

## America's Public Schools—Public Goods or Monopolies

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*AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*  
Spring 2024

*“Americans share a common destiny. What that becomes will be the result of how we understand the world together, which begins with our schools. Learning in silos will breed more distrust, which is fueled by the mischaracterization of public schools as monopolies. If we truly want to be ‘indivisible with liberty and justice for all,’ America’s public schools may be the last place to achieve such unity.”*

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April 2024

**D**r. Jeremi Suri, of the University of Texas at Austin, recently lectured on the topic, “Why Americans Love and Hate Government.” During the Q & A, he was asked why he did not include the public school “monopoly” as a problem.

Dismissing the speaker’s use of monopoly in this context, Suri argued for the benefits that a public school system provides for the country through a unifying effect. At a time when the country is politically divided, such unity is sorely needed.

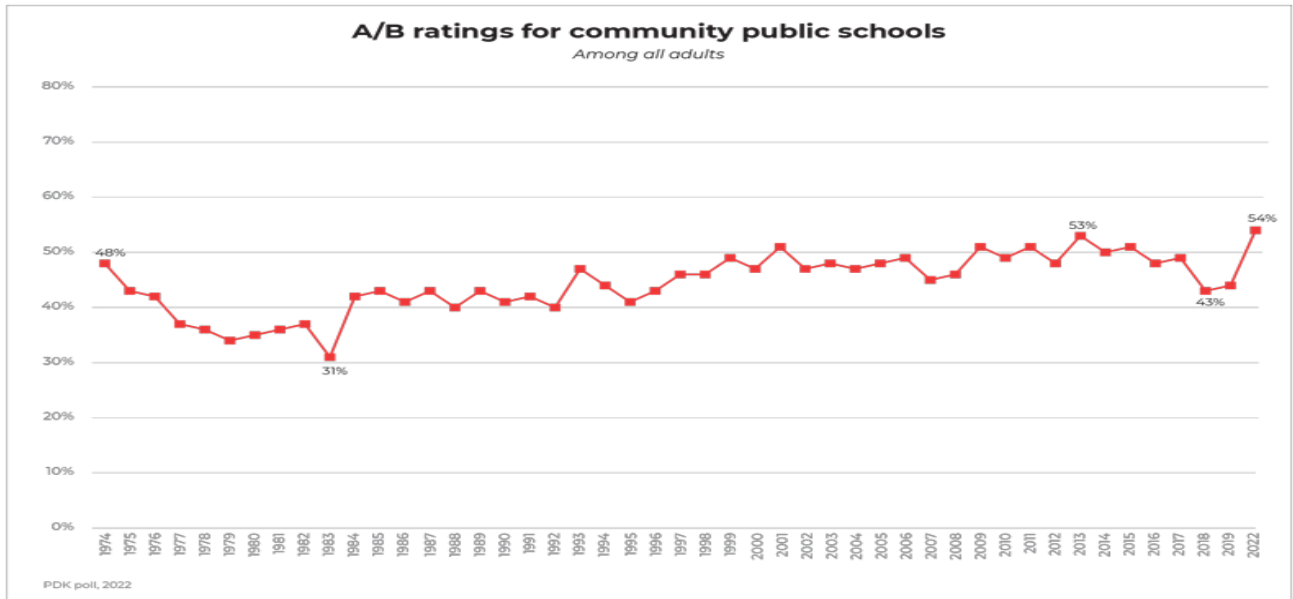
Despite what is being said to denigrate public schooling by those seeking to replace it

with a market-driven model, this is a time when Americans’ support of public schools is strong.

According to the latest *Phi Delta Kappan* (PDK) "Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools,” Americans are more favorable about public school education (see Figure 1) than they have been in fifty years: “54% of all adults (it is higher for parents of attending students) give an A or B grade to the public schools in their community, the highest percentage numerically in PDK polls since 1974, up 10 points since the question was asked in 2019. The previous high was 53% in 2013; the long-term average, 44% (PDK, 2022).

Figure 1

## PDK Poll of the Public's Attitude Toward the Public Schools



Americans also trust their public school teachers. In the same poll (see Figure 2) 72% of parents have an overall sense of trust for those educating their children.

Figure 2

Trust and confidence in community's public school teachers)

<b>Trust and confidence in community's public school teachers</b>		
	<b>Among all adults</b>	<b>Among public school parents</b>
Overall	63%	72%
<b>To appropriately handle...</b>		
U.S. history	56%	67%
Civics	50%	57%
Social/emotional growth	48%	59%
Racial/ethnic diversity	46%	56%
Media literacy	46%	54%
How the history of racism affects America today	44%	55%
Gender/sexuality issues	38%	46%

Through my work with superintendents, past and present, and my role as the editor of this journal, I am aware of the unique and unprecedented challenges facing today's public school leaders and educators. Recent *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* issues have presented themes on how adaptive or autonomous leadership skills are essential for succeeding in such complex times.

