



The Progressive Case for Educational Pluralism

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Key Points

- Educational pluralism is an approach to the structure and content of school systems in which the government funds and regulates, but does not exclusively deliver, public education.
- In North America today, support for educational pluralism (or, in US parlance, “choice and academic accountability”) is often perceived as a right-of-centre position. A close examination of the record, however, suggests that this characterization misses the mark.
- Since the 1960s, progressives have played a key role in championing the principles and practices of educational pluralism. From law professors to civil rights activists, progressives have resisted the dominance of the district-school-only model as an oppressive form of individualism, unresponsive to the needs of cultural minorities, and failing to provide academic rigor and depth for all.
- At the same time, progressives have argued positively for the rights of low-income parents to select their children’s educational pathways, the equalizing value of a liberal arts curriculum, and the benefits of clear moral alignment between family and school to a child’s development.
- This paper highlights key elements of the progressive case for educational pluralism and reminds North Americans of the complex arguments and cross-partisan alliances that have supported a movement toward a more diversified school system and a high-quality curriculum.

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Introduction

“Educational pluralism” describes an approach to the structure and content of school systems in which the government funds and regulates, but does not exclusively deliver, public education.¹ Examples abound. The Netherlands funds thirty-six different kinds of schools (e.g., Montessori, Jewish, secular) equally, and all of them are evaluated on the same academic criteria.² Australia’s federal government is the top funder of tuition to private schools, many of whose students come from the lowest economic quarter of the country’s population.³ Countries as different as Colombia, Pakistan, and Nigeria include many providers (non-profit, private) in their education systems.⁴ Indeed, a recent survey by UNESCO’s Global Education Monitoring project found that 171 out of 204 countries included state-aided private schools in their national systems.⁵ And although Canada’s provincial school systems differ from one another in important ways—from the constitutionally mandated Catholic and Protestant state-run schools in Ontario and Saskatchewan, to the wide array of options in Alberta and the state-school-only model in New Brunswick—many Canadians, too, have experienced educational pluralism.⁶

“Educational pluralism” describes an approach to the structure and content of school systems in which the government funds and regulates, but does not exclusively deliver, public education.

¹ All opinions expressed and implied in this paper are solely the author’s own and do not represent or reflect the views of the Johns Hopkins University or the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy.

² A.B. Dijkstra, J. Dronkers, and S. Karsten, “Private Schools as Public Provision for Education: School Choice and Market Forces in the Netherlands,” in *Educating Citizens: International Perspectives on Civic Values and School Choice*, ed. P.J. Wolf et al. (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2004), 67–90; Government of the Netherlands, “Freedom of Education: Public Authority and Private Schools,” Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, <https://www.government.nl/topics/freedom-of-education/public-authority-and-private-schools>; UNESCO, “Non-State Actors in Education: The Netherlands,” Global Education Monitoring Report, February 12, 2021, <https://education-profiles.org/europe-and-northern-america/netherlands/~non-state-actors-in-education>.

³ B.J. Caldwell, “Australia,” in *Balancing Freedom, Autonomy, and Accountability in Education*, ed. C.L. Glenn and J. De Groof, vol. 3 (Tilburg: Wolf Legal Publishers, 2012), 35–48, <https://jscholarship.library.jhu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/3f8a8793-2721-465a-8499-14ff32152614/content>; K. Donnelly, “Regulation and Funding of Independent Schools: Lessons from Australia,” Fraser Institute, January 10, 2017, <https://www.fraserinstitute.org/sites/default/files/regulation-and-funding-of-independent-schools-lessons-from-australia.pdf>.

⁴ R. Duncan, J. Mullan, and R. Omuthe, “Regulating Non-State Education: Findings from School Operators,” Global Schools Forum, June 2023, https://globalschoolsforum.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/regulating_non-state_education_compressed_0.pdf.

⁵ UNESCO, “Non-State Actors in Education: Who Chooses? Who Loses?,” Global Education Monitoring Report, 2021, 34, <https://doi.org/10.54676/XJFS2343>.

⁶ A. von Heyking, “Alberta, Canada: How Curriculum and Assessments Work in a Plural School System,” Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, June 2019, <https://jscholarship.library.jhu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/1a256df5-b838-469f-a7d9-4c06c78b8317/content>.

Historically, educational pluralism has not been associated with only one side of a left-to-right continuum. Conservative as well as Labour governments have supported the UK's faith-based school sector, for instance,⁷ and Belgium's pluralism resulted from negotiations between nineteenth-century traditionalists and liberals who "revitalized one another."⁸ In the early 1990s, Sweden's government allowed municipalities to create voucher programs, a change that has strong support across the political parties, decades later.⁹

Similarly, the academic quality measures that governments use do not follow predictable political patterns. Most OECD nations rely on independent inspectorates to evaluate schools' academic and civic capacities; England's inspectorate has been in place since the mid-nineteenth century, under Tory, Labour, and Liberal leadership.¹⁰

Nevertheless, while the cross-partisanship of pluralism may be common elsewhere, in the United States the principles of educational pluralism remain contested along (generally) political lines, with Republican governors more often promoting "school choice" mechanisms and Democratic legislatures defunding them. We also find in the US heightened conflict about the ideology of curriculum and an embrace of various culture wars.¹¹

Much of this is cultural habit. In the United States, an earlier pluralistic approach to public education gave way in the late nineteenth century to an educational uniformity in which the district school became the exclusive carrier of "public

⁷ See, for instance, *UK House of Commons Debates*, 2003–04, No 424 (20 July 2004) at col. 1WH (Mr. K. McNamara), [https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2004-07-20/debates/538ae40e-bc33-44f9-a21e-51707b86dde7/DenominationalSchools;TheEducationReformAct\(ERA\)1988Celebrates30thBirthday](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2004-07-20/debates/538ae40e-bc33-44f9-a21e-51707b86dde7/DenominationalSchools;TheEducationReformAct(ERA)1988Celebrates30thBirthday)," *GovernorsAgenda* (blog), August 17, 2018, <https://governorsagenda.co.uk/2018/08/17/the-education-reform-act-era-1988-celebrates-30th-birthday/>.

⁸ C.L. Glenn, *Contrasting Models of State and School: A Comparative Historical Study of Parental Choice and State Control* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 64–82.

⁹ A. Böhlmark and M. Lindahl, "Independent Schools and Long-Run Educational Outcomes Evidence from Sweden's Large Scale Voucher Reform," IZA Discussion Paper no. 6683, <https://docs.iza.org/dp6683.pdf>; T. Sanandaji, "Sweden Has an Education Crisis, but It Wasn't Caused by School Choice," *National Review*, July 21, 2014, <https://www.nationalreview.com/the-agenda/sweden-has-education-crisis-it-wasnt-caused-school-choice-tino-sanandaji/>.

¹⁰ H. Altrichter and D. Kemthofer, "Does Accountability Pressure through School Inspections Promote School Improvement?," *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 26, no. 1 (2015): 32–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2014.927369>; M.C.M. Ehren et al., "Comparing Effects and Side Effects of Different School Inspection Systems across Europe," *Comparative Education* 51, no. 3 (July 3, 2015): 375–400, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2015.1045769>; M.C.M. Ehren et al., "Impact of School Inspections on Improvement of Schools—Describing Assumptions on Causal Mechanisms in Six European Countries," *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* 25, no. 1 (2013): 3–43, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-012-9156-4>.

