

**Faith-based schools and common schools in America: Reflections on the charge that faith-based schools are a threat to social cohesion**

Avi I. Mintz and Graham P. McDonough

**THE FINAL VERSION OF THIS ARTICLE IS PUBLISHED IN *Journal of Religious Education* 59(4) 2011, pp. 23-30**

**The Rise of the American Common School as a Response to Religious Diversity**

Throughout America's history, schools have been seen as a means of creating a more cohesive population. After the American Revolution, many writers on education sought to have schools create a unique American identity for the citizens of the colonies. In 1786 Benjamin Rush wrote that creating an unbending love of country and fellow countrymen ought to be the focus of American schools, and he went so far as to argue that an estimable education would "convert men into republican machines" (Rush, 1965). Again and again in the history of American schooling, schools have been expected to help unite America's population – to create cohesion amongst a population comprised of various kinds of differences. When waves of European immigrants arrived in the early twentieth century with different languages, cultures, and religions, schools were asked to give them a common language and to assimilate them into a common American culture (e.g. Graham, 2005, pp. 7-50). In the Civil Rights era, integrated schools were expected to help overcome racial tension.

Horace Mann, the first Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education and one of nineteenth century America's leading educational thinkers and policy-makers, strongly asserted his view that "common" public schools, would help society overcome various kinds of tensions among different social groups. In his *Twelfth Annual Report* about the common schools in Massachusetts in 1848, Mann wrote,

a fellow-feeling for one's class or caste is the common instinct of hearts not wholly sunk in selfish regards for person, or for family. The spread of education, by enlarging the cultivated class or caste, will open a wider area over which the social feelings will expand; and, if this education should be universal and complete, it would do more than all things else to obliterate factitious distinctions in society. (Mann, 1957, p. 87)

Enabling a society to overcome "factitious distinctions" motivated many people to advocate for common schools, which are now generally called public schools. Indeed, Mann thought that the schools would overcome various kinds of social disharmony. For instance, Mann worried about the lower classes suffering under a "tyranny" of capital. The common school, wrote Mann, "does better than to disarm the poor of their hostility towards the rich; it prevents being poor". While America's schools have never been the social instrument that eliminated poverty as Mann hoped, the expectation that schools can address economic inequality – and social strife that results therefrom – has been a pervasive feature of American educational policy.

Indeed, in addition to his optimism about the common school's ability to solve the problem of poverty, one of the kinds of "factitious distinctions" with which Mann was most concerned was religious diversity. In 1837, in his *First Annual Report*, he warned that in the absence of common schools, which were government funded and not attached to or governed by any religious organization,<sup>i</sup> America's school system would resemble England's, "where churchmen and dissenters,—each sect according to its own

creed,—maintain separate schools, in which children are taught, from their tenderest years to wield the sword of polemics with fatal dexterity; and where the gospel, instead of being a temple of peace, is converted into an armory of deadly weapons, for social interminable warfare” (Mann, 1957, p. 33). Mann identified the common school as the only way to avoid inter-religious animosity and distrust: “Of such disastrous consequences, there is but one remedy and one preventive. It is the elevation of the common schools” (Ibid.).

Following Mann, another great proponent of the common school, John Dewey, continued to see the common school as a response to the various types of diversity in America. Dewey wrote, ‘In the olden times, the diversity of groups was largely a geographical matter’ (Dewey, 1916/1944, p. 21). In America, however,

it is this situation [of diversity] which has, perhaps, more than any other one cause, forced the demand for an educational institution which shall provide something like a homogeneous and balanced environment for the young. Only in this way can the centrifugal forces set up by juxtaposition of different groups without one and the same political unit be counteracted. The intermingling in the school of youth of different races, different religions, and unlike customs creates for all a new and broader environment... The assimilative force of the American public school is eloquent testimony to the efficacy of the common and balanced appeal. (Dewey, 1916/1944, pp. 21-2)<sup>ii</sup>

When Dewey wrote these lines, he did so in the context of a proposed educational philosophy that explicitly sought to provide meaningful experiences across differences to create citizens with a robust democratic unity. Dewey did not assume that mere contact with people of other faiths (and races, and classes, and so on) would create social harmony. He rather thought that a genuinely democratic education creates a community in which individual differences can remain while people are enabled to work cooperatively and effectively with one another.

