

## EDUCATION WEEK

## COMMENTARY

**Are Students 'Consumers'?**

By David F. Labaree

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Observers of American education have frequently noted that the general direction of educational reform over the years has not been forward but back and forth. Reform, it seems, is less an engine of progress than a pendulum, swinging monotonously between familiar policy alternatives. Progress is hard to come by. [← Back to Story](#)

However, a closer reading of the history of educational change in this country reveals a pattern that is both more complex and in a way more troubling than this. Yes, the back-and-forth movement is real, but it turns out that this pattern is for the most part good news. It simply represents a periodic shift in emphasis between two goals for education--democratic equality and social efficiency--that represent competing but equally indispensable visions of education.

The bad news is that in the 20th century, and especially in the past several decades, the pendulum swings increasingly have given way to a steady movement in the direction of a third goal, social mobility. This shift from fluctuation to forward motion may look like progress, but it's not. The problem is that it represents a fundamental change in the way we think about education, by threatening to transform this most public of institutions from a public good into a private good. The consequences for both school and society, I suggest, are potentially devastating.

Let me explain why. First we'll consider the role that these three goals have played in American education, and then we can explore the implications of the movement from equality and efficiency to mobility.

The first goal is *democratic equality*, which is the oldest of the three. From this point of view, the purpose of schooling is to produce competent citizens. This goal provided the primary impetus for the common school movement, which established the foundation for universal public education in this country during the middle of the 19th century. The idea was and is that all citizens need to be able to think, understand the world around them, behave sociably, and act according to shared political values--and that public schools are the best places to accomplish these ends. The corollary of this goal is that all these capabilities need to be equally distributed, and that public schools can serve as what Horace Mann called the great "balance wheel," by providing a common educational competence that helps reduce differences.

Some of the most enduring and familiar characteristics of our current system of education were formed historically in response to this goal. There are the neighborhood elementary school and the comprehensive high school, which draw together students from the whole community under one roof. There is the distinctively American emphasis on general education at all levels of the educational system. There is the long-standing practice of socially promoting students from grade to grade. And there is the strong emphasis on inclusion, which over the years has led to such innovations as racial integration and the mainstreaming of special education students.

The second goal is *social efficiency*, which first became prominent in the Progressive era at the turn of the century. From this perspective, the purpose of education is not to produce citizens but to train productive workers. The idea is that our society's health depends on a growing economy, and the

economy needs workers with skills that will allow them to carry out their occupational roles effectively. Schools, therefore, should place less emphasis on general education and more on the skills needed for particular jobs. And because skill requirements differ greatly from job to job, schools need to tailor curricula to the job and then sort students into the different curricula.

Consider some of the enduring effects that this goal has had on education over the years. There is the presence of explicitly vocational programs of study within the high school and college curriculum. There is the persistent practice of tracking and ability grouping. And there is the prominence of social-efficiency arguments in the public rhetoric about education, echoing through every millage election and every race for public office in the past half-century. We are all familiar with the argument that pops up on these occasions--that education is the keystone of the community's economic future, that spending money on education is really an investment in human capital that will pay big dividends.

Notice that the first two goals are in some ways quite different in the effects they have had on schools. One emphasizes a political role for schools while the other stresses an economic role. One pushes for general education, the other for specialized education. One homogenizes, the other differentiates.

But from another angle, the two take a similar approach, because they both treat education as a *public good*. A public good is one that benefits all members of a community, which means that you cannot avoid being affected by it. For example, police protection and road maintenance have an impact directly or indirectly on the life of everyone. Likewise, everyone stands to gain from a public school system that produces competent citizens and productive workers, even those members of the community who don't have children in public schools.

This leads us to something that is quite distinctive about the third educational goal, the one I call *social mobility*. From the perspective of this goal, education is not a public good but a private good. If the first goal for education takes the viewpoint of the citizen and the second takes that of the taxpayer, the third takes the viewpoint of the individual educational consumer.

The purpose of education from this angle is not what it can do for democracy or the economy but what it can do for me. Historically, education has paid off handsomely for individuals who stayed in school and came away with diplomas. Educational credentials have made it possible for people to distinguish themselves from their competitors, giving them a big advantage in the race for good jobs and a comfortable life. As a result, education has served as a springboard to upward mobility for the working class and a buttress against downward mobility for the middle class.

Note that if education is going to serve the social-mobility goal effectively, it has to provide some people with benefits that others don't get. Education in this sense is a private good that only benefits the owner, an investment in my future, not yours, in my children, not other people's children. For such an educational system to work effectively, it needs to focus a lot of attention on grading, sorting, and selecting students. It needs to provide a variety of ways for individuals to distinguish themselves from others--such as by placing themselves in a more prestigious college, a higher curriculum track, the top reading group, or the gifted program. In this sense the social-mobility goal reinforces the same sorting and selecting tendency in education that is promoted by the social-efficiency goal, but without the same concern for providing socially useful skills.

