

Educational Pluralism and Social Conflict

Public schooling, by forcing people with diverse values and needs to fund a single system of government schools, inevitably produces conflict. Such conflict has reached a fever pitch over the past several years, with Americans battling over critical race theory, LGBTQ issues, COVID-19 masking, and more. In March, two leading experts on social conflicts in education joined Neal McCluskey, director of Cato's Center for Educational Freedom, to discuss the evidence and lessons to be learned from other countries. **Charles Glenn** is professor emeritus of educational leadership and policy studies at Boston University and the author of numerous books on education policy, including *Educational Freedom in Eastern Europe* (Cato Institute, 1995). **Ashley Rogers Berner** is director of the Institute for Education Policy at Johns Hopkins University, where she specializes in comparative studies of educational systems around the world.

Charles Glenn: I'd like to talk today, very concretely, about several different ways in which social conflict over control of the public schools has played out. The first example comes from my career as a state official, more than 40 years ago now. The second is from my research in history and educational policy. And the third comes from my advising role in Ukraine in 2014 and 2015.

In the 1970s and '80s in Massachusetts, educational equity was one of my responsibilities. This meant ensuring that schools were racially integrated, that kids were not divided by race. And we thought initially, in our arrogance, that we as the government could simply decide where kids ought to go to school and thereby achieve positive social effects. This was the policy that became known as busing.

Well, everyone knows the kind of heated resistance that that produced, particularly in Boston. It was a crisis with mass protests and people throwing rocks at school buses. Two

of my own children were attending Boston schools in those days, and they had rocks thrown at their buses as well.

Over time, we came to see that there was nothing to be gained by simply ignoring the fact that parents had deep concerns about where their children went to school. And that instead we could put that concern to use to achieve racial integration, while at the same time we made parents feel more deeply committed to the schools their children attended.

What we did was conduct surveys to find out what kinds of things different parents wanted their child's school to be emphasizing, and then we worked with the schools to encourage them to decide which of those emphases they would adopt. For example, teaching in two languages was one possible focus. Five of my own children attended a bilingual school, and one of my granddaughters is attending one of those in Boston right now. Some parents want that. Other parents would like a strong emphasis on art. Other

parents want a strong emphasis on science and mathematics, and so forth.

By letting schools have different themes and letting those themes be the basis for teachers choosing which schools they wanted to work in, we were able to satisfy parents and put schools on a road toward being more coherent and more conscious about what they were trying to achieve. So in more than a dozen other cities, and eventually in Boston, we put in place such school choice programs based on decisions made by parents, in ways that satisfied the parents but also achieved racial integration among schools.

After I left government, as I thought more about those issues, I became convinced that there was no point in restricting this sort of policy to ordinary public schools. So I became a supporter of charter schools, then of vouchers, educational savings accounts, home-schooling, and anything that makes a really broad range of educational choices possible.

My second example is historical. The radical phase of the French Revolution wanted to reshape humanity and the French people. They sought to persuade children and their parents to abandon all the loyalties they had to their local languages, their local customs, the Catholic Church, or any other religious belief and instead have a loyalty exclusively to the state. And the Dutch began seeking to do that as well in the early 19th century, under the influence of France.

The result was that Catholic parents often resisted the kind of bland moralistic Protestantism that the Dutch schools were promoting, and many Protestants resisted those schools because they did not present the whole gospel as they saw it, the whole truth that they wanted their children exposed to. And so resistance grew.

You had many schools started by parents illegally, meeting in barns and other places, with the police cracking down on them. You had thousands of parents, particularly more hardline Protestant parents, leaving the country entirely, emigrating to North America, ending up in Michigan and Iowa and other parts of the Midwest. That's why we got, for example, Calvin College and Dana College and other institutions started by those immigrants.

Things continued to escalate. Most significantly, the Catholic, southern part of the country simply split off in 1830 because there was such a deep opposition to the way in which parents were not allowed to have their children taught in Catholic schools. And that southern part of the country became Belgium. Belgium is the only country in the world, as far as I know, whose very existence is based on a desire for parental choice in schooling.

Finally, my third example is more contemporary. You all know, I am sure, about what has happened in Ukraine in recent years. Eastern Ukraine has been largely Russian-speaking, and the western part is predominantly Ukrainian-speaking. That divide has been at the core of Ukraine's political instability for the past decade.

In 2013 and 2014, then president Viktor Yanukovich was under pressure from Moscow. He canceled a decision by the Ukrainian parliament to create a pact with the European Union, in line with western Ukraine's sympathies being more toward Brussels than Moscow. As a result, mass protests rocked the country. Eventually, Yanukovich fled to Russia and a new democratic, Western-oriented government eventually took office. That became the basis for Russia to seize Crimea and to support the rebellions in the Donbas—and of course, more recently, the excuse for Russia to actually invade.