Only a few years after Dewey wrote the lines quoted above in *Democracy and Education*, the perceived threat of faith-based schools to social cohesion reached its apex in American history. In 1922 in Oregon, voters approved a bill that forced all children of the state to attend public schools through the eighth grade or age sixteen. The perceived need for common education for all was, at least in part, due to suspicion of and animosity towards Catholicism and Catholic schools (Jones, 2008, p. 10).<sup>iii</sup> The question of the bill’s constitutionality worked its way through the courts and ultimately resulted in the 1925 *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* United States Supreme Court decision, in which the option of primary faith-based schooling was protected. Though Oregon’s faith-based schools obtained judicial permission and protection to remain in operation, the public had had its say and a majority had seen common schools as the exclusive vehicle for social cohesion amongst a religiously diverse population.

The American tradition of criticizing faith-based schools as divisive and a threat to social cohesion persists through today. The Supreme Court case *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* (2002) considered whether public funds in the form of vouchers could be used for tuition at faith-based schools in 2002. The court ruled that the use of public vouchers at faith-based schools was permissible, but the idea that education at faith-based schools leads to social strife was prevalent in the discourse about the case. Indeed, Justice Breyer, in a dissent joined by Justices Stevens and Souter, wrote, “In a society as religiously diverse as ours, the Court has recognized that we must rely on the Religion Clauses of the First Amendment to protect against religious strife, particularly when what is at issue is an area as central to religious belief as the shaping, through primary education, of the next generation’s minds and spirit.” Like Mann, many have

argued that since the common, public school enables children from all religions to co-mingle, it is the best means of overcoming socially undesirable tensions among religious groups. Faith-based schools, on the other hand, are a threat to social cohesion because they reinforce and entrench difference. While there are other charges that are leveled against faith-based schools (including that they threaten children's autonomy, for example) it is the threat to national unity that arises most frequently in the discourse about faith-based schools (Jones, 2008, p. xiv). It is the hope that the common school could serve as a means of overcoming deep religious divisions and animosities among Americans that is our main concern in this paper.

Many scholars have defended faith-based schools against the charge that they are an obstacle to social cohesion. For example, some have noted that mere contact with people of different faiths is neither necessary nor sufficient to promote cohesion, and might in fact exacerbate tensions (e.g. Short, 2002; Levinson, 2007). Others have argued that there is no reason that an education for social cohesion cannot take place in faith-based schools (Thiessen, 2001, pp. 29-43). In this paper, we suggest that a reconsideration of the alleged threat to social cohesion is in order given the changing aims of American public schooling. The goals of the common school in America were initially, and throughout much of its history, focused on creating citizens with appropriate attitudes, values and loyalties. In the early American model of common schooling, the idea of creating a citizen was central. Since the empirical reality of diversity in the nascent American republic featured deep sectarian differences and distrust among elements of the population, the common school was to be the chief tool for creating a socially cohesive citizenry.<sup>iv</sup> The public school in America today, however, has largely abandoned citizenship education – and therefore an education towards social cohesion – because of political currents that have radically altered America's educational priorities. We contend, therefore, that arguments against faith-based schools based on concerns about social cohesion are no longer rooted in the empirical reality of schools today. The role of faith-based schools in America may remain problematic, but it is no longer so because of social divisiveness.

### **The Public School in America Today**

If the common schools envisioned by Mann, Dewey and others were to be institutions that offered meaningful experiences leading to social unity and democratic citizenship, America's common schools today fall woefully short of their hopes. The American system of education has recently undergone a tremendous change. The nineteenth century common school sought, primarily, to create common loyalties, attitudes and values and, secondarily, instruction in academic subjects (Glenn, 1988, p. 87). In contrast, the aims of today's public schools are narrowly academic and rely heavily on basic literacy and mathematics test scores, the results of which are taken by politicians, policy makers, pundits and the general public to be indicators of a school's success or failure.