The accepted articles for the Spring 2024 issue examine similar complexities: the changing roles of and demands on the modern principal; unprecedented challenges of school safety and mental health; addressing legal yet paradoxical mandates.

The designation of public schools as a monopoly inspired me to revisit this categorization, its roots, and the arguments for and against its use. Since monopolies are defined as market powers seeking to control prices to maximize profit, how does this definition comport with the mission and vision of the public school system?

### **Friedman's Monopoly**

The use of *monopoly* to describe public education first appeared in 1955 when University of Chicago economist, Milton Friedman, wrote his essay, "The Role of Government in Education," which called for a federal disengagement in the funding of public

schools. One of Friedman's premises was that public schools, as a natural monopoly, were inefficient by failing to benefit from market-driven competition. He also claimed that via a "neighborhood effect," the greater needs of one imposes significant costs on others. He saw this as counter to other goals related to the individual freedoms of families.

Friedman acknowledged but challenged the premise that "a stable and democratic society is impossible without widespread acceptance of some common set of values and without a minimum degree of literacy on the part of most citizens," arguing that the bulk of the responsibility should not be placed on the government. Opposed to "subsidizing" vocational training or any educational programming beyond the most basic elementary education, Friedman saw such programs benefits to "free riding" individuals who should not be funded by the government. He justified his dismissal of public schools as an institution beneficial to society by describing public school's "ultimate objective" as being ambiguous.

In a 2004 address to the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), Friedman called for the abolition of the public school system and the elimination of all the taxes that pay for it: "In my ideal world, government would not be responsible for providing education any more than it is for providing food and clothing" (MacLean, 2021).

Friedman's vision for a market-driven approach has been the cornerstone of the ongoing agenda to privatize public education in the United States via vouchers, tuition-tax credits, and for-profit charters. Despite the lack of evidence of the effectiveness of these often-unregulated alternatives to public schools (Brewer, T.J., & Lubienski, 2017; C. Carnoy, 2017; Mast, 2023; Maul, 2015; NEPC, 2017), there has been a sustained commitment by

legislators to shift public school dollars to private schools that enroll only a tenth of the school population, as 90% of today's 51 million students attend public schools. Within this group, 96 % of English Language Learners and 95% of Students with Disabilities (15% of the student population) are educated in public schools (NIES, 2022). The evidence on the effectiveness of vouchers and for-profit educational alternatives is lacking, but the funding for schools that serve 10% of the population is being increased.

In the spring of 2023, the Florida legislature signed a voucher bill that shifted millions of dollars from the state's public schools that educate 88% of the students to provide \$8,500 for each student of *any income level* that families could bring to alternatives such as for-profit private schools and the costs of home-schooling. Florida's "Step-up-for-Students" voucher was promoted with the slogan, "competition breeds excellence." What has been promised as a program to improve quality through competition and choice has become a mechanism to siphon away taxpayer dollars for a small percentage of students in privatized education.

State funding for private school education has shifted from 3% to 10%. With the promised vouchers-for-all program, it is projected that 30% of funding could be shifted for just 12% of the student population. In the first year, "Of the roughly 2,300 private schools accepting vouchers, 69 percent are unaccredited, 58 percent are religious, and nearly one-third are for-profit" (Pappano, 2023). For the 2023-24 school year, 123,000 students applied for the vouchers; 70 percent were already enrolled in private schools.

### **Monopoly as Rationalization**

Friedman's proposal to replace taxpayer funded public schools with a voucher-supported system of private options coincided with the

Brown v. Board of Education (1954) decision. It provided segregationists - north south, east, and west - with cover to seek educational alternatives from the soon-to-be integrated public schools. At the time, there was an exodus from public to private schools in the South. Many public schools were shuttered to circumvent the SCOTUS ruling to integrate.

Throughout the country, there were similar retreats to parochial schools or through the manipulation of neighborhood demographics through state-sanctioned redlining and housing policies: “Today’s residential segregation in the North, South, Midwest, and West is not the unintended consequence of individual choices and of otherwise well-meaning law or regulation but of unhidden public policy that explicitly segregated every metropolitan area in the United States” (pp. vii-viii, Rothstein, 2017).