¹¹ Staff, "Governor Ron DeSantis Signs Historic Legislation to Expand School Choice Options to All Florida Students," press release, March 27, 2023, <https://www.flgov.com/2023/03/27/governor-ron-desantis-signs-historic-legislation-to-expand-school-choice-options-to-all-florida-students/>; D. Hicks, "Ohio Becomes 8th State to Enact Universal School Choice in the Last Two Years," *The Sentinel* (blog), July 19, 2023, <https://sentinelksmo.org/ohio-becomes-8th-state-to-enact-universal-school-choice-in-the-last-two-years/>; Editorial Board, "The Illinois Scholarship Scandal," *Wall Street Journal*, May 26, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/illinois-democrats-invest-in-kids-scholarship-program-school-choice-emanuel-chris-welch-don-harmon-teachers-unions-9b5b3933>; Editorial Board, "School Choice Dies in Illinois," *Wall Street Journal*, November 12, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/school-choice-dies-in-illinois-education-pritzker-2bf45e2b>.

education.”¹² Simultaneously, a commitment to common academic content (or, the democratization of the liberal arts), eroded in favour of a pedagogy of process, skills, and “learning how to learn.”¹³ As a result, US school systems entered the twentieth century with a then-novel approach: uniform delivery and increasingly eclectic content. By the end of the twentieth century, the average American took for granted both a “public versus private school” binary and a skills-based curriculum with little academic content.

Educational structure and content in the United States have been shifting toward pluralism once again. Since the 1990s, many states have diversified the delivery of education by funding private-school scholarships (vouchers and tax credits), independently governed charter schools, and other mechanisms such as education savings accounts. All provide parents with alternatives to the district school.

Albeit more slowly, research is gaining ground on the power of an intentional, knowledge-building curriculum to close achievement gaps. The steady accumulation of argument and data, from E.D. Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy* (1987) and Diane Ravitch’s *Left Back* (2001) to Natalie Wexler’s *The Knowledge Gap* (2019), has led more and more school systems to replace skills-based materials with stronger, deeper, humanistic content (the liberal arts), by which I mean instruction that equips students with integrated knowledge of literature, history, math, science, music and art, philosophy and religion, and other subjects.¹⁴

Despite these changes to the delivery and the content of education, the majority of US students still attend district schools, and the pedagogical default in many schools of all types remains an eclectic array of instructional materials chosen by individual teachers rather than a comprehensive, humanistic curriculum.¹⁵ And

¹² C.L. Glenn, *The Myth of the Common School* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988); Glenn, *Contrasting Models of State and School*.

¹³ A. Berner, “What Knowledge Do Citizens Need?,” *American Conservative*, November 9, 2023, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/what-knowledge-do-citizens-need/>.

¹⁴ E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987); E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *The New First Dictionary of Cultural Literacy: What Your Child Needs to Know* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004); D. Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Battles over School Reform* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001); E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Why Knowledge Matters: Rescuing Our Children from Failed Educational Theories* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2016); N. Wexler, *The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America’s Broken Education System—and How to Fix It* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019); Knowledge Matters Campaign, “Knowledge Ignites Literacy and Learning,” January 2023, <https://knowledgematterscampaign.org/>; Knowledge Matters Campaign, “Visit Classrooms,” January 2023, <https://knowledgematterscampaign.org/visit-classrooms/>. See also V. Coca et al., “Working to My Potential: The Postsecondary Experiences of CPS Students in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme,” University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, March 2012, <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/working-my-potential-postsecondary-experiences-cps-students-international-baccalaureate>.

¹⁵ Statista Research Department, “School Enrollment in the United States from 1965 to 2021 for All Levels of Public and Private Schools, with Projections up to 2031,” Statista, December 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/183826/us-school-enrollment-for-all-levels-of-public-and-private-schools/>; V. Opfer, J.H. Kaufman, and L.E. Thompson, *Implementation of K–12 State Standards for Mathematics and English Language Arts and Literacy: Findings from the American Teacher Panel* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1529>; J.H. Kaufman, et al., “What Teachers Know and Do in the Common Core Era: Findings from the 2015–2017 American Teacher Panel,” RAND Corporation, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RB10035>.

because of the partisanship that attends much of school-choice legislation, particularly in purple and blue states, US citizens could be forgiven for identifying vouchers, tax credits, home schools, and the liberal arts curriculum with the political right.¹⁶

That would be a mistake. Ample evidence shows that educational pluralism sits quite comfortably with progressive values, even in the United States. Histories of the “school choice” movement in the United States from journalists Ron Matus and Chad Aldeman explicitly note early support from left-wing activists.¹⁷ The Progressive Policy Institute highlights the “progressive roots of charter schools.”¹⁸ America’s foremost historian and advocate of educational pluralism, Charles L. Glenn, “spent the first thirty years of [his] adult life fighting racial injustice in America”:

Ample evidence shows that educational pluralism sits quite comfortably with progressive values, even in the United States.

I was a community activist in Boston in the sixties, I spent time in jail in North Carolina in 1963, and I walked across that Selma bridge with Dr. King in 1965. I was the Massachusetts state official responsible for racial equity in schools from 1970 to 1991. So, I know something about racial justice.¹⁹

In fact, legal scholar and former public defender James Forman Jr. argues on behalf of the “left’s substantial—indeed, I would say leading—contribution to the development of choice” based on “liberal educational reform movements, the civil-rights movement, and black nationalism.”²⁰

¹⁶ J. Resmovits, “Democrats for Education Reform’s Shavar Jeffries on How to Fix His Own Movement,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 3, 2015, <https://www.latimes.com/local/education/community/la-me-edu-shavar-jeffries-on-education-reform-problems-20150903-story.html>; E. Meltzer, “Colorado Democrats Overwhelmingly Reject Democrats for Education Reform at State Assembly,” *Chalkbeat Colorado* (blog), April 14, 2018, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/colorado/2018/4/14/21104748/colorado-democrats-overwhelmingly-reject-democrats-for-education-reform-at-state-assembly/>; B. Hawkins, “The 74 Interview: Democrats for Education Reform’s Shavar Jeffries on the Blue Wave, the Politics of the Possible and Grand Bargains,” *The 74 Million* (blog), January 21, 2019, <https://www.the74million.org/article/the-74-interview-democrats-for-education-reforms-shavar-jeffries-on-the-blue-wave-the-politics-of-the-possible-grand-bargains/>; A. Berner, “Op-Ed: Leave the Culture Wars out of Coursework. Don’t Gerrymander Curriculum,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 9, 2021, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/2021/08/09/op-ed-leave-the-culture-wars-out-of-coursework-dont-gerrymander-curriculum/>; J. Greene and J. Paul, “Time for the School Choice Movement to Embrace the Culture War,” Heritage Foundation, February 9, 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/education/report/time-the-school-choice-movement-embrace-the-culture-war>.

¹⁷ R. Matus, “From Sit-Ins to School Choice,” *NextSteps* (blog), September 15, 2015, <https://nextstepsblog.org/2015/09/15/from-sit-ins-to-school-choice/>; C. Aldeman, “A Progressive Vision for Educational Choice: 5 Questions to Ask,” *The 74 Million* (blog), June 18, 2023, <https://www.the74million.org/article/a-progressive-vision-for-educational-choice-5-questions-to-ask/>.