Now that I've spelled out some of the main characteristics of these three goals for education, let me show how they can help us understand the major swings of the pendulum in educational reform over the last 200 years.

During the common school era in the mid-19th century, the dominant goal for American education was

democratic equality. The connection between school and work at this point was weak. People earned job skills on the job rather than in school, and educational credentials offered social distinction but not necessarily preference in hiring.

By the end of the 19th century, however, both social efficiency and social mobility emerged as major factors in shaping education, while the influence of democratic equality declined. High school enrollments began to take off in the 1890s, which posed two big problems for education--a social-efficiency problem (how to provide education for the new wave of students), and a social-mobility problem (how to protect the value of high school credentials for middle-class consumers). The result was a series of reforms that defined the Progressive era in American education during the first half of the 20th century. These included such innovations as tracking, ability testing, ability grouping, vocationalism, special education, social promotion, and life adjustment.

Then in the 1960s and 1970s we saw a swing back from social efficiency to democratic equality (reinforced by the social-mobility goal). The national movement for racial equality brought pressure to integrate schools, and these arguments for political equality and individual opportunity led to a variety of related reforms aimed at reducing educational discrimination based on class, gender, and handicapping condition.

But in the 1980s and 1990s, the momentum shifted back from democratic equality to social efficiency--again reinforced by social mobility. The emerging movement for educational standards responded both to concerns about declining economic competitiveness (seen as a deficiency of human capital) and to concerns about a glut of high school and college credentials (seen as a threat to social mobility).

However, another way to think about these historical trends in educational reform is to turn attention away from the pendulum swings between the first two goals and to focus instead on the steady growth in the influence of the third goal throughout the last 100 years. Since its emergence as a factor in the late 19th century, social mobility has gradually grown to become the dominant goal in American education. Increasingly, neither of the other two goals can make strong headway except in alliance with the third. Only social mobility, it seems, can afford to go it alone any longer. A prime example is the recent push for educational choice, charters, and vouchers. This is the strongest educational reform movement of the 1990s, and it is grounded entirely within the consumer-is-king perspective of the social-mobility goal.

So, you may ask, what are the implications of all this? I want to mention two problems that arise from the history of conflicting goals in American education--one deriving from the conflict itself and the other from the emerging dominance of social mobility. The second problem is more serious than the first.

On the issue of conflict: Contradictory goals have shaped the basic structure of American schools, and the result is a system that is unable to accomplish any one of these goals very effectively--which has been a common complaint about schools. Also, much of what passes for educational reform may be little more than ritual swings back and forth between alternative goals--another common complaint. But I don't think this problem is really resolvable in any simple way. Americans seem to want and need an education system that serves political equality and economic productivity and personal opportunity, so we might as well learn how to live with it.

The bigger problem is not conflict over goals but the possible victory of social mobility over the other two. The long-term trend is in the direction of this goal, and the educational reform initiatives in the last decade suggest that this trend is accelerating. At the center of the current talk about education is

a series of reforms designed to empower the educational consumer, and if they win out, this would resolve the tension between public and private conceptions of education decisively in the favor of the private view. Such a resolution to the conflict over goals would hurt education in at least two ways.

First, in an educational system where the consumer is king, who will look after the public's interest in education? As supporters of the two public goals have long pointed out, we all have a stake in the outcomes of public education, since this is the institution that shapes our fellow citizens and fellow workers. In this sense, the true consumers of education are all of the members of the community--and not just the parents of schoolchildren. But these parents are the only ones whose interests matter for the school choice movement, and their consumer preferences will dictate the shape of the system.

A second problem is this: In an educational system where the opportunity for individual advancement is the primary focus, it becomes more important to get ahead than to get an education. When the whole point of education is not to ensure that I learn valuable skills but instead to give me a competitive social advantage, then it is only natural for me to focus my ingenuity as a student toward acquiring the most desirable grades, credits, and degrees rather than toward learning the curriculum.

We have already seen this taking place in American education in the past few decades. Increasingly, students have been acting more like smart consumers than eager learners. Their most pointed question to the teacher is "Will this be on the test?" They see no point in studying anything that doesn't really count. If the student is the consumer and the goal is to get ahead rather than to get an education, then it is only rational for students to look for the best deal. And that means getting the highest grades and the most valuable credentials for the lowest investment of effort. As cagey consumers, children in school have come to be like the rest of us when we're in the shopping mall: They hate to pay full price when they can get the same product on sale.

That's the bad news from this little excursion into educational history, but don't forget the good news as well. For 200 years, Americans have seen education as a central pillar of public life. The contradictory structure of American education today has embedded within it an array of social expectations and instructional practices that clearly express these public purposes. There is reason to think that Americans will not be willing to let educational consumerism drive this public-ness out of the public schools.

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