The 1950’s reflected post-war optimism with a baby boom, a flourishing economy, an expansive connection of the country through a federal highway system, and the elevated status of the United States as the world’s leader in the new global order. Paradoxically, fear of communism exacerbated by the McCarthy hearings, rising cold war tensions, concerns of nuclear war, and the emergence of the civil rights movement contributed to national unease that was manifested in the nation’s schools.

School systems, microcosms of the local community’s values, have frequently served as public spaces for debates about ideas and culture – history, tradition, religion, patriotism, science, and art – that reflect our society. Communities via their school boards and leaders, often informed by state policies and laws, debate to reach consensus on what gets taught. Yet inevitably there will be dissatisfied constituents wanting a different vision and more recently, publicly funded alternatives.

The argument that schools are monopolies provides a cover (with hopes of a funding source) to those seeking educational alternatives that better align with one’s beliefs about politics, religion, race, and class. For those who oppose the proposition that the government is responsible for funding the education of the nation’s children, the school monopoly provides an economic argument that also addresses the goals to reduce government’s role in education and the burden on the taxpayer.

There are other agendas. Approximately \$800 billion dollars are expended annually to educate our 51 million students. Some see this as an opportunity to profit. Donald Cohen, the executive director of *In the Public Interest*, suggests that the education market is “the last honeypot for Wall Street” (Fang, 2014, p. 3 in Attick & Boyles, 2016).

Then there is religion. In *The Good News Club: The Christian Right’s Stealth Assault on America’s Children*, Katherine Stewart writes, “Listening to the debates about public schools on the Christian Right, one hears plenty of opposing opinions and a great deal of confusion. Some want to change the schools; others want to leave them. But smart money seems to know what it is doing. It provides support for programs like the Good News Club, which slowly erode the support for public education in the country at large and in their own constituency in particular. And then it lays the groundwork for dismantling public education in favor of a private system of religious education funded by the state” (p.256).

Friedman’s monopoly has become a stealth rationale for segregationists, profiteers, libertarians, and the religious right. These disparate agendas converge at a time when the complexities of the day related to societal and

civic needs or scientific and technical advancements call for a well-educated populace that benefits all.

### **Public Schools as a Public Good**

Economist Paul Samuelson, a contemporary of Friedman, and known for bringing a scientific analysis to the field of economics, held a contrasting perspective on the role of government and the regulation of markets. Samuelson's classic definition of goods – private and public – recognized that there were certain essential public goods that could not be excluded by those who have not paid for them. He described a dichotomy of the institutional world into public and private exchanges.

In 1954 Samuelson published, “The Pure Theory of Public Expenditure,” in which he postulated that the individual's consumption of public goods, such as national security, highways, streetlights, and railroads, for example, does not prevent others from consuming; in fact, there is a cost to preventing some groups from participating. Samuelson saw benefits for all through the consumption of such public goods and did not see these as subject to market competition.

Thomas Jefferson, our nation's third president, believed that education is the foundation of democracy. In a 1786 letter to George Wythe, a law professor, judge, and fellow signer of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson wrote that education was critical for the preservation of freedom and happiness. He was realistic, too, adding, “Although I do not, with some enthusiasts, believe that the human condition will ever advance to such a state of perfection as that there shall no longer be pain or vice in the world, I believe it susceptible of much improvement ... and that the diffusion of knowledge among the people is to be the instrument by which it is to be effected” (Petillo, 2021).

Horace Mann, known as the “father of American education, proclaimed that ‘Public Education is the cornerstone of our community and our democracy.’ In 1838, he founded and edited *The Common School Journal*. In this journal, Mann targeted the public school and its problems. His six main principles were:

1. the public should no longer remain ignorant;
2. that such education should be paid for, controlled, and sustained by an interested public;
3. that this education will be best provided in schools that embrace children from a variety of backgrounds;
4. that this education must be non-sectarian;
5. that this education must be taught using the tenets of a free society; and
6. that education should be provided by well-trained, professional teachers. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horace\\_Mann](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horace_Mann))

Jefferson and Mann envisioned a public school system as a basis for a free and democratic society—a public good. Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom advanced a theory of collective action that described how communities can work together to improve their societies. Embedded in this work was a belief about the importance of civic education. She delineated public from private goods, noting that the former are essential for achieving peace and security via a strong national defense, a weather service, fire protection, etc. (Ostrom, 2009, 412-13).

### **Public Education: Monopoly or Public Good with Not-for-Profit Goals**

Americans have been taught to distrust monopolies, and rightly so. Monopolies are created to maximize profit by reducing or eliminating competition. Without competition, firms can set prices for products and services

above that which might be charged in a competitive market. But America's public school systems are not in the business of maximizing profit. Their leaders annually struggle to create "fiscally responsible" budgets in highly regulated systems. Making their arguments to school boards, town and city councils, state legislators, and governors, school leaders pitch their needs and wants.

