

Education – For the greater good, or the individual good?

With partisan division in American politics at what feels like an all time high, bipartisan agreement seems impossible. Despite such a gloomy appearance, there is bipartisan agreement when it comes to education—everyone can agree that K-12 education is important in helping improve our society. The rub, however, comes to *how* it will improve our society. In *Tinkering Toward Utopia*, David Tyack and Larry Cuban illuminate the history of education reform in the United States, circling always around the question of what society truly wants from public grade school education. While society values education and educational access, reform has been pulled in many directions due to the struggle to come to a consensus on just which social problems education is meant to address. Due to the emphasis placed on solving societal ills, education reform has never been able to focus on the central task of improving the act of educating children, as so many additional burdens must also be taken into consideration.

Focusing on remedying social problems is an unfair burden on schools because there is often much debate over what the problems to be remedied are. Over 100 years, the views of “damnation” facing our society have varied from moral dissolution to economic decline (Cuban & Tyack, 1). At other points, there was the concern about preparing citizens to be ready to enter the workforce (Cuban & Tyack, 50), while later, during the Cold War, it became about discipline and global intellectual competition (Cuban & Tyack, 52). If we as a society cannot agree about the problems that schools should be solving, then schools cannot be expected to solve them. With each generation comes a new set of problems to be addressed, requiring the corresponding changes to the school system. Furthermore, as our world evolves ever more quickly in contemporary times, the problems that schools need to address change ever more quickly as well. It is now easy for it to take far less than a generation for opinions to sway toward a new problem. This kind of changing landscape makes it difficult for effective reform to be created, rolled out, and modified for success before the process must be started over again. Even within the confines of a single classroom, a teacher may try to adapt to the current pressures of social anxiety only to find that by the time he or she has done so, society has moved on to another concern for schools to solve. The lack of consistency in goals—economic, moral, intellectual—in school purpose can fragment attention and undermine teachers and reformers alike.

In addition, there is a lack of consensus on the social justice issues that schools should be addressing. While it is true that “Americans have translated their cultural anxieties and hopes into dramatic demands for educational reform” (Cuban & Tyack, 1), those anxieties and hopes shift between times and even between contemporary groups. With a diversity of interest groups, demands have shifted between wanting “education to assimilate newcomers or to affirm ethnic diversity; to perpetuate traditional gender roles or to challenge them; to give equal opportunity to the poor or to preserve the advantages of a favored class” (Cuban & Tyack, 43). With every reform that has ostensibly been about equality (racial desegregation, mainstreaming of special needs children, etc), there has always been resistance from parents who feared that their children would suffer or receive a lesser education due to the changes. So while some groups fought for the social gains that they believed would come through reforms to the education system, other groups fought back against them for the fear that they would lose their advantage. To this day, we continue to struggle with questions of inclusion and advantage in a variety of ways in our schooling, such as in questions of bilingual education, the redistribution of funding to poorer districts, and affirmative action.

I believe that the rhetoric surrounding education as being a solution to social problems is undermining the ability of schools and teachers to truly be effective due to the disingenuous nature of a lot of this rhetoric. As stated in the previous paragraph, there is often a battle between the surface rhetoric of “public good” with the improvement of the situation of under-served populations and the underlying truth of interest in the “private gain” that is individual success and advancement. An

example of this in action is at [public high school]¹, a highly diverse Title I school in the Bay Area. PHS draws students from all across the city and has a high enrollment (approximately 2,000 students) due to their excellent academics and highly sought after programs. One of these programs is the exclusive [humanities core] program², a series of rigorous humanities core courses for tenth through twelfth graders. In order to enter the program, students must apply, submitting writing samples, teacher references, and transcripts in order to prove their academic excellence. To many parents, HCP is *the reason* to send their child to PHS—the college acceptance rate is boggling, as is the prestige of the schools to which students are accepted. However, to many PHS students and families, HCP is evidence of a nasty class division within the school and city as a whole. The majority of HCP students are white, with a growing percentage of Asian students. However, PHS as a whole is almost 30% African American and another nearly 30% Hispanic/Latino. Out of 120 sophomores in HCP, each of those non-white groups are truly minorities, being represented by only single digits of students. There is a constant refrain that the HCP program is only able to offer the education that it does because of the strict admissions standards and that it is not a problem with PHS, but rather a problem with the fact that so many students of color are coming to high school insufficiently prepared for the program.

The concerns of inequality in the HCP program reflect issues of inequality in the larger city society as a whole. The majority of students of color come from the poorer neighborhoods in the city, and those neighborhoods have the lower quality elementary and middle schools. Meanwhile, the majority of the white and Asian students in HCP come from affluent neighborhoods with high quality middle schools, and many of them attended private school. Angry students and parents often remark that HCP is a private school inside of a public school so that rich people can look more “cultured” on college applications. This bitterness comes with just cause, as every attempt to expand HCP to include more diverse students, to create other academically rigorous programs that will support under-served students, or to provide classes that would help scaffold students up to being able to join HCP in eleventh or twelfth grade have all been met with hostility and negativity from parents, and subsequently from the school administration. Despite their resistance to such changes at the school, many of those parents are on the PTA and do amazing and valuable work in raising funds for the school and supporting teachers and programs outside of HCP. They are enthusiastic, vocal supporters of improving public education and elevating the under-served students at PHS—right up until the point that their own child's education might start to be impacted. I do not think these parents are bad or corrupt people, nor that they wish ill upon children not in HCP. They simply are focused on promoting the best possible opportunities for their own children, which is a very understandable goal.

The idea of education as the great equalizer in society strains against our concurrently very individualistic society. We need universal public education in order to continue in the narrative that every person has the same opportunities and that success is merely a question of what one does with them. It is ability and merit, not luck or wealth, that determines success. However, the truth is that “in periods both of supposed progress and supposed regress, the most severe problems were those in the bottom tier of schools that served the poor and people of color, yet these groups were all too often ignored” (Cuban & Tyack 38). So although schools claim to offer equality, the already disadvantaged remain so due to inequalities within the educational system. Furthermore, despite acknowledgment of this fact throughout the country, these inequalities continue because “in the abstract, people may favor giving all children a fair chance, but at the same time they want *their* children to succeed in the competition for economic and social advantage” (Cuban & Tyack, 29). Despite the fact that education is arguably not a zero sum game, “when secondary schools succeeded in retaining and graduating minorities and the poor, for example, they appear to lessen the advantage once enjoyed by middle-class whites” (Cuban & Tyack, 29). Thus, we end up with challenging situations such as the HCP controversy.

1 Hereafter referred to as PHS

2 Hereafter referred to as HCP (humanities core program)

Everyone in America can agree that education is valuable and that it is essential to our democratic society functioning and thriving. It is an essential foundation to our narrative of equal opportunity, while simultaneously supporting our proud individuality. All education reform therefore must be wrapped into the notion that it is optimizing equality, even when that is not what is genuinely in the hearts of the public. I agree with Cuban and Tyack's assessment that what we need is "lengthy and searching public dialogue about the ends and means of schooling" (109), because until there is consensus on what we are hoping to achieve with schooling, we cannot possibly shape an education system that will deliver it.