Public education means different things in different countries. In the United States, it means government-funded and
government-delivered schooling—schooling that is supposedly ideologically neutral but in fact reflects a progressive
tradition strongly committed to beliefs and to an educational philosophy rejected by many Americans. Not surprisingly,
we now fight a great deal about public education. Other democracies fight about education, too, but less divisively,
because for them, “public education” means educational pluralism: government support for diverse institutions that reflect
a wide variety of beliefs and commitments.

One hundred and fifty years ago, America’s elites, faced with waves of (mostly Catholic, ethnic, and poor) immigrants,
concluded that only state-enforced uniformity could effectively make one people out of many. Once bitterly contested on
grounds of religious liberty, this belief in the uniform common school, and its ability to create citizens out of disparate
groups, is now so embedded in our consciousness that we cannot imagine public education otherwise.

Because the secularist view has dominated American public education since the mid-twentieth century, many Americans
reflexively confuse “secularity” with “neutrality.” Some religious groups have responded by creating parallel educational
institutions.

Other liberal democracies took a different view. Beginning in the nineteenth century, most Western countries established
centralized standards and funding that supported a variety of institutions with diverse philosophies of education, religious
and cultural commitments, and student populations. Today, the Netherlands supports more than thirty types of schools on
equal footing, and in England over 60 percent of Jewish children attend Jewish day school at state expense. Nearly a
quarter of Italy’s schools are fully supported nonstate schools. Israel’s state schools are religious or secular, Hebrew- or
Arabic-language, and the government funds from 55 to 75 percent of the costs of almost all nonstate schools. Educational
diversity is increasing exponentially in places such as Australia and Sweden, and India is introducing vouchers in some of
its provinces.

What binds the diverse groups and their schools together in most cases is commitment to a national (or regional)
curriculum and assessments, so that children in quite different classrooms engage in a common civic and academic
project. These curricula tend to prescribe general rather than specific goals (such as demonstrating knowledge of a
particular genre of English literature rather than studying particular sonnets) and are often negotiated between national
and local governments.

Recent American educational innovation—charter schools, vouchers, cyber-education, Teach for America—are
encouraging educational diversity, but they can only go so far. Lasting, structural change requires reframing “public
education” to mean publicly funded or publicly supported, not exclusively publicly delivered, education. This in turn
requires a different political philosophy, a turn to a model of education based on civil society rather than state control.

It is important to note that educational pluralism is not a proxy for religious education, although it does embrace religious
as well as secular, philosophical, and pedagogical variety. Nor is it tantamount to “privatizing education.” Rather, it
affirms both the dignity of diverse commitments and society’s interest in the nurture of the next generation.

Educational pluralism would certainly not solve all of America’s educational troubles, and it would generate concerns of
its own. However, it offers an honest acknowledgement of the myriad value judgments inherent in any education and
generously accommodates a variety of beliefs and opinions in a way more congruous with the United States’ democratic political philosophy than does the current system. While some people fear that such pluralism would produce division and harm the students educationally, evidence suggests that, in fact, pluralism often yields superior civic and academic results.

Educational pluralism is also more honest than the current model, because it acknowledges that education always rests upon particular views about what education is for, who the child is, what role the teacher and school play, and how the atmosphere of the school reflects those beliefs. As educational theorist Charles Glenn wrote in *The Myth of the Common School*, “Formal education . . . presents pictures or maps of reality that reflect, unavoidably, particular choices about what is certain and what in question, what is significant and what unworthy of notice. No aspect of schooling can be truly neutral.” Every aspect of schooling reflects these maps, even implicitly, and drawing them is the work of educational philosophy. The variety that has played out in American education is instructive.

The first difference to be addressed is that over the question: What is education for? Educational theorists have advocated education for citizenship, for survival, for vocation, for social adjustment, for self-expression, for social reform, and for spiritual development—to name a few of the goals they have offered over the last century. Although these emphases are not necessarily mutually exclusive, in practice one tends to dominate others.

Educational leaders in the early republic thought education existed to equalize opportunity and to form wise citizens by popularizing an aristocratic, humanistic curriculum. Social Darwinists in the late-nineteenth century contended that education should “fit children to life” in industrial society, not guide them towards eternal questions.

