**Education for Sale: What’s a (Democratic) Principle Worth?**

By Michael Hartoonian

*Oscar Wilde* once defined a cynic as “a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.” It seems that Americans today may not know the value of what is most precious to us as a people—simply stated, the manner in which we pass on the set of ideals and behaviors necessary to sustain our republic. The need to construct a stronger link between learning and democratic values, between private wealth and the common wealth, has never been greater. Yet most of the “education” talk of today centers on the private, the personal, and the individual “wants” of children, as parents and others in the general public lose interest in the common good and its corollary, the common school.

Because we fail to remember the civic purpose of education, the issue of the public school’s place in contemporary society—and its fundamental worth to the nation—is growing ever more problematic. We have become a people motivated by the gratification of individual concerns, making it no mystery why techniques and practices such as vouchers, charter schools, and tax-credits are so popular. But if people and policy-makers think of our schools as serving only the private interests of parents and their children, why not make all schools private and be done with it?

How did we come to think this way? Why have so many parents determined not to support the public school or its teachers? When did it happen that so many students would go to school without learning respect for scholarship? When, why, and how did it occur to us that our children are consumers rather than citizens in the making—and that money can buy the best education? The answers may reflect a change that occurred sometime after World War II, when our societal values shifted away from the belief in saving and building toward the practice of spending and consuming. We thought we were entitled to “have it all” regardless of the cost to ourselves, our children, and our communities. It was our birthright simply to have, and without much effort.

This personal “live for today” credo has caused us to deny our obligations to the community and to history. It carries with it two spiritual dangers. One is a lack of hope for the future. The second, a logical extension of the first, is a fear of as well as for our children. Fear drives out love, and that we seem to care so little for the common good strongly suggests that we do not care much about the future or our children. If we did, we would help provide the intellectual and ethical fitness necessary to construct the good society.

We would, as a nation, agree upon a common value that requires children of all colors, creeds, and economic situations to go to school each day, work hard, and learn respect for scholarship. We would, as a nation, agree upon a second common value that requires teachers to hold children of all colors, creeds, and economic situations to the same high standards of learning. We would, as a nation, agree upon a third common value that requires all of us to understand that in the pursuit of knowledge, accurate assessment of achievements is better then empty praise to bolster self-esteem. If we do not attend to these values, and very soon, we and our children will find ourselves without a free and healthy place in which to live.

There exists a belief among many of our citizens that the quality of life is synonymous with the existence of a free market. It suggests that almost any social concern can be addressed by redefining the issue within the context of market values, or that all problems of resource and value allocations can be rationally solved through the “invisible hand” of the market. But this conception is not, in fact, friendly to the operation of a democratic free market.

A democratic free market cannot function, nor can commerce flourish, without quality infrastructures to help establish an ethical, aesthetic, and efficient context for business. The free market has limits. It needs an ethical context in which to function or it will become corrupt. It also needs infrastructures provided by the community in the form of a quality environment; quality institutions, such as schools, libraries, museums, and courts; and quality behavior on the part of citizens.

The public school is the essential element for the preservation of both democracy and the free market. But this is the case only if we understand that public schools were not created primarily to serve the private interests of students and their parents. Public schools exist for the wider community. They are here for the common good in order to establish the intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic infrastructure for democracy and capitalism. Students learn not only for private reasons but for community purposes.

At best, our children should come to understand that happiness is a
function not merely of economic luxury, but of the pursuit of excellence. It results from production (for students, this means acquiring knowledge) rather than from consumption. Happiness is what we get when we do our work well, live our lives well, raise our children well, plant a tree, donate time to an institution or community, or make a product that people recognize as possessing quality. From this context, both happiness and profit flow together and reinforce each other, adding grace and sustainability to our lives.