¹⁸ E. Langhorne, “The Progressive Roots of Charter Schools,” Progressive Policy Institute, September 2019, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED605247.pdf>.

¹⁹ C.L. Glenn, “Anti-Religious Education,” *First Things*, April 2021, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2021/04/anti-religious-education>.

²⁰ J. Forman, Jr., “The Secret History of School Choice: How Progressives Got There First,” *Georgetown Law Journal* 93, no. 4 (2004): 1287–320.

The primary purpose of this paper is to elevate the arguments made by progressive legal scholars, philosophers, and activists on behalf of educational pluralism. It also summarizes current tensions within left-of-centre politics about educational pluralism and suggests ways for advocates of educational pluralism to unite across the left-right divide. Because many provinces in Canada have had pluralist education systems historically, this report focuses on counter-cultural, US-focused voices.

The backbone of this paper is the work of John E. Coons and Stephen D. Sugarman, professors at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Law, whose 1978 book, *Education by Choice: The Case for Family Control*, first articulated the civil rights argument for school choice and academic accountability.²¹ Readers will also encounter scholars such as Harry Brighouse, professor of philosophy at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, James Forman, Jr., and key journalists Sol Stern and Joe Williams.

This review is by nature selective. The authors with which it engages deserve much greater descriptive depth; their arguments require book-length treatments. It is not clear, moreover, whether those cited would consider themselves “progressive” in current parlance, nor that they would endorse all elements of what I understand by “educational pluralism.” Brighouse, for one, writes from within a classical liberal perspective; Sol Stern was a radical who wrote for the left-leaning *Ramparts* before becoming pro-school-choice and writing for the right-leaning *City Journal*. Forman’s piece is descriptive rather than normative. At the same time, wherever they currently reside politically, these authors and activists leveraged progressive values to support the combination of choice and accountability that, together, comprise educational pluralism in the majority of school systems worldwide.²²

What follows is not only theoretical but actual: it explores not what progressives *could possibly* say in favour of pluralism, but what some of them have *actually* said.

A final note on language. Progressive support for educational pluralism is clearly a minority left-wing position in the United States. For simplicity’s sake, in this paper I refer to progressives who support educational pluralism as simply “progressives.”

Progressive Arguments for Educational Pluralism

When today’s conservatives argue for school choice and academic accountability, they often do so in terms that disparage district schools, promote parental rights, and resist

²¹ University of California, Berkeley, School of Law, “John Coons, Robert L. Bridges Professor of Law (Emeritus),” 2023, <https://www.law.berkeley.edu/our-faculty/faculty-profiles/john-coons/>; D.A. Farber and M. Gergen, “Our Colleague Stephen Sugarman: Teacher, Scholar, and Policy Entrepreneur,” *California Law Review* 109, no. 2 (2021): 393–400, <https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38BR8MH1Z>.

²² UNESCO, “Non-State Actors in Education: Who Chooses? Who Loses?,” 34.

exposure to content with which parents disagree. When progressives make the case, they tend to focus on the justice concerns of cultural and socioeconomic minorities. Unlike some conservatives, progressives promote exposure to diverse viewpoints as critical to the democratic enterprise. However, the two sides are surprisingly aligned on the *negative* empirical record of the district schools, which progressives roundly condemn for failing to close achievement gaps for marginalized communities.²³

Every decision about curriculum, student discipline, teacher-staff relationships, even classroom practices, reflects normative values of some kind. A district school, or any school for that matter, therefore, cannot be considered values-neutral.

The case for educational pluralism rests on at least five related premises. Let's consider now the progressive support for each premise, taking each in turn.

1. Education Cannot Be Neutral with Respect to Values—So a Variety of School Types Should Be Funded

This principle asserts that it is simply not possible for education to be values-neutral. Every decision about curriculum, student discipline, teacher-staff relationships, even classroom practices, reflects normative values of some kind.²⁴ A district school, or any school for that matter, therefore, cannot be considered values-neutral. As such, the state that funds only one particular type of school is imposing

education that may not reflect the values of a heterogenous society. The appropriate consequence, therefore, is for the state to fund a wide range of schools that differ from one another in important ways.

Progressives object to the normativity of the district schools on at least four grounds: their ethical banality, their inability to build young people's healthy psychological development, their oppression of individuality, and their inevitable endorsement of some values at the expense of others.

²³ I have articulated the principles of pluralism from a centrist perspective at many times and in many places, including A. Berner, "The Case for a Educational Pluralism in the US," Manhattan Institute, July 11, 2019, <https://www.manhattan-institute.org/educational-pluralism-in-united-states>; Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, "Educational Pluralism," <https://education.jhu.edu/edpolicy/policy-research-initiatives/educational-pluralism/>; A. Berner, *Pluralism and American Public Education: No One Way to School* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017); A. Berner, "No One Way to School: Educational Pluralism and Why It Matters," TEDxWilmington, February 9, 2018, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/BCJ3YerGHnA>; A. Berner, "Good Schools, Good Citizens: Do Independent Schools Contribute to Civic Formation?," Cardus, June 2021, <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/good-schools-good-citizens/>. For a new, thoroughgoing approach to these tenets, see A. Berner, *Educational Pluralism and Democracy: How to Handle Indoctrination, Promote Exposure, and Rebuild America's Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2024).

²⁴ I explore this notion in depth in Berner, *Pluralism and American Public Education: No One Way to School*, 7–28.

Ethical Banality

The banality of district schools became a key focus of two legal scholars, John Coons and Stephen Sugarman, in their 1978 treatise, *Education by Choice: The Case for Family Control*. Although districts aspire to moral neutrality based on “technology, uncontroversial information, and skills,” in reality, the authors argue, districts “endorse majoritarian and social political norms”—including the subtle messages that derive from classroom *silence*. Not learning about religious beliefs as part of the human experience, for instance, conveys that such matters are either unimportant or not appropriate for public discussion.²⁵

The fruitless search for neutrality results in tacit claims suggesting “the emptiness of all values,” which in turn encourages “riskless noncommitment” and a “flaccid legitimation of ethical detachment.”²⁶ Ethical detachment is a *position*, they note, a stance toward the world, that reflects some values and rejects others. District schools therefore impose a “value-laden public education” that may, in many instances, simply reflect the consumer culture of the majority.

What is the solution then, according to this line of thinking? Support a variety of schools that offer a variety of viewpoints and reflect a heterogeneous society. Coons and Sugarman hold that institutional pluralism offers important benefits to heterogeneous societies:

Given the diversity of values among American adults, in what should publicly supported education consist? For us the answer lies in subsidizing a much wider range of private choice. . . . [This view is] egalitarian; it holds for one area of the child’s life the socialist ideal of an equal portion—his full share of a particular good.²⁷

Psychological Development

But that’s not all. Coons and Sugarman note that the tacit promotion of ethical detachment also contradicts children’s developmental need for “ego strength.” Ego strength is developed, according to Lawrence Kohlberg, within a stable moral atmosphere that ideally is shared by family and school.²⁸ A child’s observation of “trusted adults gripped by a moral concern which is shared and endorsed by [their] own family,” posit Coons and Sugarman, creates a stable foundation from which to explore challenges to the worldview in adolescence and beyond.²⁹ The end result is

²⁵ J.E. Coons and S.D. Sugarman, *Education by Choice: The Case for Family Control* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 42–43, 79.

