Jasen Lee, "Programs give students real world work experience in high school," *Deseret News*, May 26, 2014.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Blair Mann, "Equity and Equality Are not Equal," The Education Trust, Mar 12, 2014, <https://edtrust.org/the-equity-line/equity-and-equality-are-not-equal/>.

²⁰ "From Thomas Jefferson to Uriah Forrest, with Enclosure, 31 December 1787," *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified October 5, 2016, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-12-02-0490>.

²¹ "Only a Teacher: Schoolhouse Pioneers – Horace Mann."

²² Graham Warder, "Horace Mann and the Creation of the Common School," Disability History Museum, <http://www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/edu/essay.html?id=42> (accessed Oct 14, 2016).

²³ Glenn, 4.

²⁴ "Only a Teacher: Schoolhouse Pioneers – John Dewey," KUED 7, PBS, accessed October 13, 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/onlyateacher/john.html>.

²⁵ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, (New York: Free Press, 1916 [1966]), 21-22.

²⁶ Henry T. Edmondson III, *John Dewey and the Decline of American Education*, (ISI Books, 2006), 40.

²⁷ Glenn, 4-5.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Common Core State Standards Initiative: Preparing America's Students for College & Career, accessed Oct 14, 2016, <http://www.corestandards.org/>.

³⁰ Dear Colleague Letter on Transgender Students: Notice of Language Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, U.S. Department of Edu-

cation, Office for Civil Rights, May 13, 2016.

³¹ No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, § 115, Stat. 1425 (2002).

³² "School Enrollment in the United States: 2011," <https://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p20-571.pdf>.

³³ Paul Hill, Lawrence C. Pierce, and James W. Guthrie, *Reinventing Public Education: How Contracting Can Transform America's Schools* (The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 220.

³⁴ *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

³⁵ *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205, 213 (1972).

³⁶ *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* (1973).

³⁷ *Wisconsin*, 406 U.S. 205, 213.

³⁸ *Troxel et vir v. Granville*, 530 U.S. 57 (2000).

³⁹ *Ibid.*

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