The contemporary deficiency in public schools is the result of a gradual narrowing of educational aims that has accompanied the evolution of schooling in America since the establishment of the common school.<sup>v</sup> A shift of focus toward academic achievement and away from creating a cohesive society has been a pervasive feature of American educational policy since the 1950s, when progressive educators like Dewey and his colleagues at Columbia University's Teachers College were commonly blamed for the United States' lack of scientific competitiveness – a perception that arose in response to the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik in 1957. One landmark in the movement towards a primary academic focus in schools was the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983. By the 1980s, the concern was largely economic competitiveness and focused heavily on the rise of Japan. The report sought to focus educational aims on academic achievement primarily and argued that firm standards in academic subjects were required to ensure the country's economic health. Yet, as Diane Ravitch has argued, compared to the most recent

policy reforms of *No Child Left Behind*, enacted by the George W. Bush administration in 2002, *A Nation at Risk* “looks positively idealist, liberal, and prescient” because it called for a balanced, coherent, demanding curriculum. In contrast, Ravitch writes, NCLB “was a technocratic approach to school reform that measured ‘success’ only in relation to standardized test scores in two skill-based subjects [reading and mathematics]... [NCLB] produced mountains of data, not educated citizens” (Ravitch, 2010, p. 29).

The transition to narrower academic goals as the near exclusive domain of America’s public schools is not entirely without merit. After all, schools have long been identified as a panacea for all kinds of social ills and they continue to be so today (even though many seem to assume raising standardized test scores will correlate with increased economic, technological scientific competitiveness or better preparation for students’ vocations or further academic studies). If the aims of education are so broad that schools fail to succeed at any one of them, there is clearly a problem. And educational reformers have, justifiably, argued that schools should focus rather on doing a single thing well— academic achievement (e.g. Hess, 2004, pp. 3-4).

Ravitch and others (e.g. Rothstein, Jacobsen and Wilder, 2008) have amply documented this new trend in regarding test scores as the sole marker of educational success, but it might be useful to provide a specific example of the effect of these narrow goals on educators, administrators and policy analysts. The Harlem Children Zone Promise Academy represents one of the most ambitious plans to change student achievement by changing the fortunes of the entire community in which the children live. Thus the publicly funded charter school<sup>vi</sup> makes available a range of services – including prenatal counseling, parenting education, health services, and social services – in the neighborhood in which it is located. A widely discussed report by the Brookings Institution recently demonstrated that The Harlem Children Zone Promise Academy students’ performance is average on their math and literacy standardized test scores compared to other New York City charter schools serving similar students. The authors of the Brookings report seek to debunk the idea that dramatic neighborhood investments such as those made in the Harlem Children Zone are necessary for student achievement. But surely given the broad mission of The Harlem Children Zone, should we not judge its success in terms of the character, health, prospects, creativity and so on of its students? The authors of the report counter, “improving neighborhoods and communities is a desirable goal in its own right, but let’s not confuse it with education reform” (Whitehurst and Croft, 2010, p. 9). The implication is clear: education and, by extension, education reform, is about academic achievement and the best tool we have of measuring that achievement is standardized test scores in math and literacy.

Lest one be tempted to defend The Promise Academy by arguing that it is concerned with far broader educational aims than merely boosting its students’ standardized test scores, one must tread carefully. The Promise Academy was justified largely by its potential to demonstrate significant improvement in academic achievement. An entire class was essentially expelled from the Promise Academy in its early years because their test gains were not sufficiently stellar, despite how these children’s intellects, characters and potential may have been improving. And, in the most heart wrenching part of Paul Tough’s book about the Promise Academy, the students’ scores were indeed improving, but some of the positive scores were released only after the entire class was dismissed (Tough, 2008, p.250).<sup>vii</sup> If The Harlem Children Zone had identified broader aims than increased test scores, it seems to have confined them to second place, behind academic achievement, narrowly conceived.