²⁶ Coons and Sugarman, *Education by Choice*, 82.

²⁷ Coons and Sugarman, *Education by Choice*, 2.

²⁸ L. Kohlberg, “Stages of Moral Development as a Basis for Moral Education,” in *Moral Education: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. C.M. Beck, B.S. Crittenden, and E.V. Sullivan (New York: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 23–91, as cited in J.E. Coons and S.D. Sugarman, *Education by Choice: The Case for Family Control* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 83.

²⁹ Coons and Sugarman, *Education by Choice*, 82–87.

an “emotionally secure individual [who] is likely not only to be more tolerant, but also to be concerned with maintaining the social order which has respected him.”³⁰ Private schools that rest on clear, distinctive missions are up to the task. Districts, because they aspire to neutrality and end up with insipidity, are not:

Schools of choice are more likely to provide that honing [of meaning and purpose] than is a compulsory majoritarian system committed by its nature to noncommitment.³¹

Children’s need for a stable moral universe during their formative years continues to inspire diverse schools that are supported by progressives. Civil-rights advocates in Minneapolis opened the Friendship Academy of the Arts and Higher Ground Academy (both charter schools), which provide academically rigorous and culturally affirming environments for children of colour.³² The number of African American homeschoolers is growing exponentially, as families are in search of the same rigour and cultural affirmation.³³ Montana’s charter school legislation won the support of Native American leaders looking to design new schools that reflect tribal culture.³⁴ The key argument here is for education to occur in “thick” communities reflecting intentional norms and values, which are seen as a necessary foundation for human growth.

Repression and Conformity

Other progressives are motivated by what they consider to be the oppressive nature of district bureaucracy. This animus led to the growth of the free school movement, animated by Paul Goodman, Jonathan Kozol, and John Holt. Left-wing activists in the 1960s and 70s counted district schools among the “greatest problem of our nation—depersonalized, unresponsive bureaucracy.”³⁵ The solution was to create parallel institutions that were small, radical, and communal.

Free schoolers are inspired by progressive educators from the early twentieth century, such as the Englishman A.S. Neill who considered traditional schooling to be a pernicious instrument of social control. In books with titles such as *The Problem Parent* (1932), *That Dreadful School* (1937), and *The Problem Teacher* (1939), Neill

³⁰ Coons and Sugarman, *Education by Choice*, 99.

³¹ Coons and Sugarman, *Education by Choice*, 102.

³² E. Hinrichs, “Why Charter School Advocates Have Mixed Feelings about the State Supreme Court’s Integration Decision,” *MinnPost*, July 26, 2018, <https://www.minnpost.com/education/2018/07/why-charter-school-advocates-have-mixed-feelings-about-state-supreme-courts-integr/>.

³³ C. Adams, “Black Families Are Changing the Educational Landscape through Communal Home-Schooling,” *NBC News*, February 8, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/black-families-are-challenging-educations-status-quo-home-schooling-rcna69027>; C. Parks, “The Rise of Black Homeschooling,” *New Yorker*, June 14, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/06/21/the-rise-of-black-homeschooling>.

³⁴ A. Sakariassen, “New Voices Join Montana’s Charter School Lawsuit,” *Montana Free Press*, September 22, 2023, <https://montanafreepress.org/2023/09/22/montana-charter-school-lawsuit-intervenors/>.

³⁵ Forman, “The Secret History of School Choice,” 1301.

decried the “prison atmosphere” of “even the happiest of homes” and the “annoying trifles” that comprised school curricula; he called for schools where children found themselves psychologically according to their own timeline, for which “we had to renounce all discipline, all direction, all suggestion, all moral training, all religious instruction.”³⁶ Neill’s radical school, Summerhill, still exists today as “a school that . . . fit[s] the child rather than forcing pupils to do what parents and educators thought might be best for them.”³⁷ At its height during the late 1960s, the free school movement had inspired several hundred schools across the country.³⁸

Holt ultimately broke from the alternative-school approach all together, calling instead for an “unschooling” movement outside of classrooms, teachers, and subject matter. Mitchell Steven’s early study of the homeschooling movement found ample evidence of Holt’s influence on homeschooling families, which “unschooled” their children

according to the rules and with the resources of “alternative” America—that fragile organizational network left after the ebb of liberal causes of the 1960s and 1970s. This is the world of alternative schools, progressive not-for-profits, food coops, and the occasional surviving commune that carry on the egalitarian ethos of the student movements and the counterculture.³⁹

Endorsement of Particular Values

And finally, Harry Brighouse rejects districts’ commitment to “neutrality” from a different angle: “government policy cannot be designed to privilege one view of the good life over others.” For Brighouse, it doesn’t matter whether state institutions endorse values that are majoritarian, minoritarian, or something in between; the problem is the endorsement itself.

The liberal commitment to neutrality is not relativistic. . . . As citizens, liberals can quite consistently campaign for and against favored and disfavored ways of life. . . . the *state*, with its monopolies on legitimate coercion, is not a proper agency to do this campaigning.⁴⁰

³⁶ A.S. Neill, *The Problem Teacher* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1939), 29; A.S. Neill, *The Problem Parent* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1932), 107; A.S. Neill, *That Dreadful School* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1937), 14.

³⁷ Summerhill School, “Homepage: A.S. Neill Summerhill School,” <https://www.summerhillschool.co.uk>; J. Jones, “The Summerhill School, the Radical Educational Experiment That Let Students Learn What, When, and How They Want (1966),” *Open Culture* (blog), March 9, 2020, <https://www.openculture.com/2020/03/summerhill-school.html>.

³⁸ Forman, “The Secret History of School Choice,” 1300.

³⁹ M. Stevens, *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 4.

⁴⁰ H. Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8, emphasis original.

For Brighthouse, too, the solution is for “parents/guardians [to] choose the schools their children attend,” within an accountability framework and equitable funding mechanisms.⁴¹

2. Education Implicates All of Us—So We Must Ensure Quality

The argument here is that the “goods” of education redound not only to individuals but to society as a whole. It matters to me that your child knows how to cast a vote; it matters to you that my child writes well enough to support herself; it matters to democratic sustainability that all children learn (for instance) which nations surround the Persian Gulf, why the region is strategically important, and what the different branches of Islam teach. Because the consequences of education affect the general public for better or for worse, there needs to be a public assurance of academic quality for all students, particularly those from marginalized communities. Princeton political scientist Stephen Macedo, for instance, argues that “the flow of public monies to religious schools and nonprofit institutions should come with ‘strings attached’ designed to ensure that public purposes are served.”⁴² Why? Because “the Constitution itself points in the direction of deliberative politics and a society in which cooperation is fostered across the bounds of particular and local allegiances.”⁴³

Progressives usually agree with the need for government oversight of academic quality that includes potentially overlapping methods such as regulation of admissions policies, a high-quality curriculum, and state or nationally normed assessments and/or site visits.⁴⁴

Admissions Policies

Progressives reject the right of schools—including publicly funded private schools—to refuse admission to students based on their religious beliefs or sexual norms. Racial discrimination in private schools was struck down by the Supreme Court of the United States in 1976.⁴⁵

Progressives usually agree with the need for government oversight of academic quality that includes potentially overlapping methods such as regulation of admissions policies, a high-quality curriculum, and state or nationally normed assessments and/or site visits.

⁴¹ Brighthouse, *School Choice and Social Justice*, 183–90.