Following Rousseau, romantic progressives preferred (and still prefer) education for self-expression, and they saw themselves as drawing out the child’s innate nature, not imparting wisdom or information. Radicals from the 1920s on legitimated education only insofar as it involved “revolutionary praxis.” On the other side, character-education advocates assert the primacy of the traditional virtues as the first order of the classroom.

Even if Americans agreed about the purposes of education, however, the ways we think about the nature of the child and the role of teachers lead to other difficult differences. Two conflicts over these questions have had particular force in American education: the first between the traditionalist and the progressive, the second between the religionist and the secularist. Both conflicts began early in the last century and continue today as strongly as ever.

Traditionalists view the child as the recipient of knowledge that introduces him into the great human conversation and opens doors to the widest possible life opportunities. They are likely to support a core curriculum taught in chronological order, high academic standards for all students, and subject rather than education degrees for teachers. Progressives, in contrast, view the child as the creator of knowledge, not the recipient of information deemed important by others. They shy away from the traditional curriculum in favor of studies that attempt to foster social development or creative expression. They believe that a more open-ended classroom trains students to think critically in a way that traditional education does not.

Secularists view the child primarily as an autonomous individual who must, therefore, be entirely uncoerced in decisions as personal as religious belief. Although an educational secularist may be religious himself, he fears the possibility of religious indoctrination and therefore believes the teacher’s role is to train the child’s emotions and intellect while remaining completely agnostic about religious faith. Religious people assert that children are spiritual as well as intellectual and emotional beings and that omitting questions of belief is itself indoctrination of another kind.

Progressive approaches have dominated colleges of education and school districts since the 1920s. The current debate over academic standards needs to be seen in this light: Today’s educators have often been trained in progressive pedagogies, but state legislatures are now asking them to teach a more prescribed curriculum and to participate in high-stakes academic assessments. This has caused a struggle in nearly every state.

Educational pluralism offers a way out of these conflicts—over what education is for, who the child is, and what role teachers and schools should play—since it refuses to privilege one view over another. Instead of progressive and traditionalist educators competing for ideological dominance, they can populate and influence schools that want their particular approach. Instead of pretending to be ideologically neutral, public schooling could offer parents a variety of choices that reflect their beliefs and their children’s pedagogical needs. In short, educational pluralism opens up this conversation in a way that purported neutrality and uniformity cannot.
Educational pluralism is not only more honest about the formational nature of education and the deep differences between pedagogical approaches, but the political philosophy that supports it and the institutions it generates are more democratic than our present system.

Some education reformers speak the language of the market, as if educational choice were akin to buying a car or a house, but educational pluralism recognizes that education is a public good, not merely an individual choice. It attempts to balance parental commitments with common standards and goals. It reflects an understanding of civil society that views the state as the guarantor of a rich social ecology, not its chief actor. This is the philosophy in force in many liberal democracies. In contrast, the United States has adopted a state-control model for education, in which the government ensures its own version of the good above all others.

Another way to look at this matter is to distinguish between “republican” and “liberal-pluralist” secularisms, as Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor do in their new book, Secularism and Freedom of Conscience. The republican version, seen in the educational systems of the United States and (to some extent) France, favors a common civic identity shorn of sectarian particularity. The liberal-pluralist version, which informs education in most other democracies, allows distinctive beliefs in the public square (or public education) as long as they do not infringe upon the rights of others or place undue burdens upon public institutions.

The institutions created by educational pluralism reduce the risk of majority domination and foster democratic accountability. As educational theorist and attorney Lawrence Weinberg put it in his book Religious Charter Schools, “by choosing a singular worldview, whether it is the nondenominational Protestantism of the nineteenth century, or the supposed secular humanism of the late twentieth century, public education is defining orthodoxy.” Uniformity breeds indoctrination of the worst kind, because it is implicit and unacknowledged. Pluralism, in contrast, makes everyone aware of the variety of viewpoints.

