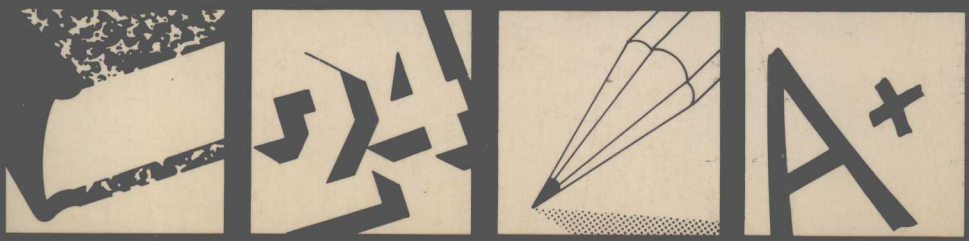
FOURTH EDITION

# American Education



## An Introduction to Social and Political Aspects



JOEL SPRING

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# American Education: An Introduction to Social and Political Aspects. 4th edition



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# Preface

The fourth edition of *American Education* contains much new and revised material. The political, economic, and social factors that determine curriculum, instructions, and the popularity of particular theories of learning in American public schools are discussed in a new chapter, Chapter 3. The chapter begins with a description of how the public school curriculum in the twentieth century has reflected changing social and economic concerns. The discussion of instruction in the public schools is based on Larry Cuban's outstanding book, *How Teachers Taught,* which raises the question of why basic classroom instruction methods, despite many reform movements, have changed so little in the twentieth century. The final discussion in the chapter focuses on how changing economic and political conditions determine the popularity of particular learning theories in the public schools.

Chapters 1 and 2 now contain extended discussions of the reports of the Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century,* and of the Holmes Group, *Tomorrow's Teachers.* A discussion of the "new immigrants" has been added to Chapter 5. Chapters on the political structure of American education and the role of the courts have been updated.

I have been convinced by recent events that my arguments in the original preface to the first edition of this book were correct. I argued then that a teaching career involves more than being an educational technician and that teachers have to be prepared for involvement in the social, political, and economic aspects of education. This argument has been made more relevant

by the push by teachers' unions for teacher power and by the reforms calling for master teachers and career ladders. In fact, teachers are playing an increasing role in the determination of educational policy in local school districts, in the halls of state legislatures, and in the arena of national politics. The best example of this new role of teachers is the active and important participation of teachers in presidential and congressional elections.

I also retain my commitment to the idea that decisions about a career in education should be based on a clear understanding and knowledge of the structure and functioning of the educational system. Introductory courses in teacher education should focus on the ideological debates about the role of schooling in society, the effects of schooling on society, and the politics of education. In addition, the prospective teacher should try to understand the profession of teaching in the context of society and the educational system. Being a good teacher involves more than making decisions about methods of instruction; it includes making political, economic, and social decisions that can affect the entire society. This book's purpose is to acquaint prospective teachers with the political context in which they will work and the major social, economic, and political issues related to education.

# American Education

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# I

# THE SCHOOL AND THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE

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# 1

# The Purposes of Public Schooling

The public school has become one of the central and most controversial institutions of society. Parents select housing in terms of available schooling; politicians are often forced to voice their opinions on school issues; racial and religious riots take place at the schoolhouse; some parents accuse schools of not being patriotic, while others find them guilty of flag waving; some members of society argue that schools will end poverty, and others contend that they maintain poverty.

In recent years, conflicts over religious values have caused some groups to question the very existence of government-operated schools. As discussed in more detail in Chapter 10, a series of court cases in 1986 found public schools to be teaching a secular form of religion. These cases were brought to the courts by Protestant fundamentalists who believed that public schools were destroying the religious and moral values of their children. One solution proposed by these groups is for schools to teach according to the values of each individual child. Schools would select books and materials reflecting the values of each student, or parents could select a school reflecting their own values. The latter alternative, one strongly favored by fundamentalist religious groups, could result in replacement of the present system of publicly supported and privately operated schools by giving parents, instead of schools, the money to spend on their children's education.

While controversy is an integral part of the history of American schools, there is also a high level of satisfaction. This is most apparent when attitudes of American parents are compared to those of parents in other countries. For

instance, the 1986 report of the Task Force on Teaching as a Profession of the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century,* found that mothers in the United States expressed a higher level of satisfaction with their children's schooling than did mothers in Japan and Taiwan. The report expressed surprise at the finding because Japanese students score higher than American students on many standardized achievement tests. In the United States over 60 percent of the mothers in the sample were "very satisfied" with their children's education as compared to fewer than 20 percent of Japanese mothers, while fewer than 20 percent of American mothers were "not satisfied" as compared to 30 percent of Japanese mothers.