In 2014, a Belgian colleague and I were asked to come advise the new democratic government of Ukraine about reforming their education system. We made several visits and

even had meetings with them in Western Europe as we worked on helping them redraft their education laws.

One of the things the new government had done early on was to say that all schools had to use Ukrainian as their language of instruction. We were very concerned about that. We said it would be much wiser to let that be a local decision so that parents could



CHARLES GLENN

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play a role in deciding what language their children would be taught in. And then in schools that have Ukrainian as their first language, Russian should be taught as a second language. In schools with Russian as their first language, Ukrainian should be their second language.

Unfortunately, we were too late. Even though it wasn't implemented in a uniform way, the very fact that that decision had been

made by the government on a one-size-fits-all nationwide basis served as one of the major reasons for some of the eastern areas of the country to rise in rebellion, and it provided one of the most prominent excuses for Russia to begin meddling in Ukraine's internal politics. I think there will be no lasting peace in Ukraine until it's recognized that both language groups can live peacefully together. Education and the need for a more tolerant educational pluralism are at the center of that, just like educational pluralism is so important to social and political peace around the world, in every country.

Ashley Rogers Berner: I'd like to offer some additional thoughts about educational pluralism, what it means and why it's important, and then a little bit about the research. Education policy is a complicated business. I have never been in the position of being a policymaker, but I've studied it, and I work for, and help run, an education policy institute. I just want to say up front that I don't think any democratic school system perfectly solves the goals of education, which are social mobility, academic achievement, and citizenship formation in a democracy. Nobody gets it totally and completely right, but I think it's important to look at other models around the world and to look at our own history to find what lessons can be learned.

In the United States, for over a hundred years, we've had this extreme binary of public schools and private schools. Now there are also charter schools, which are public schools but privately managed by nonprofits, but those are still fairly new. Outside of recent developments like that, Americans are historically and culturally very used to having this binary where “public schools” means one thing, the district school, and private schools are everything else. We know that this division is inequitable because well-off families can move to a “better” school district or enroll their kids in private school, but low-income families don't have that ability.

When we look around the world at how democracies frame their educational systems, it's entirely different. That's the description that Charlie and I have worked on, which we call educational pluralism. Educational pluralism is simply a different way to structure democratic education policy. There are two key pieces of it that I want to lay out: the first is about structure, and the second is about content. They're both very important for social cohesion and parental rights.

When it comes to structure, educational pluralism assumes that schooling cannot be neutral with respect to values. There's no way to select a textbook or hire people or attract families or even create a disciplinary code without drawing on some kind of normative values. It's impossible to design education to be neutral.

Having accepted that, the next step is simply to fund a variety of institutions. The Netherlands, one of our favorite examples, has 36 different kinds of schools on equal footing. They have Montessori, Jewish Orthodox, Jewish Reform, Catholic, Islamic, secular, and many other different kinds of schools. Only 30 percent of the kids go to what we would consider district schools, traditional public schools. This is the norm around the world. Indonesia, Israel, Sweden, Belgium, France, and Australia all have different models; the funding structure is different, but the premise is the same. They fund a variety of schools. That policy of pluralism in who can own and operate schools is by deliberate design.

The content question is equally important. Here, the premise is different. Unlike other choices we might make in our lives, education is not only about the individual. It isn't simply an individual good. Why not? Because it matters to me that your child knows, in our country, the three branches of government; it matters to you that my children know how to read and function in adult society. We're all in this together; there's a common good principle here. That is why the most successful pluralistic countries have curricular frameworks and guidelines that all kids must study.

I just served on a board panel for Alberta, Canada, for example. They fund homeschooling; they fund indigenous schools; they have charter schools; they have Catholic schools. And yet, the common body of knowledge is meant to be common across all of them, and they all use a common assessment. Assessments are really important—assessments that are knowledge-based and not just the kinds of



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assessments we have in this country that are very skills-oriented. It is about essentially a liberal approach—liberal arts education. This works very, very well actually for equity. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's research shows how important a knowledge-building curriculum is.