### **A Threat to Social Cohesion?**

We ought to consider the prevailing educational ethos in light of the persistent argument that faith-based schools lead to social disharmony. Above, we mentioned various scholarly attempts to defend faith-

based schools against the charge of threatening social cohesion. In the American context, however, these defenses are no longer necessary. American public schools are no longer expected to create national unity, nor are they given adequate time or resources to embark on that mission should teachers or administrators choose to do so. One can indeed continue the discussion of whether the common school would theoretically be better at fostering social cohesion than faith-based schools, but one must concede that such an argument is untethered from the reality of contemporary schooling in the United States. We are not suggesting that such a discussion is uninteresting; we do believe that it is valuable insofar as it allows us to further probe fundamental questions about the accommodation of minority rights in liberal democracies and questions about the aims of schooling. Further, it is a question with real implications in other countries that have not entirely succumbed to test score madness. However, the conversation has just as much implication for contemporary American educational policy surrounding faith-based schools as does a thought experiment in which the only religion in America is Buddhism and the only faith-based schools in the country are Buddhist. It would be intellectually taxing and rewarding to think through this scenario, but it would require positing a completely different culture of schooling and educational policy in the United States than the one that currently exists. We are not arguing that faith-based schools necessarily aim to provide an education that will lead to social cohesion. Rather, we are arguing that the charge that faith-based schools are socially divisive is moot because one can no longer expect public schools to offer an alternative education that will lead to social cohesion. Our argument depends on an adequate response to two objections. First, even if one concedes that public schools are not addressing citizenship, are there not some faith-based schools whose teachings cast other individuals or groups as inferior and, therefore, are a threat to social cohesion? Second, are there not public schools that, despite the current emphasis on basic academic skills, do a good job of creating the kind of citizens who will comprise a cohesive citizenry?

The first concern is a serious problem among some faith-based schools. Some faith-based schools, like the fundamentalist Accelerated Christian Education (ACE) Schools, clearly provide children with teachings that are not at all conducive to social cohesion as their curriculum involves statements that people of other religions, races or ethnicities are inferior.<sup>viii</sup> And some religious schools, whether they are one of a Christian denomination, Jewish, Islamic or other, teach about, for example, homosexuality in ways that either directly or indirectly results in cultivating dangerous prejudice against homosexual people. The question is whether the existence of schools such as these tips the scales in favor of common schools over faith-based schools on the general question of cultivating social cohesion. So if one raises the objection that societies should not permit or fund faith-based schools on the grounds that they cause or exacerbate social divisions, then the question emerges: To what extent are common schools endeavoring to create social cohesion? If they are not at all, or not sufficiently endeavoring to do so, then we suggest that sustaining any preference for public schools based on these grounds is based more in sentiment than reason.

On the positive side, we acknowledge that in many public schools there are teachers and administrators who care deeply about citizenship and aims broader than basic literacy. Clearly there are educational theorists at schools of education throughout the United States who continue to make efforts to train teachers to deal effectively and sensitively with the diversity they find in their classrooms, in the hopes that America will become a better, and more cohesive, place. These are efforts that surely meet with some success in cultivating a more cohesive citizenry when such teachers enter America's public schools and impact the lives of students in their classrooms. It is also worthwhile to note, however, that many faith-based school also explicitly attempt to foster social cohesion. Indeed, many Jewish schools in America embrace the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*, or repairing the world, a basic mission of social justice that involves working to create a better world for all members of society (e.g. Pekarsky, 2006). And

many Catholic schools, which is the largest category of faith-based schooling in the United States, have a strong mission of social justice that requires working on behalf of and with all society's marginalized and oppressed people and not only those of the faith (e.g. Feinberg, 2006, pp. 75-6). Given that some faith-based schools retain concerns about citizenship and social cohesion in the very mission of their schooling, while teachers and administrators in common schools have much less support, time and resources to cultivate a socially cohesive citizenry because of the narrow aims of common schooling, there may even be an advantage for faith-based schools in facilitating social cohesion.<sup>ix</sup> Therefore, while we concede that there are some faith-based schools in which students are taught things that may create social tension, we also recognize the presence of many others that explicitly reject such teachings and therefore are better equipped to talk about creating a better society than are today's public schools.