Such findings suggest that while conflict exists regarding the *purposes* of American education there is still considerable satisfaction in its *achievements.* It is often difficult to separate conflict over values in schools from other attitudes regarding the workings of the educational system. But at the heart of most educational controversies is a debate over public and private goals, of which the struggle over religious values is simply one aspect. The remaining sections of this chapter will examine the inherent problems and contradictions in the political, economic, and social purposes of public schooling. A review of the purposes of schooling provides a brief history of the reasons for the development of American public schools. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of how political beliefs affect the goals of schooling.

## Public versus Private Goals

A great deal of confusion and conflict can occur over the difference between public and private goals in education. A parent might send his or her child to school to learn basic intellectual skills while considering moral and social training a function of the home. On the other hand, the school might assume the responsibility of producing moral, socially responsible citizens. This situation has the potential of creating conflict between the parents and the school over the content of moral and social training, and the goals that should control the education of the child.

If the school in question is a public school operated by the government, then the problem becomes even more difficult. Government-operated schools by their very nature have the responsibility of carrying out the wishes of the general public and not those of private individuals. This means that the education of a child in a public school is subordinate to the general educational goals of the government. In other words, the public school serves public purposes.

The fact that the public school serves public purposes is inherent in the very idea that governments should establish and operate educational systems; government educational systems were set up to serve public—not private—goals. How the goals were established is a political question, and will be

discussed in later chapters. In general, the public goals of education have been linked to concerns about social and political stability, reform, and economic development. Therefore, parents who send their child to a public school to achieve purely intellectual goals might be frustrated and concerned about both the time spent on government goals for education and the content of those goals. Certainly, in the history of American education one of the greatest arenas of conflict has been between private moral and religious beliefs and the values taught in the public schools. Other issues have also created bitter dispute. Educating children in public schools for citizenship has always been an area of conflict, a conflict concerned with content and purpose. Similar conflicts occur over the use of public schools to pursue economic goals.

Although private goals are subordinate to government goals in public schools, they cannot simply be dismissed. It is important to understand private goals because of the potential conflict between private goals and public schools, and because of the larger issue of whether the public schools serve the interests of the individual.

One of the more recent surveys of private goals was conducted by John Goodlad for his study, *A Place Called School*. Goodlad surveyed the educational goals held by students, teachers, and parents, and divided them into social, intellectual, personal, and vocational goals. These categories differ slightly in meaning from those used in the remainder of this chapter to describe the public goals of schooling. Goodlad defines *vocational* to mean preparation for work; *social* to mean preparation for the social life of a complex society; *intellectual* to mean academic skills and knowledge; and *personal* to mean development of individual responsibility, talent, and free expression.

The most striking conclusion one reaches in looking at the results of Goodlad's survey is the difference between private and public goals. The dominant public goals for education in the twentieth century have been economic. These economic goals have included preparation for work, and controlling the labor market and economic development. In Goodlad's survey, vocational is the word closest in meaning to economic and it was chosen as the least important goal by teachers and parents. All teachers in elementary, middle, and high school grades selected vocational as the least important goal after intellectual, personal, and social goals. Parents of elementary and middle school children selected vocational goals last, and parents of high school students chose vocational as third, after intellectual and personal goals. High school students, on the other hand, selected vocational as the most important goal, whereas it was the second choice for middle school students.

Nothing gives greater evidence of the potential conflict between public and private goals than the fact that the number-one goal of teachers and parents is intellectual. Students maintain this as their number-one goal until high school, when it moves into second place after vocational. This means that the majority of parents send their children to school primarily to learn academic skills and knowledge. Although on the surface this seems reasonable

and a commonsense conclusion, it is in conflict with the major public goals that have been used to justify the establishment and maintenance of public schools. In fact, parents rank personal goals as second in importance, leaving social and vocational at the bottom in relative importance.

These differences between public and private goals should be kept in mind by the reader as she or he studies the following pages. What the public official wants the school system to achieve can be entirely different from what the individual citizen wants. Also, differing attitudes and perceptions can develop about what is happening within public school systems.

The following discussion of the public goals of schooling is divided into political, social, and economic goals. In general, political goals refer to the attempts to use educational systems to mold future citizens, maintain political stability, and shape political systems; social goals include attempts to reform society, provide social stability, and give direction to social development; and economic goals involve the use of the public school system to sort and select talent for the labor market, develop human capital, and plan economic development. However, the reader should be aware that these categories often overlap. For instance, the goal of eliminating poverty through schooling can be considered both an economic and a social goal.

## The Political Purposes of Schooling

The most important political goal of public schooling in modern society is the education of the future citizen. This statement can mean different things depending on the nature of the political organization. For instance, in Nazi Germany during the 1930s, schools were enlisted in a general campaign to produce citizens who would believe in the racial superiority of the German people, support fascism, and be willing to die at the command of Hitler. Racial biology and fascist political doctrines were taught in the classroom; patriotic parades and singing took place in the school yard. The lesson learned from the experience of schools in Nazi Germany is that one must carefully evaluate the citizenship-training function of public schools. Citizenship training is not necessarily good, nor can it exist apart from a general political philosophy.