In these other countries, there's the structure that is diverse, and while the content is not totally lockstep, it's much more similar

and uniform in terms of its basic requirements. The ministry of education or equivalent provides curricular frameworks. You do get some very strange situations from this. One of my favorite examples is that the Netherlands and the UK both fund creationist schools, schools that teach fundamentalist Christian doctrine on that question. Now, that would set people's hair on fire in the United States, that the government funds creationist schools. However, kids in those schools also must demonstrate mastery of evolutionary theory and biology. That's considered part of what you need to know to navigate adult life. You don't have to believe it's true, but you have to demonstrate a competent basic understanding of it. The school's values and how they interpret content is distinctive, but the content is relatively stable.

There are lots of nuances and variations here, but my interpretation of the data is that this is the best of both worlds. Why? Because you can have a strong school culture, the ethos of the school, which we know makes a material difference in student outcomes for the better. There's a strong, stable school culture that can be very diverse across different schools, and we see this across all countries. But there's also an academically robust curriculum, and no students are being left without the necessary basics of becoming an educated adult citizen.

Now, I don't want to pretend that this is easy in the United States. Both of these things, the pluralistic structure and robust curriculum requirements, are alien to our cultural norms and expectations, the history of how we think about schooling.

Our institute at Johns Hopkins works on both of these tracks. We work a lot on the content of education, on helping all schools design better curriculum, regardless of if they're religious or secular. That includes helping district schools, charter schools, and private schools to develop more robust instructional frameworks. We sometimes run up against a lot of opposition. There's a strong commitment by some

Continued on page 19

TIP YOUR WAITER



Tip credits allow employers to pay less than the minimum wage so long as the difference is more than made up for in tips received by workers. Eliminating this policy is a goal of many who are also seeking to raise the minimum wage, but the negative employment effects of such a



policy are real, as shown in **“The Employment and Redistributive Effects of Reducing or Eliminating Minimum Wage Tip Credits,”** Cato Research Brief in Economic Policy no. 293, by David Neumark and Maysen Yen.

CRYPTO CONGRESS

As cryptocurrencies such as bitcoin have

become more popular, members of Congress have become increasingly concerned about whether they might threaten the dollar’s status as the world’s reserve currency. To the contrary, the coexistence of cryptocurrencies is beneficial to the dollar. Nicholas Anthony explains why in **“Congress Should Welcome Cryptocurrency Competition,”** Cato Briefing Paper no. 138.

DISINCENTIVIZED CAPITALISM

The regulatory burdens on publicly traded companies is immense and has been growing. An important explanation for the significant decline in the number of publicly listed companies in the United States is the increased burden of disclosure and governance regulations, as explained by Michael Ewens, Kairong Xiao, and Ting Xu in **“The Regulatory Costs of Being Public,”** Cato Research Brief in Economic Policy no. 295. ■

Continued from page 11

folks in our country that only the district schools can deliver public education, that only the local district school is legitimate. We have to push against that and say, “Well, no, in most democracies, that’s not the case, and it used to not be the case in this country.”

On the other hand, we have many school choice advocates who want to leave the quality measures completely to the schools and the parents. From my perspective, that’s highly risky. There’s not a lot of evidence that it leads to high quality and equity. Both of these moves, toward structural pluralism and content standards, are difficult to promote in the United States, but they really have worked well for families all around the world. It’s very much the norm. It’s quite fun to be in conversations in the United States in which one can say, “Well, I think we need more of what the Netherlands has.”

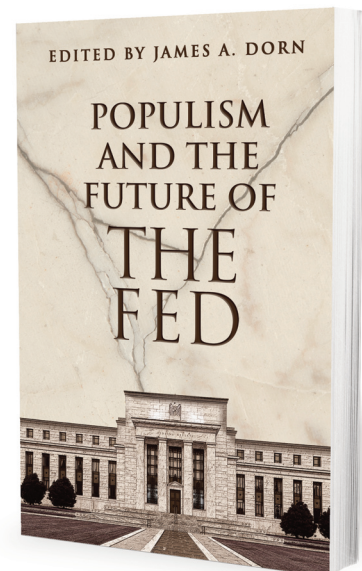
It’s not the case that this model of educational

pluralism diminishes all conflicts over education. There are certainly still conflicts going on currently around the world, in many different countries. But in essence, I’ve become persuaded that any kind of uniform, centralized monopoly structure is going to lead to this battle for control. That means other people’s values don’t matter. The minority culture, whether that minority is Catholic or secular, atheist, Jehovah’s Witness, or whatever else the case may be, doesn’t have a place at the table. That inevitably leads to social conflicts. But also, a completely agnostic view about curriculum does not work well for the kind of equity and civic formation that we’d like to see. So when we talk about educational pluralism, it’s that combination of a diversity of structural arrangements for schools and who is running the schools but also having a baseline of some curricular requirements to be eligible to participate in public funding. ■

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