⁴² S. Macedo, “Constituting Civil Society: School Vouchers, Religious Nonprofit Organizations, and Liberal Public Values,” *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 75, no. 2 (2000): 418.

⁴³ Macedo, “Constituting Civil Society,” 426.

⁴⁴ “Usually,” because it is not clear that proponents of free schools or the unschooling movement agree with public oversight.

⁴⁵ *Runyon v McCrary*, 427 US Reports 160 (Supreme Court of the United States, 1976). For a detailed narrative, see A. Berner, *Educational Pluralism and Democracy*, 85–88.

On religious discrimination, Macedo favours voucher legislation that constrains private religious schools' admissions policies so that they cannot (for instance) give priority to members of the faith community, cannot require students who don't share the faith to participate in worship, and must admit via lottery in the case of oversubscription.⁴⁶ Such policies are aimed at addressing the concern that funding for religious schools could lead to religious isolation and thus to a deterioration of democratic society.

In recent years, gender identity and sexual orientation have become front and centre in disputes about public funding for religious schools, some of which openly deny admission to gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender children. Progressives oppose such discrimination and call for an end to the religious exemption, about which some state laws are silent. No state currently outright prohibits private schools from discriminating against LGBTQ students, but several states—such as Maine and Maryland—will not disburse state vouchers or tuition-replacement dollars to schools that discriminate on this basis.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, in 2020, the Supreme Court held that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of individuals' sexual orientation or gender identity (*Bostock v Clayton County*).⁴⁸ While the ruling focused on employees, its application to K–12 students came quickly thereafter; there are currently lower court cases that apply *Bostock* to students' rights.⁴⁹

Liberal Arts Curriculum

Some progressives focus on mandatory exposure to the liberal arts, because of its capacity to equalize opportunity, close socioeconomic achievement gaps, and prepare young people for democratic citizenship.

For instance, research on the power of systematic knowledge-building convinced progressive educator and professor E.D. Hirsch to devote decades to promoting what he deemed the best way to override racial and socioeconomic discrimination.⁵⁰ Requiring mastery of specific content has characterized many high-performing school systems, including in the United States in the nineteenth century and in the

⁴⁶ Macedo, "Constituting Civil Society," 438–40.

⁴⁷ C. Binkley and D. Sharp, "Maine Religious Schools Might Not Participate in State Tuition Program, despite Supreme Court Victory," *CBS News*, June 25, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/religious-schools-supreme-court-ruling-lgbtq/>; EdChoice, "Maryland—Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) Program," December 6, 2023, <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/programs/maryland-broadening-options-opportunities-students-today-boost-program/>.

⁴⁸ *Bostock v Clayton County*, 590 US State Reports (Supreme Court of the United States, 2020).

⁴⁹ R. Kim, "The Historic Bostock Opinion and LGBTQ Rights in Schools," *Kappan* (blog), September 21, 2020, <https://kappanonline.org/historic-bostock-opinion-scotus-lgbtq-rights-schools-kim/>; National School Boards Association, "Protections for LGBTQ Employees and Students after Bostock v. Clayton County," November 2020, 5, <https://www.nsba.org/-/media/NSBA/File/nsba-protections-for-lgbtq-employees-and-students-guide-2020.pdf>.

⁵⁰ E.D. Hirsch, Jr., "Why Traditional Education Is More Progressive," *American Enterprise Institute* 8, no. 2 (April 1997); S. Stern, "The Redemption of E.D. Hirsch," *City Journal*, December 6, 2013, <https://www.city-journal.org/article/the-redemption-of-e-d-hirsch>.

Canadian province of Alberta in the twentieth.⁵¹ Finland, the UK, and Belgium are among the many nations that democratized the liberal arts in tandem with the right to vote.⁵²

In particular, data from France offered Hirsch a rousing confirmation of the benefits of the liberal arts to close achievement gaps and promote equality—at least, in the decades before 1990. The French national curriculum until 1989 specified the “number of minutes per week for the study of topics in each discipline in each grade. The topics in history, math, science, civics, literature, and music were outlined with some specificity.”⁵³ And this robust liberal-arts approach, Hirsch notes, led to “the highest average student achievement with the greatest equity of any large, diverse country.”⁵⁴ Note that France accomplished this gap closure while funding a wide variety of school types (secular, Catholic, Jewish, and so on).⁵⁵

Hirsch attributes such equitable outcomes for immigrant, first-generation, and low-income students to the ubiquity of high-quality preschool and “a well-developed common curriculum.”⁵⁶ He further notes that France’s former reliance on the liberal arts had its roots in “the old egalitarian left, starting with Condorcet’s plan of 1790.”⁵⁷ Hirsch was clear that, although it appeared to be “conservative,” requiring the liberal arts constituted the most politically progressive lever that could be pulled. (Note that Hirsch is focused on the content, not the structure, of public education.)

Sociologist James Coleman found the same logic at work in the Catholic high schools he studied in the United States in the 1970s and 80s, which virtually closed the achievement gaps between wealthy and low-income students in four years. He attributed these results, at least in part, to the presence of the liberal arts curriculum for all students.⁵⁸

Brighouse’s support for a liberal arts curriculum is expansive and derives from his view that students have a right to an “autonomy-facilitating education.” Autonomy-facilitating education means exposure to diverse points of view in every school, including schools that are patently committed to one view of life or another. Multiple perspectives need not be taught as truth, he argues, but they must be taught. Why?

⁵¹ von Heyking, “Alberta, Canada.”

⁵² See, for instance, J.N. Neem, *What’s the Point of College? Seeking Purpose in an Age of Reform* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 18, 54.

⁵³ Hirsch, *Why Knowledge Matters*, 134.

⁵⁴ Hirsch, *Why Knowledge Matters*, 135.

⁵⁵ A. Legrand and C.L. Glenn, “France,” in *Balancing Freedom, Autonomy, and Accountability in Education*, ed. C. Glenn and J. De Groof, vol. 2 (Tilburg: Wolf Legal Publishers, 2012), 175–208.

⁵⁶ Hirsch, *Why Knowledge Matters*, 135. Note that Hirsch then describes how the progressive approach to education overwhelmed the liberal arts, beginning with Jospin’s Law of 1989 that decentralized the content, supported progressive pedagogy, and led to an increasing achievement gap.

⁵⁷ Hirsch, *Why Knowledge Matters*, 142.

⁵⁸ J. Coleman, *High School and Beyond* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

To allow students to develop a range of analytic capacities and knowledge about the world.

Specifically, the “traditional academic content-based curriculum” gives children “access to a considerable amount of information which is provided only by having learned it and internalized it.” It also gives them skills of discernment and judgement, or “how to identify various sorts of fallacious arguments, and how to distinguish among them.” The liberal arts help students understand “about the diverse ways, including non-reason-based ways, in which secular and religious thinkers have dealt with moral conflict,” and

about a range of religious, non-religious, and anti-religious ethical views in some detail; about the kinds of reasoning deployed within those views; and the attitudes of proponents toward non-believers, heretics, and the secular world.⁵⁹

Brighthouse returns again and again to the value of concrete historical and philosophical knowledge about the world, even though students “are not obligated to be sympathetic to all views.”⁶⁰

Comprehensive Oversight

But Brighthouse advocates for more than the humanistic curriculum. His proposal, outlined in *School Choice and Social Justice* (2000), includes site visits akin to England’s Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted); independent, third-party grading and credentialing; and record-keeping of such statistics as “retention rates, teacher accreditation levels, the ratio of expenditure on bureaucracy to classroom teaching, and test scores.”⁶¹ Robust, independent evaluation of schools is commonplace in OECD countries; an OECD review found that “inspections” bring positive, indirect influence over school quality.⁶²

It is worth noting that progressives in the United States tend toward a far thinner vision of accountability than do their counterparts in Europe or Canada (Brighthouse was raised in the UK). Democrats for Education Reform was among the groups that advocated, successfully although temporarily, for common standards and assessments across the United States. These standards and tests, however, were skills-based rather than content-rich. They were used to evaluate teacher performance and school

⁵⁹ Brighthouse, *School Choice and Social Justice*, 74–75.