Of course, sustainability and grace are dependent upon the ways in which we challenge and love our children. What is sad about our contemporary situation is the lack of concern we seem to have for our children and our communities, as suggested by the slogans with which we try to calm our collective conscience. We have all heard the statement, “Children First.” But the reality is very different. Who are the poorest among us? Have the most unhealthy diets? The worst health care? Are most often abused? Children first? Perhaps we believe that if we say it often enough, it must or will be true.

Given this circumstance, it comes as no surprise that we are less than honest about the health of the republic, the role of public education as the major engine for creating wealth, and the responsibility of parents for helping their children become good scholars and citizens. If we were honest, we would know that the reason our children sometimes fall short of these goals has less to do with the public schools and more to do with our culture’s “me-first” attitude.

Again, there is a simple confusion between price and value, between wanting a diploma or wanting a real education. Many think that money and time will buy an education. However, a genuine education must be earned through good habits and rightful behavior. It comes from practicing the work ethic and in recognizing that individuals have duties to one another and to our common cultural heritage. But the fear we have of our children, and our timidity in judging their attitudes and behavior, has led to a fundamental misunderstanding of the “truth-in-learning” principle. Our inaction as adults is manifested in the inappropriate roles we confer on our children, such as those of consumer or client. At the same time, we transfer our responsibility to “society” without ever confronting the sadness, joy, and just plain hard work required to create real communities and to uphold the public schools that anchor our democracy.

Without doubt, our students have access to more knowledge and—through it—more power than was the case in any previous time in history. However, this power is raw and almost overwhelming. Our children are more precocious, more aggressive, and even more knowledgeable than previous generations, but they are not as civil, respectful, or reflective. Admittedly, this complaint has been made of children across the ages. But today, the eternal contract between the generations lies in a state of suspense, and the adult world seems to lack the courage, prudence, or justice to restore and enhance generational relationships. Out of fear and its attendant intellectual paralysis, we have abdicated our positions as mentors, ethical models, and judges. What is clear to many teachers is how often students seek an easy way through school to prepare themselves for an easy way through life. When we apply the wrongful metaphor of “consumer” to describe our children’s role in the educational process, we all fail, absolutely.

The use of such concepts as need and consumer—rather than server, co-creator, and producer—in constructing educational programs is a clear manifestation of our fear of confronting our children, our societal values, and the natural chaos of life and learning within a community. Until we understand education as a responsibility that leads to personal rights, whatever we offer students will have less meaning because it will not transcend private interests. Without a conception of community—in our case, the democratic community—we remain at risk.

My quality of life (under the law) will always be a function of the general quality of life. And the general quality of life will be a function of the quality of the common school. This does not mean the quality of the common school for my child only, but for my neighbor’s child as well. It is not enough for the few to think only of their own children’s education, for the few or the one will always live within the context of the many. And the quality of that context will depend on how well we educate all our children. This is the meaning of the common school for the common good. As Thomas Jefferson said to P.S. Dupont de Nemours in April of 1816, “Enlighten the people generally, and tyranny and oppression of body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day.”

It must be clear to all of us that the practice of responsibility toward the group or society will result in greater personal freedom, even for those citizens with great wealth. It is no longer enough for my child to get “hers” from whatever “school” and get out; for in truth, all of our children will pay dearly, and sooner than we think, for the lack of a common education. We can build all the walled suburbs we want. We can raise more prisons and hire more police. We can try to grow our economy and compete in the global market. None of this will make any difference if we don’t address the education of the citizen. None of us will thrive if we don’t understand that the purpose of our schools is to transmit from one generation to the next our
cultural DNA—defined here as the intellectual, spiritual, and moral essence and possibilities of democratic governance and democratic capitalism.

Education must become something more fundamental to our culture than the training of the individual. This is the case because our conception of the public realm, and the probability of our survival as a people with the attendant enhancement of our liberties, is directly related to the quality of our schools. Preparing citizens to be loving critics of our republic is a fundamental value that provides the basis for our dynamic culture. The creative tension between upholding our cultural heritage and offering critiques of it provides the context for our ethical and aesthetic growth as citizens. Such growth assumes that we pay careful attention to the sense of wonder and innate love of learning upon which scholarship is constructed and nourished. Understood this way, scholarship becomes an act of service through which students develop the virtues needed to live within a civic and civil society. How, then, do we move from the situation where a student asks, “Do I have to do this?” to “Do I get to know this?”