Some advocates for the current American model worry that pluralism would reduce accountability. The political philosopher Amy Gutmann, for instance, admits that American public schooling is imperfect but insists that it nevertheless achieves the optimal balance between the interests of the state, parents, and educators. Giving state funding to schools the state does not run, she worries, would weaken the “public” side of accountability.

This is a dubious claim. Far from being subject to “democratic deliberation,” our current school system privileges the employment interests of teachers above the interests of parents or children. No other group can compete with teachers’ political and financial power at the local, state, and federal levels. The power of the teachers’ employment interests to determine what is done in the public schools is deleterious to democratic practice, and it is difficult to see how the imbalance could be corrected without changing the institutional framework.

Another reason to doubt Gutmann’s claim is the current jurisprudence on parents’ rights over their children’s education. Circuit courts generally rule in favor of school districts, not parental conscience, in matters concerning curricula. Once a child enrolls in public school, his parents’ influence over the content and process of educating him diminishes.

A further benefit of educational pluralism is that it fosters democratic citizenship better than does uniformity, at least in contemporary America. That is a counterintuitive claim, given that the justification for uniform schooling has been that only a common educational experience could make one people out of many. Political scientists use a number of metrics to examine civic engagement, in particular civic knowledge (an understanding of political history and institutions); civic skills (the ability to think and write clearly, to speak in public, and to analyze complex arguments); community service (engagement in community); and political tolerance (especially for those whose views one dislikes intensely). Americans fall alarmingly short in each.

There are many reasons why Americans are not democratically engaged. The hundred-year resistance within public education to a traditional curriculum that would have required in-depth knowledge of history, philosophy, and culture is part of the problem: Americans simply do not know why our institutions developed as they did, or how important it is to participate in the ongoing struggle to align our institutions with our ideals. More broadly, though, American institutions, including public schooling, tend to reinforce individual autonomy and to discourage the habit of commitment. Citizenship is many things, but at its core it is an intellectual, emotional, and behavioral commitment to something greater than the self.
We can see why many public schools have difficulty engendering this kind of democratic attachment and praxis. An educational philosophy whose aim is self-expression is ill-equipped to foster attachment to liberal democracy. At the same time, the public system’s pursuit of ideological neutrality, however unattainable, hinders its ability to nurture deep commitment to something greater than the self or to make explicit claims about the good. Many public school teachers hesitate to allow classroom discussions about beliefs or truth claims. Schools with a distinctive flavor (religious or secular), in contrast, can engage such claims at many levels.

In 2008, political scientist David Campbell published his study on school sectors and citizenship, using the four measures mentioned above (the habit of community service, skills adequate to political participation, historical and political knowledge, and tolerance of difference). He compared these outcomes in students from Catholic, religious non-Catholic, secular-private, assigned public, and selective magnet schools.

After accounting for family factors (such as parental community service, education and income levels, and religiosity) and school-level factors such as size, mandatory community service, or student governments, he found that students in non-state, particularly Catholic schools, evidence civic preparation at statistically higher levels than did their public-school peers. Another study, this one by Cardus, found that graduates of American Christian schools are active participants in their communities, not siloed separatists.

Not only do non-state schools foster stronger preparation for citizenship, they also do a better job than traditional public schools of closing the academic achievement gap, even when social and family factors are removed. William Jeynes, a professor of education at California State University, recently analyzed multiple studies and data sets exploring the link between religious schooling and attainment and concluded that religious education helps all children academically, but particularly helps minority and low-socioeconomic-status students close the achievement gap.

This is not to deny that many public schools can support cultures of academic achievement, as books as varied as Karin Chenoweth’s *It’s Being Done* and Doug Lemov’s *Teach Like a Champion* describe. It is, rather, to make the point that two primary goals of American education, citizenship and academic attainment, are at least as well, if not better, accomplished by diverse, nonstate schools.

Given the value of diversity, not just to children and their families but also to American society, how far might American education move toward what citizens in Switzerland, Ireland, and Hong Kong take for granted? The trajectory is already promising.