⁶⁰ Brighthouse, *School Choice and Social Justice*, 78–80. Note that Brighthouse explicitly distinguishes his views from the “autonomy-promoting” education favoured by Amy Gutmann in A. Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 62.

⁶¹ Brighthouse, *School Choice and Social Justice*, 183–87.

⁶² A. Berner, “Would School Inspections Work in the United States?,” Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, September 14, 2017, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1sjAgUj4pO057QHUNeMEii2psnSUfBURJ/view>.

quality rather than students' mastery of knowledge.⁶³ Content-agnostic tests are a far cry from the exit exams favoured in Europe, which evaluate students' knowledge rather than teachers' pedagogy and require substantial mastery of key domains of knowledge.⁶⁴

3. Education Belongs within Civil Society

This position views the voluntary sector as an independent good, the presence of which protects democracy from the twin dangers of individualism and state control. Alexis de Tocqueville, one of the first social observers of the United States, marveled at the role of what he called "civic associations" to protect the young democracy from the isolation of individualism and the potential tyranny of the state.⁶⁵ William Galston, Brookings Institution's senior fellow and Ezra K. Zilkha Chair in Governance Studies, describes civil society as the "network of intimate, expressive, and associational institutions that stand between the individual and the state."⁶⁶ These three (individual, state, and civil society) may be intertwined in contemporary society, but they are still distinct conceptually.⁶⁷ Galston has been an advocate for increasing the purview of civil society, including in the sphere of education.⁶⁸

Stephen Macedo's *Constituting Civil Society: School Vouchers, Religious Nonprofit Organizations, and Liberal Public Values* (2000), on the other hand, addresses progressive angst about civil society head on. Membership in voluntary organizations (churches, synagogues, civic clubs) create particularist loyalties that must be balanced by common associations, or "cross-cutting patterns of membership," that "help insure that social divisions do not run too deep."⁶⁹ Thus, while it may be important, even necessary, to entrust public projects like schooling to civil-society organizations, we have to ensure that they "will tend to support our largest and most inclusive civic ideals."⁷⁰ Hence his recommendation for oversight of publicly funded private schools.

Brighthouse, accustomed to the UK's version of educational pluralism, supports civil-society organizations among the panoply of entities (including the state) that

⁶³ D. Steiner, "The Coming Common Core Assessments: How They Could Stop Patronizing Our Students," *Education Next*, February 26, 2014, <http://educationnext.org/the-coming-common-core-assessments-how-they-could-stop-patronizing-our-students/>.

⁶⁴ M. West, "Education and Global Competitiveness," in *Rethinking Competitiveness*, ed. K. Hassett (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 2012), 68–94.

⁶⁵ A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J.P. Mayer, trans. G. Lawrence (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 506–17. Note: I spend substantial time on civil society in Berner, *Pluralism and American Public Education*, 29–50.

⁶⁶ W.A. Galston, *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 110, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511613579>.

⁶⁷ Galston, *Liberal Pluralism*, 114.

⁶⁸ Galston, *Liberal Pluralism*.

⁶⁹ Macedo, "Constituting Civil Society," 429.

⁷⁰ Macedo, "Constituting Civil Society," 428.

should deliver public education.⁷¹ He argues against the absolutism of either state or individual: while the state cannot enforce orthodoxy and should not be the sole provider of public education, parents do not have “unrestricted authority” over their children’s education, so their judgements should not be absolute, either. As such, Brighthouse suggests, the state must serve as the “coordinating” role, the guarantor of excellence and equal access.⁷²

4. All Families Should Be Able to Access Schools That Reflect Their Needs and Values

This principle is based on the fact that relatively well-off families exercise choice as a matter of course; they can move to higher-performing suburban school districts or enroll their children in private schools. According to this view, uniform delivery deprives the non-rich of that right, which is fundamentally unjust.

Progressives place great weight on pluralism’s claims to justice and respect for persons.

Equalizing access to distinctive schools would, for progressives, begin to rectify the inequalities inherent in different families, neighbourhoods, and social networks.

Equalizing access to distinctive schools would, for progressives, begin to rectify the inequalities inherent in different families, neighbourhoods, and social networks. It would also bring abstract principles of universal human dignity, or “respect for human persons,” into concrete form. Martin Luther King III, put it this way in his defense of Florida’s tax credit scholarship: “The freedom to choose for your family is . . . about justice. . . . About righteousness.”⁷³

Coons and Sugarman highlight the anomaly of neighbourhood-based assignment of schools in the umbrella of US social policy. “Residential assignment” is compulsory, whereas state-aided medical care, food stamps, and public housing allow the dignity of choice.⁷⁴ Introducing “family choice for the non-rich” would end what Coons and Sugarman call the “American double standard” of private schools for some and “compulsory assignment” for others.⁷⁵ Family-choice policies would place education in line with the other goals of Lyndon Johnson’s war on poverty, since these policies “emerged principally from the poverty programs” of the 1960s that are “trying to give the poor more control over all aspects of their lives.”⁷⁶

⁷¹ Brighthouse, *School Choice and Social Justice*, 183.

⁷² Brighthouse, *School Choice and Social Justice*, 4–6, 15–17.

⁷³ B.K. Marcus, “Martin Luther King III on Freedom, Justice, and School Choice,” January 25, 2016, <https://fee.org/articles/martin-luther-king-iii-on-educational-freedom/>.

⁷⁴ Coons and Sugarman, *Education by Choice*, 66.

⁷⁵ Coons and Sugarman, *Education by Choice*, 2–3.

⁷⁶ Coons and Sugarman, *Education by Choice*, 25.

The opposite is also true: as Brighthouse notes, a clear signal of agency and voice comes not only from the right to *join* a school but also from the right to *leave* it.⁷⁷

5. The Empirical Findings Are Compelling

Many proponents of educational pluralism across the political spectrum note, positively, that attending a private school or charter school often undergirds stronger academic and civic outcomes than does district-school attendance. One scholarly summary of international data reports that studying within “distinctive educational communities in which pupils and teachers share a common *ethos*” vastly improves the odds of students’ reaching higher academic outcomes and stronger civic formation.⁷⁸ Charles Glenn puts it succinctly: “Schools with a distinctive identity . . . offer educational advantages deriving from their clarity of focus.”⁷⁹ David Campbell and Patrick Wolf have found civic advantages to attending private schools, particularly Catholic and independent schools.⁸⁰ Moreover, extensive research on charter-school performance from Stanford University’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes compares urban charter schools with district schools and finds an aggregate advantage to charter schools nationally, but a definitive advantage for minority students in cities such as Boston, New York City, and Newark: “Learning gains for charter school students are larger by significant amounts for Black, Hispanic, low-income, and special education students in both math and reading.”⁸¹ Such positive data can be persuasive.