In America early proposals for public systems of education reflected a variety of concerns about the establishment of a republican form of government. One of the major worries expressed immediately following the American Revolution was the source of future leadership for the new government. Since hereditary nobility and monarchy would no longer be bases for leadership, a question arose about who would be the leaders of a republican government. Revolutionary leader Benjamin Rush proposed in the late eighteenth century the establishment of a national university and a requirement that all government officials hold a degree from that institution. Rush argued that one should no more allow quacks to practice politics than

one allows quacks to practice medicine. President George Washington proposed a national university before Congress as a means of training political leaders and creating a common national culture by bringing together within one institution students from all areas of the country.

One of the arguments against Washington's proposal for a national university as a training ground for political leadership was the charge of elitism. (Current criticism of reliance upon educational institutions as sources of political and social leadership makes the same charge.) Critics of Washington's proposal felt that a national university would be training leaders who would view themselves as "better" and more important than the general public. These educated leaders would not necessarily represent the interests and welfare of the general public. The hereditary aristocracy might be replaced by an aristocracy of the educated. If none but the rich had access to higher education, then the rich could use higher education as a means of perpetuating and supporting their social status.

One answer to the charge of elitism is the concept of a meritocracy. This idea permeates our existing educational institutions. A meritocracy is a social system in which all members are given an equal chance to develop their abilities and rise in the social hierarchy. In a meritocracy the school is often viewed as the key institution for training and sorting citizens. One of the earliest and most elaborate proposals for a society based on the selectivity of education was Plato's *Republic.* In Plato's utopian proposal each generation was trained in music and gymnastics, and from each generation the most talented were selected for further education as guardians. The most talented guardians were educated to be philosopher-kings. An educational system functioning in this manner, Plato believed, would result in the ruling of society by the wisdom of philosopher-kings.

One of the earliest proposals in the United States to create an educational system designed to select and promote talent into a social hierarchy was made by Thomas Jefferson in 1779 in a proposed *Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge.* Jefferson's plan called for three years of free education for all free children. The most talented of these children were to be selected and educated at public expense at regional grammar schools. From this select group the most talented were to be chosen for further education. Thomas Jefferson wrote in *Notes on the State of Virginia,* "By this means twenty of the best geniuses will be raked from the rubbish annually, and be instructed, at the public expense. . . ."

The details of Jefferson's plan are not as important as the idea, which has become ingrained in American social thought, that schooling is the best means of identifying democratic leadership. This idea assumes that the educational system is fair in its judgments and that its basis for judgment has some relationship to the role for which students are being selected.

For instance, fairness of selection in education assumes that the individual is being judged solely on talent demonstrated in school and not on other social

factors such as race, religion, dress, and social class. As will be discussed in later chapters, these factors have been related to performance in school. If, for example, the educational institution tends to favor an individual from a particular religion or social class, then it would tend to select and promote that particular individual in school and, consequently, in the social hierarchy.

This situation could result in a democratic elitism in which certain groups would be favored in school, and the social power of their class perpetuated through the school. For example, if all members of society were taught to believe that the school selected fairly and only those selected by the educational system could lead society, then all members of society would accept the social hierarchy perpetuated by the educational system. Acceptance of this situation might obscure other inequalities in society. For instance, if the educational system favored those with wealth, then all members of society might come to accept differences in wealth as differences in talent as determined by educational institutions.

Another debatable issue is the assumption of a relationship between talented performance in an educational institution and performance in a social role. There might not be any necessary relationship between the skills and attitudes required for good academic performance and those required for good occupational and social performance. The best medical doctor might not be the one who received the highest grades in medical school. The best politician might not be the one who received the highest grades in political science courses. Of course, this depends on what one means by the "best doctor" or the "best politician." The important issue is whether or not one believes that the skills required to succeed in an educational institution are the best skills for a particular social role.

The differences between these approaches are reflected in the differences between Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann, often called the father of American education. Jefferson proposed a very limited education for the general citizenry. The three years of free education to be provided to all children were to consist of training in reading, writing, and arithmetic, with reading instruction given in books on Greek, Roman, English, and American history. Jefferson did not believe that people needed to be educated to be good citizens. He believed in the guiding power of natural reason to lead the citizen to the correct political decisions. The political education of the citizen was to come from a free press; the citizen would judge between competing political ideas in newspapers. The only requirement was that the citizen know how to read.

Interestingly, while Jefferson wanted political opinions to be formed in a free marketplace of ideas, he advocated censorship of political texts at the University of Virginia. These contradictory positions reflect an inherent problem in the use of schools to teach political ideas. One is always tempted to limit political instruction to what one believes are "correct" political ideas.

Horace Mann, on the other hand, believed that a common political creed had to be instilled in all citizens. Without this political consensus a democratic