Charter schools can have a unique pedagogical mission and be culturally focused (for example, Hebrew or Turkish, but not Jewish or Muslim) and govern themselves without union contracts. Religious groups manage charters through nondenominational foundations, and although the schools may not be religious in content or tone, they may provide voluntary religious “wrap-around” services on either side of the school day. Online learning, such as Florida Virtual Schools, offers students access to academic subjects that their neighborhood schools may not provide, catering to a variety of special needs and family preferences. A few states allow vouchers or tax credits that parents can take to alternative schools. This arrangement is less common, but it comes closest to the educational pluralism in other nations.

There are state and federal barriers to extending diversity, however. Thirty-seven state constitutions include a version of the Blaine Amendment, a Reconstruction-era attempt to prohibit states from funding religious institutions. The amendment failed in Congress in 1875 but was passed in many state legislatures. The state Blaine amendments (as they are known) vary considerably. In *Zeidan v. Simmons-Harris* (2002), however, the United States Supreme Court supported Cleveland’s voucher program despite the presence of Ohio’s Blaine Amendment, because funding for religious schools was the result of parental choice and not state action. The degree of state flexibility therefore depends upon the wording of any Blaine Amendment, as well as upon local political will.

The issue at the federal level involves the application of the Constitution’s establishment and free-exercise-of-religion clauses. *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947) defined the establishment of religion to include any kind of intrusive support for religious institutions. The ruling was refined in *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971), which created a three-pronged test to determine whether government action inappropriately establishes religion. The Lemon test has been relaxed in the last twenty years, and the Court has allowed indirect aid to religious schools provided that the criteria used to grant the aid are “religiously neutral.” This represents an important legal step forward that allows for greater state-funded educational
pluralism.

Educational pluralism is supported by international treaties. The United Nations’ International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and that on Civil and Political Rights (both in force since 1976) obligate signatories “to have respect for the liberty of parents . . . to choose for their children schools other than those established by the public authorities, which conform to such minimum educational standards as may be laid down or approved by the State and to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.” The United States ratified both covenants “with reservations,” which means they are not binding on domestic law. For some legal scholars, such as Emory Law School’s John Witte, the covenants suggest that educational systems should give special weight to parental rights and commitments.

Educational pluralism effectively accomplishes the proper ends of public education without imposing the uniformity created by the present American system. However, it also raises specific concerns that need to be addressed in our own constitutional and cultural context.

First, educators, parents, and legal scholars will have to collaborate to balance two principles: the freedom of intentional schools to create their own ethos and the prerogative of the state to protect individual liberty and ensure pedagogical standards. The experiences of other nations suggest that there will be all sorts of conflicts over curricula, admissions protocols, and even staffing. We can look to them for foresight about protections and compromises. Quebec is currently experiencing a quite troubling conflict between the mandates of educational authorities and religious education in Catholic schools. However, England’s equal-employment rights have been applied in a modified way to faith schools, allowing them to include faith criteria in the hiring of teachers.

Second, the fact of plural institutions does not ensure a commensurate diversity in pedagogy. Again, the experience of other nations is illustrative. England and Wales began to support pluralistic schools and teacher-training institutes in the 1830s. By the 1920s, however, the philosophy of education that aspiring teachers imbibed had become thoroughly homogenized in all but Catholic settings (it came to them in the 1950s). University-based colleges of education set the tone for the entire educational domain, and there was little diversity of thought and consequently of pedagogy.

Recent years have seen a renaissance of educational philosophy, with Jewish, Anglican, Catholic, and other communities setting out distinctive frameworks for their networks of schools. Some countries, such as Ireland and the Netherlands, support pluralistic teacher-training institutions to ensure that schools can maintain their distinctive purpose. Nevertheless, the pull toward uniformity of thought is strong, and it needs to be resisted if we are to promote genuine pluralism in education.

America is one of the world’s only liberal democracies that does not provide state-funded educational diversity, in some fashion, for its families. Educational pluralism does not solve all classroom problems, but it is the international norm, and it will help close the achievement gap, strengthen civic virtue, and support parental participation in their children’s education.

The most formidable barrier to educational pluralism is neither legal nor pedagogical nor even, finally, political, but cultural. Our imaginations have adjusted to the current system. If we are to get ourselves out of the rut of the state-controlled system of public education, we must envision a different future.

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