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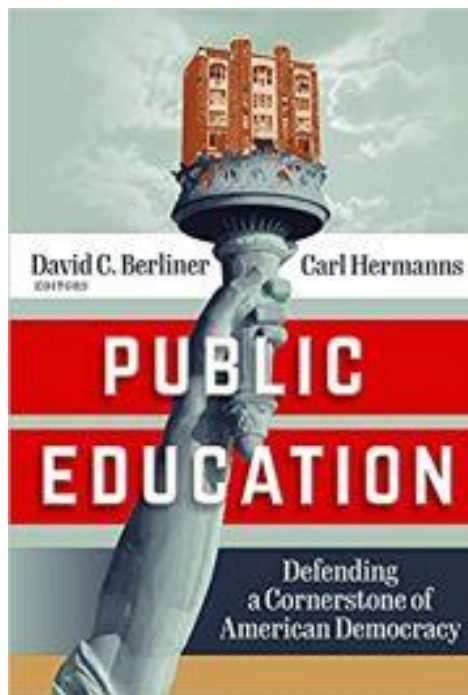
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Discourse concerning American public education is increasingly fraught and complex. Against this backdrop, David Berliner and Carl Hermanns have entered an edited volume of essays into the fray – *Public Education: Defending a Cornerstone of American Democracy* – with a particular focus on the contributions of Horace Mann as a visionary of an education system that could serve and sustain American democracy.

Accordingly, a conversation about American education can and should address what democracy actually means and how it can be nurtured and strengthened. This volume facilitates such a conversation, bringing together many of the nation’s most respected educators and scholars to reflect on how and why to “uphold, defend, and perfect the critical and transformative role of public education that Mann envisioned, and for which he advocated” (p. 2).



Especially in the recent past, and ramping up even since this excellent volume was sent to the printers, we have seen disputes about education and education policy reach a fevered pitch, with large and escalating consequences for public education and for students in many school districts and states. At state levels, for example, we have seen the passage of the most aggressive school voucher and voucher-like programs yet – such as in Arizona, where this volume was presumably pulled

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together – and in many states we also see proposed legislation or new laws seeking to restrict the teaching of particular content regarding race, history, or gender and sexuality (Pendharkar, 2022). At local levels, too, school board meetings have become contested battlegrounds in which conflicting perspectives related to these same topics are presented, and at times such disputes have been extremely intense and included physical threats (Borter et al., 2022). But these situations also present challenges and fine lines if we are focusing on strengthening democracy. For example, those who come to make their voices heard at school board meetings (even if they say or believe things we may vehemently disagree with) *are* participating in the democratic process, so a key then may be to find ways to harness some of this new energy for good, for the improvement of education.

Still, we cannot help but wonder if Horace Mann or his contemporaries might see our present state of affairs as a failure, as another instance of our longstanding inability to find commonality in answering a simple question: What is education’s purpose? (For a historical perspective of the challenges here, see Labaree, 1997.) Unfortunately, for those who work for equitable and just education, “simple” does not equate to “easy.” One cannot merely prescribe a purpose for education based on a single set of values, or based on one dominant culture’s narratives and assumptions. It is also true that education does not have the same meaning across all of the human experience. Still, as educators, we endure, in the hope that we will fulfill the potential of public education for all people.

In *Public Education*, many of the nation’s most respected educators and scholars grapple with what could be framed as a disconnect between Horace Mann’s initial vision of common education, and the harsh and hopeful realities of an evolving and (post)modernizing America. It does not escape several of the authors, for example, that Horace Mann’s America was willfully more unequal and discriminatory than our own. To that end, we are left as readers to question if Mann’s vision – which was exclusive, largely, to white males – is still a schematic on which we should pin the future of American education. Perhaps, as some of the essayists suggest, a pluralistic democracy requires both innovation *and* determined redress of the inequities that prevailed in and, in many ways, beyond Mann’s time.

Maybe a central issue is that Horace Mann believed too purely and fervently in the nation upon which he rested his noble goal of common education. Did he fail to envision, for example, the strong march of free-market capitalism and neoliberal policies that would serve to shrink and divide school funding and in other ways pervert and narrow the educational process? It may be that Mann believed Americans would be able to come together in pursuit of a common goal of sharing knowledge and collectively building and sustaining a democratic way of life, and never foresaw that many of us would succumb instead to impulses to divide and separate, or that we would ride the wave of flimsy but compelling narratives elevating “panaceas” like school choice and educational freedom. Indeed, Mann’s hope and optimism is scarcely detectable in current debates on compulsory education, which is viewed by some as the ultimate commodity – creating a captive audience that could generate tremendous wealth for corporate interests as well as a circular maelstrom of policy decisions that are less about common good, and more about private gain.

Berliner and Hermanns have sparked a conversation that is much richer, nuanced, and challenging than we can convey in this brief review. However, where we have landed for now is that it is much less of a question of whether Mann's education vision was correct, than whether we have actually ever fully committed to making it a reality.