Further, it is not the case that the curriculum of public schools remains neutral on matters of church and state. In a much publicized controversy over Texas's social studies curriculum in 2010, the Texas State Board of Education made various changes that emphasized the Christian basis of the founders' political thought and the American Constitution itself. Notably, Thomas Jefferson – who created the idea of “separation of church and state” – was removed from the list of figures who inspired revolution in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and was replaced by St. Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin. The Christian faith of America's Founding Fathers was also emphasized, despite the fact that Jefferson, one of the major figures among them and later President, was obviously not comfortable with embracing the idea of America as a fundamentally Christian country (McKinley, 2010).

The point of raising this example of the changes in the social studies curriculum standards in Texas's public schools is to note that religious chauvinism – the kind that many worry is fostered in faith-based schools – is currently alive and well in some of America's public schools. One should be quite concerned that a faith-based school might teach that other religions are inferior, thereby creating religious tensions. But if some of America's public schools are doing the same, the threat to social cohesion is no longer unique to faith-based schools.

Further, while ACE schools and other extreme faith-based schools fail to promote social cohesion and may indeed cause divisiveness, one must keep in mind that America's public schools are *de facto* segregated along ethnic and socio-economic lines. This *de facto* segregation, coupled with the narrow educational goals of the public school, does little to cultivate social cohesion and, one could argue, renders students ill-equipped to deal with individuals of other faiths, ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds. There is little reason to think that the *de facto* segregated public school students are in a better position to be part of a socially cohesive citizenry.<sup>x</sup> The situation may suggest that we might seek the lesser of these two evils, but the choice is far from obvious.

## **Conclusion**

Our point in discussing social justice missions of faith-based schools and mentioning the example of ACE schools is not to defend faith-based schools but rather to undermine a possible objection to our argument; namely, the objection that faith-based schools in America remain, in principle, more of a threat to social cohesion than do public schools (even if one concedes that common schools today do a poor job of providing the kind of citizenship education that would facilitate social cohesion). Also, as we stated above, our goal in this paper was not to argue that faith-based schools pose no problems to society or their own students. Rather, we have restricted our focus to arguing that the force of one particular charge which has historically been leveled at faith-based schools in America has diminished.

If the American educational ethos were to change radically and public schools began to look like those envisioned by Dewey, our argument would need to be reconsidered. However, given the state of America's public schools today, there is little basis on which to continue to insist that faith-based schools pose a unique threat to social cohesion. If the worst faith-based schools were denied support on those grounds, as we believe they should, the public schools that neglect a social mission should be similarly denied. There may be reason to hope that the aims of public schools will once again broaden and that America's public schools will begin to live up the aspirations of their most idealistic reformers. Until that time comes, educational theorists must acknowledge the state of the schools that exist and consider whether the historically persistent charge that faith-based schools are a threat to social cohesion remains relevant.

## References

- Bryk, A. S., Lee, V. E., & Holland, P. B. (1993). *Catholic schools and the common good*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1916/1944). *Democracy and education: an introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York: Free Press.
- Dwyer, J. G. (1998). *Religious schools v. children's rights*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Feinberg, W. (2006). *For goodness sake: religious schools and education for democratic citizenry*. New York: Routledge.
- Feinberg, W. (2011). Teaching Religion in Public Schools: A Critical Appraisal of Dewey's Ideas on Religion and Education. In G. Biesta (Ed.), *Philosophy of Education 2010* (pp. 266-274). Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society.
- Glenn, C. L. (1988). *The myth of the common school*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Graham, P. A. (2005). *Schooling America: how the public schools meet the nation's changing needs*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Halstead, J. M. (2009). In defense of faith schools. In G. Haydon (Ed.), *Faith in education: A tribute to Terence McLaughlin* (pp. 46-67). London, England: Institute of Education.
- Hess, F. M. (2004). *Common sense school reform* (1st ed.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jones, S. L. (2008). *Religious schooling in America: private education and public life*: Praeger.
- Levinson, M. (2007). Common Schools and Multicultural Education. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 41(4), 625-647.
- Mann, H. (1957). *Republic and the School: Horace Mann on the Education of Free Men*: L. A. Cremin (Ed.). Teachers College Press.
- McKinley, J.C. Jr. (2010, March 13). Texas Conservatives Win Curriculum Change. *New York Times*.
- Pekarsky, D. (2006). *Vision at Work: The Theory and Practice of Beit Rabban*: JTS Press.
- Ravitch, D. (2010). *The death and life of the great American school system: how testing and choice are undermining education*. New York: Basic Books.
- Rothstein, R., Jacobsen, R., & Wilder, T. (2008). *Grading education: getting accountability right*. Washington, DC; New York: Economic Policy Institute; Teachers College Press.
- Rush, Benjamin. "Thoughts Upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic." In *Essays on Education in the Early Republic*, edited by Frederick Rudolph, 9-23. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965.
- Short, G. (2002). Faith-Based Schools: A Threat To Social Cohesion? *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 36(4), 559-572.
- Sweet, L. (1997). *God in the classroom: the controversial issue of religion in the classroom*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.

