

ICPE, Day of Action

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A Fight for Public Schools Is a Fight for Our Democracy (Revised)

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John Dewey said, “Education is not a preparation for life.” It is life itself. Dewey believed that education is parallel to the human life cycle. Yes, the parent is the child’s first teacher. So, informal education begins at birth.

Formal education takes place in schools and even then, Dewey believed that schooling was not merely about preparing students for the life they would have. The classroom is the incubator for society because all of the attributes that society would need for its social sustainability are cultivated in the interactions there.

In making this case, Dewey was echoing the beliefs of the ancient Greek philosopher in the first democracy in Western society, possibly learned from ancient Africa but we won’t go there. Socrates believed that true teachers were the midwives of democracy. On their shoulders and in their hands rests the future of democratic society. It is for this reason that teaching is political. Within the profession is the power to order the affairs of a nation to cause it to swing towards liberty, justice, and the promotion of the human good, and it begins with nurturing empathetic future citizens who can engage in critical thinking that self-rule requires.

It is a misnomer to suggest that schools must choose between parental rights and public education. This formulation is a false choice. In reality, not only are teachers former and current parents, but they also act on behalf of the custodial role of parents in the idea of *in loco parentis*. The phrase means that teachers are the partners of parents and take responsibility for the care of their students as future citizens as a part of their mission, while they are “in the building”.

Therefore, the teaching profession also incorporates the responsibility to cultivate the social virtues necessary to sustain our democracy. These are the very attributes that are taught in kindergarten, as Robert Fulghum explained in *All I Really Need to Know, I Learned in Kindergarten*. Some of these lessons were:

1. Share everything.
2. Play fair.
3. Don't hit people.
4. Put things back where you found them.
5. Clean up your own mess.
6. Don't take things that aren't yours.
7. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.
8. Wash your hands before you eat.
9. Flush.
10. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.

Elementary school classrooms across the country relentlessly reinforce these social rules of the road. They then become contested in middle school, where it is all up for grabs. Students are then increasingly trusted to walk out these beliefs in high school and sometimes rebel to show their independence.

This political role of education in continually birthing our democracy is exemplified in the public education system that has been the envy of the modern world for most of the twentieth century. Publicly supported, compulsory, free K-12 education was a project that emerged along with the nation's growth that increasingly viewed public education as an essential public good. Its achievements stand on their own.

Thomas Jefferson first proposed this idea of a public school system that was locally controlled in his 18th century “Bill for the General Diffusion of Knowledge.” Although the bill did not pass in the Virginia Legislature, Massachusetts’s secretary of education, Horace Mann, was one of the social reformers who took up the mantle, in the early 19th century, of the state-by-state pioneering of common schools. He viewed education in these schools as “the great equalizer.” African American teachers and abolitionists shouldered the postbellum African American literacy burden in the late 19th century.

How, then, have we come to where we now are in our society where the greatest and most important profession is so maligned and degraded? It is pretty clear that we have traded the sacrosanct political role of formal education for the politics of partisanship and placed public education at the mercy of corporate interests.

Although public K-12 education is political, it should be immune from politics, which is that pendulum swing of partisan power based on left or right extreme ideologies. Our public schools are indicators of the health of the social compact and our collective commitment to an egalitarian democracy. So a fight for public schools is nothing less than a fight for democracy.

Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education*. Archives.org

Fulghum, R. (2004), *All I really need to know, I learned in kindergarten*. Ballantine Books (15th anniversary).