Teachers, a budget's costliest but most essential item, are professionals whose salaries, even with collective bargaining, fall below that of other professions: "On average, teachers earned 73.6 cents for every dollar that other professionals made in 2022. This is much less than the 93.9 cents on the dollar they made in 1996" (EPI – 2023). Contrary to exaggerations of self-serving teacher unions, they are in an ongoing struggle to negotiate living wage salaries.

Schools are about serving the public good, providing our nation with informed and responsible citizens who will possess the skills, knowledge, and adaptive critical thinking to deal with the challenges of a complex future. They are about ensuring we have the engineers to provide us with a strong infrastructure, medical professionals to keep us healthy, technicians, artists, mechanics, and so many other talents to address our needs in a vibrant society and economy.

According to Knight, Abowitz, and Stitzlein (2018), those promoting school competition as a hedge against monopolization, "operate under a set of assumptions built on the economic definition of a public good that views education as only an individual experience sought to fulfill one's unique desires.

These assumptions ignore that public schools are, in large part, aimed at supporting and improving social life in communities and

the nation. This civic framing of school as a public good is a historic ideal, but it is in danger of fading as a commonly held value in the face of powerful, well-financed individualist views of education" (pp. 33-37).

Also underestimated is the complexity of the demands on today's public schools. When Friedman called for the dismantling of public schools, the programming was basic. We were just emerging from *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and a doctrine of "separate but equal."

There were no laws requiring services to special education students until 1975 (Public Law 94-142). America's economy remained largely agricultural and manufacturing. There was no Internet and no thought of what today's "fourth industrial revolution" would bring and what skills would be needed to thrive as a nation and as individuals.

In the post-war years international trade competition was dominated by the United States, which had profited from supplying Europe with equipment for the war and then the rebuilding of that continent. In fact, the nation's economy prospered and has continued to lead the world in multiple economic indicators. Today, competitive trade, which relies on innovation, is global. Innovation relies on educational systems that foster creativity and maximize the potential of all.

In the Spring 2024 issue of the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, Davis and Nixon, researchers at the University of West Georgia, in their analysis, "The Changing Role of Principals: Are District Leaders and University Preparation Programs Providing the Needed Supports?" outline the role of the modern-day principal as being unrecognizable as compared to leaders prior to this century.

The work is complex and imbued with conflict. Leaders need to morph into various roles: educational visionaries, change agents, instructional leaders, budget analysts, curriculum and assessment experts, facility managers, special program administrators, and community builders. Context has changed.

Aside from the pandemic and what it wrought, the rise of artificial intelligence, the battlegrounds of social media, political and cultural conflict and polarization, attacks on science and empirical knowledge, low teacher morale, and increasing shortages of educators are just a set of the contextual challenges facing leaders.

Knight, Abowitz, and Stitzlein (2018) argue, “In the case of education, the civic public good includes benefits for both the individual and the wider community.

Individuals benefit from receiving an education that enables them to function in society, and the wider community benefits from being part of a populace possessing shared general knowledge, critical-thinking ability for making decisions about social problems, and norms of civility and community engagement.

These benefits are made widely available and accessible to all social classes, races, and ethnic groups through a universal, tuition-free system of public schooling” (pp. 33-37).

Public schools, while benefiting individuals, have a common mission to improve civic life and the success of the nation. They should not be about making profits. They should be about the democratic principle that requires a striving for consensus about what gets taught.” (Knight, Abowitz, and Stitzlein, 2018, pp. 33-37).

A public good is generated when citizens learn to appreciate shared liberties while being elbow-to-elbow and nose-to-nose with diverse others.

The intentional and unintentional separation or exclusion of students based on social class, intellectual ability, religious affiliation, sexuality, race, or other attributes diminishes the power of a school to construct a public good of safeguarding shared liberties for all.

Because private schools, by design and by practice, select students based on an array of criteria, their value in this regard is more limited than in public schools that must accept all comers” (Knight, Abowitz, and Stitzlein, 2018, pp. 33-37).

Public schools are the public good that serve the nation. They provide a common ground for discussion of ideas that starts at the community level via school board meetings and parental engagement.

They bring together diverse voices from a pluralistic society that, now more than ever, needs ways to find unity, not further fragmentation.

Americans share a common destiny. What that becomes will be the result of how we understand the world together, which begins with our schools. Learning in silos will breed more distrust, which is fueled by the mischaracterization of public schools as monopolies. If we truly want to be “indivisible with liberty and justice for all,” America’s public schools may be the last place to achieve such unity.



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