- Thiessen, E. J. (2001). *In defence of religious schools and colleges*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Whitehurst, G. J., & Croft, M. (2010). *The Harlem Children's Zone, Promise Neighborhoods, and the Broader, Bolder Approach to Education*. Washington: The Brookings Institution.
- Zelman v. Simmons-Harris (2002) 536 U.S. 639.

## Endnote

---

<sup>i</sup> Mann proposed, however, that the common school would nonetheless sustain a generic, non-sectarian "common Christianity" as its moral foundation, which was a largely a reflection of the dominant social mores of nineteenth century American Protestantism. Roman Catholics rejected "common Christianity" because they regarded it as "common Protestantism," and many non-Christians objected to the religious education in the schools. Eventually, "secularism" displaced the notion of "common Christianity" in the common school.

<sup>ii</sup> For a fine account of Dewey's skeptical position on religion, especially on how it relates to his educational thought, see Feinberg (2011).

<sup>iii</sup> At the same time, since Mann and Dewey also wrote within the context of a nineteenth and early twentieth century Catholicism which was strongly influenced by Pope Pius IX's authoritarian, triumphalist, anti-modern, and anti-democratic views, one must be wary of any synchronic liberal conceit that roots its assertions about Catholicism in a pre-Vatican II context. Walter Feinberg argues that Dewey's concerns about Catholicism were "understandable," given his moment in history, but that "had [he] emphasized his other values, such as community and pluralism, had he explored the possibilities for pluralism within a tradition, he might have been more hopeful about the possibilities for openness and tolerance within Catholicism and other religious traditions" (Feinberg, 2011, p. 268). To generalize, secular critiques of *any* faith based schools must be examined for their reliance on outdated portraits.

<sup>iv</sup> "The common school was intended, by its proponents, above all as the instrumentality by which the particularities of localism and religious tradition and (in the United States) of national origin would be integrated into a single sustaining identity" (Glenn, 1988, p. 9).

<sup>v</sup> This is a widely noted phenomenon. For a valuable recent account of the history of aims and its relation to the accountability movement, see the overview by Rothstein, Jacobsen and Tamara (2008, pp. 13-34). For the impact that these aims have had in the classrooms of public schools, see pp. 181-198.

<sup>vi</sup> A charter school in America is a publically funded school that is independent, in that does not fall under the administrative umbrella of its local public school board.

<sup>vii</sup> As described in an otherwise positive account by Paul Tough (2008).

<sup>viii</sup> See, for example, Dwyer's critical account of ACE schools (1998, especially pp. 16-19) or Sweet's description of an ACE school in Canada (1997, pp. 88-92).

<sup>ix</sup> Writing almost a decade before *No Child Left Behind*, Bryk, Lee and Holland argued that, based on their study of Catholic schools, Catholic schools have managed to retain a concern for the common good that common schools have abandoned: "Although the common school ideal inspired the formation of American public education for over one hundred years, it is now the Catholic school that focuses our attention on fostering human cooperation in the pursuit of the common good" (1993, p. 10; see also 41 ff. and 303-304).

<sup>x</sup> Halstead makes this argument, addressing the British context: "it is difficult and unfair to single out faith schools as a major factor in divisiveness in comparison with other factors such as discrimination and economic depression" (2009, p. 53).