However, for most of the progressives cited in this report, the negative outcomes of district schools have proved just as, if not more, persuasive than the positive outcomes of charter and private schools. As Brighthouse notes, the “school choice” movement in the United States has been plausible only because of “the dramatic failures of the urban public school to serve urban African-Americans well.”⁸²

⁷⁷ Brighthouse, *School Choice and Social Justice*, 56–58, 109.

⁷⁸ S. Macedo and P. Wolf, “Introduction: School Choice, Civic Values, and Problems of Policy Comparison,” in *Educating Citizens: International Perspectives on Civic Values and School Choice*, ed. P.J. Wolf et al. (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2004), 12.

⁷⁹ C.L. Glenn, “What the United States Can Learn from Other Countries,” in *What Americans Can Learn from School Choice in Other Countries*, ed. D. Salisbury and J. Tooley (Washington: Cato Institute, 2005), 80, 83.

⁸⁰ D.E. Campbell, “The Civic Side of School Choice: An Empirical Analysis of Civic Education in Public and Private Schools,” *BYU Law Review* 2008, no. 2 (2008): 487–523, <https://digitalcommons.law.byu.edu/lawreview/vol2008/iss2/11>; D.E. Campbell, “The Civic Implications of Canada’s Education System,” in *Educating Citizens: International Perspectives on Civic Values and School Choice*, ed. P.J. Wolf et al. (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2004), 187–212; P.J. Wolf, “Civics Exam: Schools of Choice Boost Civic Values,” *Education Next* 7, no. 3 (2007); P.J. Wolf, “Myth: Public Schools Are Necessary for a Stable Democracy,” in *School Choice Myths: Setting the Record Straight on Education Freedom*, ed. N.P. McCluskey and C.A. DeAngelis (Washington: Cato Institute, 2020), 46–68; Berner, “Good Schools, Good Citizens.”

⁸¹ Center for Research on Education Outcomes, “Urban Charter School Study: Report on 41 Regions,” Stanford University, March 2015), v, <https://urbancharters.stanford.edu/download/Urban%20Charter%20School%20Study%20Report%20on%2041%20Regions.pdf>.

⁸² Brighthouse, *School Choice and Social Justice*, 24.

Districts and Cultural Minorities

James Forman's article "The Secret History of School Choice: How Progressives Got There First," shows how district schools' inability to serve minority students led to wave after wave of progressive support for school choice.

First, the South during Reconstruction was so slow to create the infrastructure for Black education that Black communities responded by building schools and hiring teachers on their own. Forman cites an historian who found that in 1866 "at least half of the schools in Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, and Texas were sustained by blacks," and in Alabama, the Carolinas, Tennessee, and Virginia, Blacks supported a quarter to nearly half of schools. Some of these efforts persisted, even after district schools were in place.⁸³

In the 1960s, the country's persistent segregation and educational inequality led progressives and civil-rights organizations to establish summer freedom schools, outside of the districts' control.⁸⁴ So, too, the 1960s and 70s found "left-leaning reformers and progressive educators" making the case for alternative schools ("free schools"), based on these activists' antipathy to the conformist, authoritarian ethos of the bureaucratic nature of a centralized district. The free-schools movement was short lived, but it "[laid] the foundation for the wide variety of alternatives that come under the umbrella of school choice today."⁸⁵

Forman also describes how districts' "unwillingness or inability to respond to the documented failure of minority children" led to the left-leaning community-control model of the 1970s and to experiments with vouchers in Milwaukee, led by progressives animated by "anger at how inner-city schools had failed black children."⁸⁶ Forman's history of school choice reads like a *Who's Who* of important liberals and liberal institutions, including Christopher Jencks, Ted Sizer, and Lyndon Johnson's Office of Economic Opportunity, all of which thought that vouchers could help solve the racial inequities found in district schools.⁸⁷

Howard Fuller, professor at Marquette University and former superintendent of Milwaukee Public Schools, helped author the country's first voucher program.⁸⁸ He still supports pluralism unstintingly and locates his work firmly in the civil-rights movement:

When I think about the condition of so many poor black people and their children, this pain is still their reality. Today's pain is not new for

⁸³ Forman, "The Secret History of School Choice," 1292–94.

⁸⁴ Forman, "The Secret History of School Choice," 1295–1300.

⁸⁵ Forman, "The Secret History of School Choice," 1300–5.

⁸⁶ Forman, "The Secret History of School Choice," 1305–9.

⁸⁷ Forman, "The Secret History of School Choice," 1309–19.

⁸⁸ C. Sanchez, "Lessons on Race and Vouchers from Milwaukee," *NPR ED* (blog), May 16, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/05/16/523612949/lessons-on-race-and-vouchers-from-milwaukee>.

black people. But sometimes the pain and the scars reach down and touch the very depths of our souls. How deep was the pain when we were told to move to the back of the bus? How jagged were the scars when they told us, “Niggers ain’t allowed to eat here”? How much did the wounds ache when they told us to train a white person for the job they said we were not qualified to do? Yes, all these dehumanizing acts left scars and caused pain.

But today, there is nothing more painful than seeing so many of our children being denied the quality education they need and deserve. There is nothing more difficult than seeing the actual pain on our children’s faces because of their circumstances that come from living in poverty in the richest country in the world.

The reality of these real so-called pain points haunts me as I continue to work to change the life chances of poor black children throughout this country by trying to ensure that they get a quality education. Years ago, I made a decision to focus on education as the lever to use to rescue as many of our children and young people as possible. I understood then, as I do now, that the work in education has limits. In so many ways, it is truly a rescue mission, and not the broad systemic change that is needed. Yet I am driven to stay focused on the area of education, because for so many of the children I care about it is their only chance to change the trajectory of their lives.⁸⁹

In this piece as in many others, Fuller defends choice options in civil-rights terms, against believers in district-school-only education.⁹⁰

Districts Versus Private Schools

Other progressives are convinced by data in both directions. Take the case of sociologist James Coleman, who authored the first post-civil-rights evaluation of US education in *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, otherwise known as the *Coleman Report* (1966). Researchers still discuss Coleman’s sober finding that American education in the aggregate did not change students’ expected life outcomes.⁹¹ But Coleman went

⁸⁹ H. Fuller, “Fuller: Call It ‘Ed Reform’ or Don’t—The Fight to Make Schools Work for Our Poorest Families Must Go On. To Stop Is to Dishonor King’s Memory,” *The 74 Million* (blog), January 17, 2019, <https://www.the74million.org/article/fuller-call-it-ed-reform-or-dont-the-fight-to-make-schools-work-for-our-poorest-families-must-go-on-to-stop-is-to-dishonor-kings-memory/>.

⁹⁰ H. Fuller, “Advancement—The Second ‘A’ in NAACP—Should Apply to Our Children Too,” *The 74 Million* (blog), August 2, 2017, <https://www.the74million.org/article/howard-fuller-advancement-the-second-a-in-naacp-should-apply-to-our-children-too>.

