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In Defense of Public Schools: America's Diamond in the Rough

The current national debate about the viability of public education is certainly lively and replete with advocates as well detractors. While some would argue that public schools have underserved a significant segment of the population, a strong counter-argument can also be made in defense of public education.

The institution of education is multifaceted. First, it is the primary transmitter of knowledge and information – the “stuff” of a modern, capitalist society. This is an essential component of capitalism because it ensures the continued growth and viability of the economy by providing an educated workforce capable of addressing the issues of the present and the future. Without this component, mass transit systems would not be constructed, public utilities would come to a standstill, the nation's food supply would dwindle, and our health-care system would falter, among other essential functions of modern society. So, this element of education is essential.

Education also serves a socializing role in society. It is the fundamental transmitter of core societal values. Unlike personal values, these core societal values, combined, comprise the “glue” that holds a heterogeneous, pluralistic society together. Without this, American society would become as splintered as many in the world where ethnic tensions and lack of civic cohesion threatens stability.

As an agent of socialization, education also offers what sociologists refer to as the “Hidden Curriculum.” This function enables children to develop the skills of following instructions, getting along with others, being respectful, dependable, and punctual; working in group settings, respecting others' values and belief systems, developing a sense of civic responsibility, and a myriad of other functions that create a well-rounded member of society.

Last, a more general function of education is its role as a democratizing agent in society. From the time of Jefferson, the founding fathers of the nation recognized that free public education was one of the cornerstones of a fully functioning democracy. From its earliest roots dating back to Horace Mann, public education has been the gateway for millions of immigrants as well as those in the lower socioeconomic strata. It has been one of the more stabilizing forces in American history, creating a strong middle class – the bedrock of a strong democratic system.

So, the next time someone questions the value of public education in America, kindly tell them that without it, it is likely that the comforts they enjoy in a democratic society may very well not be available to them.

- Dr. Ralph G. Perrino