



## On the Fence

### Is education a right or a privilege?

Beyond right or privilege, education is a duty of democratic government

Historically, education in America has undergone dramatic changes in purpose and availability. After the Revolutionary War, common schools predominated. Generally, they were one-room buildings with a single teacher. Parents provided tuition and housing and determined what was to be taught. The focus beyond reading, writing and arithmetic was religious studies and the virtues of family, religion and community. There were few rural schools. Wealthy parents employed private tutors. Education was a privilege.

Thomas Jefferson argued that a healthy democracy required an educated citizenry of informed voters to protect Americans' rights and freedoms from threats inside and outside the country. He also felt it was the duty of government to foster education so that all citizens could compete economically. Jefferson believed education enhanced both democracy and economy. In 1779, he proposed the Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge, saying that all free children, male and female, should have free education paid for by the government.

That concept was opposed by racists and the wealthy who resented being taxed to educate poor, racially diverse children, making them better able to compete and advance. The bill failed to pass in 1778, 1779 and 1780. In 1796, an edited version, Act to Establish Public Education — which did not establish a curriculum or public oversight — passed.

In 1797 William Godwin published *The Enquirer* in which he warned mandatory public education would become an immensely effective tool in the hands of government to manipulate and affect public opinion for its own uses. As Godwin forewarned, most public elementary and high school curriculums today ignore or gloss over America's horrendous past and current policies including, but not limited to, the near extermination of the Native Americans, slavery, U.S. overthrow of democratic governments around the world, and our refusal to join other countries to address global problems. This whitewashed curriculum does not prepare citizens to question and/or resist government's motives and actions at home and around the world.

From the late 1800s through 1930, a movement grew based on the belief everybody should be encouraged to reach



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their full potential, become active participants in democratic society and help build wealth. Noah Webster particularly supported a tax-supported common education system that would mix people of different backgrounds to help reinforce bonds of democracy by breaking down divisions between ethnic, economic, religious and racial groups. Education was to prepare citizens to work together to build the economy and support our new nation.

State university education was tuition free in America from Lincoln's land grant universities of 1860s until the 1960s. During the 1960s, students marched in the civil rights movement, demonstrated against the Vietnam War, and supported women's rights and reproductive choice. Their speaking truth to power prompted Henry Kissinger to say, "There's too much education here."

Honest education prepares citizens to participate in and direct government. For that reason it is essential to provide affordable education while shielding the curriculum from religious, political and corporate oversight.

Currently many Americans are priced out of higher education. Today 69 percent of college graduates owe on average \$29,800. More than 44 million Americans carry student loans that total \$1.4 trillion. Research from Citizens Financial Group suggests 60 percent of student loan borrowers don't expect to pay it off until their 40s. Some have debt payments taken from their social security. This massive debt burden decreases home ownership across the country and often forces people to delay retirement. Many young American lives are pressurized by educational debt burden and cost of health care insurance. Turning earnings into interest payments decreases money circulating in the marketplace.

Quality K-12 education and affordable higher education is necessary to maintain an involved citizenry and flourishing economy. The need for educated citizenry goes beyond the question of right or privilege. It is actually the duty of a truly democratic government. ■

A necessary privilege, education must equip the citizenry

Ultimately, by definition, I believe education is fundamentally a privilege, not a right. However, I also think the two are connected and dependent upon the other.

One definition of privilege is a right "granted as a peculiar benefit, advantage, or favor" — whereas, a right is "something to which one has a just claim" or "the power or privilege to which one is justly entitled," according to Merriam Webster.

The opportunity for education afforded to an individual citizen in a given community or country reflects (a) the value placed on a given level and type of education, (b) a formal intent to promote that level of education to all of its citizens, and (c) a commitment of resources to empower interested citizens with access to that level of education. Thus, an individual citizen has the privilege of obtaining an education to the level at which the community has determined it to be a "right" and has committed time and resources in support of providing that "right."

Regardless of where one stands on whether education is a right or a privilege, I think most parents and people are more concerned with direct personal impact — specifically, access, integration and prosperity. People want access to the dynamic levels of education that their community has decided to provide to its citizens, without barriers or denial on a prohibited basis. People also want education that will enable them and their children to better integrate socially into their communities and nation while being able to support themselves and their families economically. Lastly, education is of little value if it is not helping individual citizens equip themselves with tools, abilities and critical thinking skills that empower them to achieve a more prosperous individual future while also making positive contributions to their communities and nation. What many people from all paths of life are seeing, feeling and experiencing is the current systems of education in place are not effectively producing access, integration or prosperity, at least to the levels they should be.

There is no clear and easy process to follow, nor solution to implement, that will result in overhauling our educational systems to achieve the results we want. Some systems do not need much overhauling to begin with. But I do believe there are at least two core concepts that should be re-



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thought and discussed to help inform any proposed changes or courses of action.

**Choice:** Most local educational systems in America are cookie cutter and arbitrarily funded mostly by local property owners through property taxes, meaning children have one or two schooling options based on the zip code they reside in, and funding for said schools is not tied directly to meaningful, custom performance measures or other desired outcomes. Should parents be able to decide what schools their kids go to? Can local people vs. a department in Washington D.C. or the United Nations make better decisions for their kids on curriculum and skills being taught? Can teaching quality and results for all students be improved and be more effective if teacher and administrator compensation includes an incentive component based on results achieved?

**Curriculum:** Many Americans, at least in the last two or three generations, would agree the curriculums they learned in school (all levels, pre-K through college) did not necessarily do a great job of equipping them to (a) get a living wage job, (b) enter a long-term career field, (c) identify work and activity that aligns with their individual predispositions, (d) think about how to balance work and life, or (e) to think critically and connect decisions to consequences. Can we come up with better curriculums that are also more customized to our community or state? Can we better align curriculum and skill building with industry for immediate employability? To augment parenting responsibility, is it possible to incorporate a better balance of life and social skill development into our curriculums?

In short, we owe it to every citizen to begin hammering away at revitalizing and retooling our current educational systems that for far too long and for too many people have been producing sub-optimal results. Coinciding with engaged parenting, our educational systems have the potential to be doing a much better job at preparing our children with life, social, professional and trade skills, which will allow them to be much happier, healthier and productive people and citizens. ■

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