

High Quality Public Education or Individual Retirement Accounts: Which Side Are You On?

Educators, concerned about their incomes and their values, are faced with a win *and* lose dilemma.

ALEX MOLNAR

Deborah Grey



Privatization is an especially important issue for educators because of the historical significance of public schools. Public schools have seemingly always had a special place in the hearts of Americans. Love them or hate them, no one can seriously question their central place in the social ideology of the United States. Yet self-supporting private schools, some of which predate the Republic, have also contributed to the development of our social democracy. Their very existence demonstrates that intellectual and religious freedom is a reality in the U.S. Americans have, therefore, traditionally tended not only to regard education as a common good, they have also regarded the development of both private and public schools as the best way to assure that good in our pluralistic democracy.

The benefits of the traditional relationship between self-standing private

Alex Molnar is Associate Professor, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; during 1983-84 he is Guest Professor, Department of Educational and Social Science, Fernuniversitat, Hagen, Federal Republic of Germany.



Jan Sutherland Lane

“The traditional relationship between self-standing private and tax-supported public schools has been challenged in the last 30 years by a number of factors.”

and tax-supported public schools have been challenged in the last 30 years by, among other things, the growing number of all-white private schools in the South following the *Brown* decision; the sharp criticisms of the public schools in the 1960s and 70s for their failure to provide a quality education to minority, poor, and working class children; and the proposal of an educational voucher system, designed to make public schools more responsive by making them “compete” for tax dollars. The most recent threat to the traditional private school-public school relationship are proposals to provide indirect tax support for private schools through tuition tax credits as part of a larger trend toward the increasing privatization of social services.

The guiding ideology of U.S. social welfare policy at the national level today is clearly based on the assumption that, to use Whitty's words, “the individual exercise of supposedly free choice in an

unequal society is the best way of achieving social justice.” It would be a mistake, however, to describe this ideology (given the social history of the U.S.) as conservative in a partisan sense. In the U.S., political liberals and conservatives have always *shared* this ideological premise. They have differed only on the *extent* to which it should be carried through in social policy.

Take, for example, Richard Christensen's proposal, in an article titled “Educating Toward Justice,” that high school students be required to take an academic course in social justice while concurrently working among the urban poor, the “have nots” of our society.¹ Although from the traditional American perspective this proposal may seem very liberal, it is, from the perspective of Whitty's structural analysis, essentially conservative. That is, it presupposes that enlightened acts of good works are the primary basis for solving social problems and promoting the general welfare.

"Educating Toward Justice" therefore stands well within traditional American liberal/conservative social ideology. Its tone recalls Violas' description of Jane Addams, the archetypal American liberal/conservative reformer:

Jane Addams first became aware of the contradiction between social ideal and social reality when, at age six, her father drove her through the poor quarter of Cedarville. Her response was both interesting and instructive. She first expressed shock that people should live "in such horrid little houses so close together." Then she voiced the conviction that "when I grow up, I should, of course, have a large house, but it would not be built among the other large houses, but right in the midst of horrid little houses like these."²

Although Christensen's and Addams' sentiments are humane, they do not address issues such as poverty, mass unemployment, or tax support for non-public social welfare services into *structural* issues. This inability seems increasingly problematic as we struggle to formulate social policy in a climate of economic crisis. Although in the U.S. we have managed for some time to ignore the structurally irrelevant differences between liberals and conservatives in order to formulate social policy consensus on such issues as railroad ownership, sewage treatment, medical care for the elderly, and support for public education. It now appears, however, that the latest economic crisis in the U.S. and the entire capitalist world is pushing liberals and conservatives ever more closely together in their social policy formulations.

For example, Republicans and Democrats recently worked long and hard to "reform" the social security system. In the process, they encouraged Americans to regard the primary problem of the system as administrative or demographic rather than one of mass unemployment. They further eroded public confidence in, and political support for, the social security system by supporting legislation to enable those with enough money to set up tax sheltered individual retirement accounts (IRA). These accounts amount to a hidden tax on the working poor who must help make up the lost tax dollars. In other words, the poor pay more and get less. By examining programs such as the IRA, it is possible to see that as liberals and conservatives are

forced to move closer and closer together in their programmatic formulations, the practical result is the class divisions in American society. It is precisely these divisions that social welfare programs in general and public education in particular are supposed to ameliorate.

The relationship between the social security system and IRAs is structured in roughly the same way as the new relationship between public and private schools will be if the government grants tax credits for private school tuition. The historically positive, balanced and complementary relationship between public and private schools in the U.S. is threatened, not strengthened, by the increasing privatization of social services in the name of "free choice." This is because, in practice, privatization has the effect of building political support for the continued withdrawal of public money for public education. Under a policy of privatization, at the same time that less public money will be available for public education, the amount of money in the pockets of a wealthy minority will increase. This minority will then be able to purchase privately a variety of social services from trash collection to good schools. That will be the "free choice" of the wealthy. The "free choice" of the majority of our citizens, however, will be to do without an increasing number of social welfare benefits (such as good public schools) or to

reduce their standard of living to pay for them.

In these historical circumstances, educators are in a paradoxical situation. Most professional educators are middle class, a status that depends to a large extent on public tax support. At the same time that individual educators seemingly have the chance to profit from the trend toward the privatization of social services through such schemes as IRAs, our professional status and membership in the middle class is being threatened by the same trend. As educators, we are confronted with determining whether we will support the social policy of privatization that enabled us to open our IRA accounts or whether we will participate in formulating a social policy that is aimed at the equal provision of education for all children of the U.S. as the policy most in our professional interests and the one most likely to result in the greatest social good. We can no longer pretend it is possible to have it both ways. □

¹Richard Christensen, "Educating Toward Justice," *Educational Leadership* 41 (March 1984): 41-42.

²Paul C. Violas, "Jane Addams and the New Liberalism," in *Roots of Crisis: American Education in the Twentieth Century*, ed. C.J. Karier, P. Violas, J. Spring (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1976), pp. 69-70.



Copyright © 1984 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.