First and foremost, we must be clear about the fundamental value of education to WE THE PEOPLE. The history of our republic is the story of the struggle to enlarge the set originally referred to as WE THE PEOPLE from a small group of white male adults who owned property in thirteen states to the inclusive set that defines the republic today. Rooted in this same history, the quality education once confined to a small set of citizens must grow to encompass all through the institution of the common school.

Our personal well-being is a measure of the well-being of the community (public realm). This is a truism. It is also the proper meaning of e pluribus unum. E pluribus unum does not mean the development of many tribes unaccountable to one another. It means the ethical growth of one community capable of protecting the many because the many protect the one. This demands from all of us a desire for quality education, or what we might call an intimate engagement with personal intellectual virtues and the practice of civic virtue in and through our institutions. This added value elevates education and makes us realize that beyond being a legal document, our Constitution serves as a curriculum for the nation and a symbol of the story of America that provides its citizens with meaning and moral light. Enlightened or educated citizens display, and expect in others, such characteristics as fairness, cooperation, integrity, responsibility, and the performance of high quality work. When these virtues are placed in the highest priority, we will see education take its rightful place in the republic.

In a free society, one of the most difficult tasks of the people is learning to put first things first. This is the case because first principles often seem counterintuitive. For example, to ensure that our children are not corrupted, schools must first serve a public purpose—to enhance the public realm, that is, the economic, ethical, and aesthetic infrastructure. To the degree that we give our students the idea that they are first and that the school is there to serve them, to that same degree we will corrupt our children.

Students go to school to understand their cultural heritage, to discover who they are, and to learn what is expected of them. They go to school to become civilized—meaning civil, self-disciplined, and reflective of the wisdom of all of the world’s people and the principles of their own republic, this jewel of history. They go to school to construct knowledge and to serve the community with that knowledge. They go to school to learn the difference between price and value. And they go to school to learn how to hold the highest office of the land: the office of citizen.

Public schools serve a public purpose before fulfilling a private need. If we fail to understand their relationship to the common good, our public schools will make no sense, particularly for the 70 percent of our people who have no children to send to school. They will simply ask why they should support the private wants of parents and their children. WE THE PEOPLE will be diminished if we (the people) continue to withdraw our support from public education. Some people, for whatever reasons, will even put the public schools in the category of a national evil. And this will continue until educators, policy-makers, and all citizens understand why public schools are privately necessary.

The beginning of wisdom is knowing what is in place and what is out of place. Within the democratic republic, education is in place when learning is seen as a public responsibility. If we want an enlightened work force, competent citizens, and ethical human beings, then all of us must demand that the highest value be placed on public schools, as they are the most powerful engines of our civic, economic, and cultural wealth. The common school represents the idea that we do not have an individual right to read, we have a public responsibility to know how to read. We do not have a right to know our history, we have a responsibility to know it. We do not have a right to the skills that help us gain employment; we have the responsibility to learn intellectual virtues and to use them in all of our endeavors, knowing that all people will depend upon the knowledge, skills, and ethics practiced by each of us.

It is in the acceptance and practice of our public responsibilities that we gain personal liberties and
economic well-being. These behaviors create the family, the firm, the community, and the nation. This is the democratic attitude that helps us understand that there is no private wealth without common wealth. This is the energy needed to transcend the individual and enhance his or her achievements at the same time. And this is the love that holds community and competency together in sparkling communication.

The current movement toward the privatization of education allows us to know the price of schooling. What is at issue here is that if we don’t remember the value of the common school, and its capacity to promote the common good, we will surely destroy the foundations of our republic.