Looking outward is sometimes useful. Pasi Sahlberg, a Finnish educator and policy expert, has suggested that the people of Finland on the whole are very satisfied with their education system, which among other things does not allow for-profit education and prioritizes equity and collaboration over competition. Teachers in this milieu are also highly respected, and their career is regarded as a highly intellectual one. As for why Finland has gone in this direction, Sahlberg (2012) largely credits how Finnish policymakers and educators adopted and implemented visionary ideas of American scholars such as John Dewey, whose progressive education model has direct lineage from Mann's vision. Can we say the same here in the United States, the cradle of such ideas and innovations? Unfortunately, not. We must at least consider that our public education system has been largely dominated in recent decades by perpetual policy changes reflecting a valuation of accountability, markets, and competition, and not by a powerful dream of democratic education for our children.

In our reading of the 29 essays in this ambitious six-part edited volume, a persistent emphasis on the following theme is evident: How do we balance a critical examining and improving our current public education system, while still paying tribute to its potential as the "great equalizer" as envisioned by Mann? And more importantly, how can we reflect on our practice as educators in a way that sees our own responsibility in going off track, while also acknowledging that only hope and concerted action will see us through?

Among the notions that the essayists tend to agree on is that many Americans value the idea that public education can and should serve a common good. Notwithstanding, the many possible definitions of that common good are in contention, state or unstated, with each other. Some essayists point out that Americans primarily see a common good as entailing a strong economy, and students who are equipped with the necessary abilities that complex global society entails (Ravitch, Fiske/Ladd, Harvey). Meanwhile, other contributors describe a growing distrust by Americans, who believe that our schools are failing to so equip them (Labaree, Starr). Still others (Meier, Phillips, Grennon Brooks) present the case that many Americans see education as offering essential, meaningful preparation for citizenship in a pluralistic society. And yet, there are still considerable questions about whether that can be done in an era of decreased funding (Weber), misleading public narratives (Brooks, Zeichner, Ayers), and the effects of neoliberal policies that favor school choice and vouchers (Corbett Burris, Berliner).

The conversation around just what those values are is frequently met with criticism and distrust. There are those in this compendium who question whether a system built on Mann's narrow conception of common good will ever yield the equalization he suggested. Several essayists (Smagorinsky, Powers) point out that

Mann's vision literally centered around assimilation. Just imagine the effect on minority children of a system that celebrates a "common good" that excludes them, and celebrates figures who, it can be argued, intentionally left them out of that vision. While limited educational opportunities for Black families did exist, Gloria Ladson-Billings points out that American education is still segregated by both *de facto* and *de jure* policies. She suggests that even major changes like *Brown v Board of Education* were made because of interest convergence, again justified by "traditional American values," and the fear that Black Americans might see their interests as laborers better reflected in Communism than by the "bootstraps" ethos of American capitalism. Perhaps, given that thought, it might be more appropriate to attribute our enduring system to those in communities of color who fought tirelessly for their rights to be included in "the common good." Has their transgression of norms and the status quo not yielded many of the most significant contributions to equitable education, over and above those who may have nostalgically and uncritically stuck too closely to the original, non-inclusive visions of influential thinkers like Mann?

Other contributors investigate the continual reproduction of policies that strengthen meritocracy, testing, and sorting students based on conceptualizations of the model student, which are often connected to biases related to race and culture (Oakes/Lipton, Nieto). Others point out that educators cannot solve all ills of society, no matter how hard they try. We see this as a particularly important point, given how Americans (and perhaps especially "elite" Americans, those who are most wealthy and politically powerful; see Malin & Lubienski, 2022) often have been too quick to try to fix all that ails us through education. As essayists in this volume emphasize, we should also/instead have been focusing on other pressing and interconnected matters (e.g., segregated housing, poverty, health care, income inequality; see chapters by Carter and Welner). Perhaps Mann did not envision a nation as divided as our own. It also bears interrogating the ways schools and educators have been neutral in the face of growing criticisms. No, educators cannot solve all problems, but surrendering before the fight also certainly will not yield positive results.

Diane Ravitch points out that our schools have been transformed exhaustively in the image of accountability and measurable adherence to standards. Welner, too, suggests that reforms are rarely systemic. One must question how such incomplete "reforms" impact leadership, which is likely to become more bureaucratic and administrative than to push back against the ongoing misinformation campaigns that apparently seek to undermine public education. Beyond that, one must also ask if social mobility, necessary for any "great equalizer," is attainable in the face of reduced funding and divided resources, circumstances hardened by the growing anti-public-school narratives of school choice.

It is almost too daunting to truly comprehend.

Yet, something still emanates from the center of Mann's vision, which we suggest is no longer entirely his own. Educators in the United States have persisted through unending difficulties, poor public perceptions, stagnant pay, pandemics, and divisive commentary. In doing so, they have shaped, along with their communities, a

vision that is partly Mann's, yes, as well as ours to nurture. The editors of this book have thoughtfully elected to use the imagery that American public education is the "cornerstone" of democracy. It might be natural to think of a cornerstone as a structural element, especially in this metaphor. If we remove it, the structure will fall. But the purpose of a cornerstone is about direction. The cornerstone is laid in a way that all other pieces are built off of it, true and stable. We can and must continually discuss if that cornerstone is still directing us in the most virtuous course. We can and must continually discuss who actually laid that cornerstone, and for whom, be it those who looked like Mann or some amalgam of all that America is and can be. We must continually question whether the democracy it leads us to is one that is truly inclusive and responsive to the needs of the modern world. But what we must not do, what we cannot do, is allow that cornerstone to be removed, or turned, or reshaped in the image of the select few. For if we do that, the edifice will most certainly fall.

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