⁹¹ J.S. Coleman et al., “Equality of Educational Opportunity,” National Center for Educational Statistics, 1966, <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED012275>; E. Haushek, “What Matters for Student Achievement: Updating Coleman on the Influence of Families and Schools,” *Education Next* 16, no. 2 (April 2016), <http://educationnext.org/what-matters-for-student-achievement/>.

on to study the comparative impact of Catholic and non-Catholic private schools. His findings, explained in his *High School and Beyond* (1986), include significant positive outcomes from attending a Catholic high school. The outcomes include not only higher academic outputs (graduation, course-taking) but a more heterogeneous atmosphere, higher levels of student economic heterogeneity in private (particularly Catholic) than in public schools, higher levels of student racial heterogeneity in private (particularly Catholic) than in public schools, and higher levels of minority student achievement in private (particularly Catholic) than in public schools.⁹²

These data led Coleman to conclude not only that Catholic high schools come closer than district schools to achieving the “common school ideal,” but also that the findings should lead policy to “an expansion of choice for those without such (tuition-enabling) resources.”⁹³

As another instance, former *Ramparts* editor Sol Stern relays in *Breaking Free: Public School Lessons and the Imperative of School Choice* (2003) a lengthy array of purportedly incompetent teachers who could not be fired, administrators unwilling to rock the boat, and parents characterized as desperate for a good education for their children—all drawn from real-life experiences in New York City public schools.⁹⁴ The book chronicles, for instance, the time-consuming, two-year effort required to remove teachers deemed physically and verbally abusive from the classroom, the deleterious impact of labour contracts on education (“the labor contract undermines teacher professionalism, excellence, and hard work”), and the seniority rules that frustrated principals’ capacity to attract the staff they need.⁹⁵ By contrast, Stern reports, New York City’s Catholic schools, which he also studied in depth, were able to help their majority-minority student population succeed at vastly higher levels, and at a lower cost, than the district schools.⁹⁶ Stern found in school choice “a new civil rights movement that was completing the unfinished business of the 1960s movement I had once been part of.”⁹⁷

Support for Charter Schools

Joe Williams makes a similar case in *Cheating our Kids: How Politics and Greed Ruin Education* (2005), a groundbreaking book that tacks back and forth between statistics,

⁹² Coleman, *High School and Beyond*, 37–41, 141–44.

⁹³ Coleman, *High School and Beyond*, 144, 158, 197.

⁹⁴ I do not know whether Sol Stern would consider himself a progressive today. His intellectual home was the Manhattan Institute’s City Journal for many years, although he resigned over the Manhattan Institute’s affinity for Donald Trump. *New Republic*, “Sol Stern: Author Page,” <https://newrepublic.com/authors/sol-stern>; R. Radosh and S. Stern, “Our Friend, the Trump Propagandist,” *New Republic*, May 5, 2021, <https://newrepublic.com/article/162227/david-horowitz-profile-trump-propagandist-radical-leftist>.

⁹⁵ S. Stern, *Breaking Free: Public School Lessons and the Imperative of School Choice* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003), 44, 113.

⁹⁶ Stern, *Breaking Free*, 175–76.

⁹⁷ Stern, *Breaking Free*, 13.

anecdotes, and tough-minded conclusions about the state of the US district-school landscape such as “Even our best and brightest are getting a substandard education.”⁹⁸ Williams lays the blame at the feet of union protectionism, sentimentality, self-interested vendors and philanthropists, and the unwillingness of both political parties to change course.⁹⁹

Unlike Coleman and Stern, Williams embraced charter schools but not private-school scholarships. To promote charter schools and district accountability, he founded Democrats for Education Reform (DfER), a well-funded movement within the Democratic Party that supported pro-reform candidates, pro-charter legislation, and particularly the US Department of Education under President Barack Obama.¹⁰⁰

In Steven Brill’s chronicle of education policy in the late 1990s and 2010s, the progressive superstars of DfER play a large role: Michelle Rhee, Eli Broad, Whitney Tilson, Cory Booker. In one chapter, titled “Billionaires Trapped in an Elevator,” Brill describes how a group of Democrat investors raised almost \$10 million to raise the charter caps in New York State, including funding radio and television ads “calling for parent choice . . . and demanding that Albany politicians stop kowtowing to the teachers’ unions,” and launching door-to-door campaigns in districts held by “persuadable” Democrats.¹⁰¹

Williams’ and DfER’s support for charter schools played a key role in expanding the number of charter laws across the country, but they were not alone. In 2019, the Progressive Policy Institute released “The Progressive Roots of Charter Schools,” a report that locates charter schools firmly in the left-of-centre camp that includes union leaders (Al Shanker), Democratic legislators (Ken Nelson in Minnesota and Mark Roosevelt in Massachusetts), presidents (Bill Clinton and Barack Obama), and policy leaders (David Osborne).¹⁰²

Economic Benefits

One of the more persistent arguments against “school choice” is that it inevitably pulls financial resources from district schools and creates a market environment for education.

Some progressives do not recoil from market terminology but actively embrace it. Coons and Sugarman, for instance, hope that the injection of choice models will “strengthen” the district school.¹⁰³ And Brighthouse defends economic efficiency in terms of social-opportunity costs:

⁹⁸ J. Williams, *Cheating Our Kids: How Politics and Greed Ruin Education* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1–3.

⁹⁹ Williams, *Cheating Our Kids*.

¹⁰⁰ Democrats for Education Reform, “Democrats for Education Reform: Origin Story,” <https://dfer.org/about/dfer-origin-story/>.

¹⁰¹ S. Brill, *Class Warfare: Inside the Fight to Fix America’s Schools* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 324–27.

¹⁰² Langhorne, “The Progressive Roots of Charter Schools.”

¹⁰³ Coons and Sugarman, *Education by Choice*, 4.

If we could get exactly the same results under Plan A costing \$100 as under Plan B costing \$150, we are morally bound to choose Plan A, since that will free up resources for expenditure on other socially valuable projects.¹⁰⁴

Note that this is not a market-oriented argument for reducing costs per se. Rather, it is a justice-oriented claim about the questionable ethics of perpetuating ineffective district-school bureaucracy when “private schools . . . currently provide education at a much lower per-pupil cost than do public schools.”¹⁰⁵ This line of reasoning may particularly resonate in a time of budgetary constraints, which, according to some analyses, may arrive sooner rather than later. The US federal education funds associated with COVID-19 and directed to district schools will run out in September 2024, and the resulting “fiscal cliff” may make a progressive orientation toward efficiency a necessity.¹⁰⁶

Conclusions and Recommendations

It should be clear from the evidence provided in this paper that progressives not only can, but often do, support educational pluralism. They tend to do so on grounds of justice, equal access, and freedom of expression. With rare exceptions (such as the free-school movement), progressives readily accept government oversight, with varying degrees of specificity.

Tensions about educational pluralism within the conservative camp often come down to *how much accountability*, while tensions within the progressive camp to *how much choice*.¹⁰⁷ The key divide is between those whose “choice” includes charter schools but not private-school scholarships (such as DfER, Williams), and those who are “all in,” with vouchers and tax credits as well (such as Coons and Sugarman, Stern, Coleman).

Yet, it remains the case that advocacy for educational pluralism remains a minority view in the US political left. The Democratic Party has been aligned historically with public-sector unions, which contribute heavily to Democrats’ political campaigns.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Brighthouse, *School Choice and Social Justice*, 31.

¹⁰⁵ Brighthouse, *School Choice and Social Justice*, 29.

¹⁰⁶ L. Jacobson, “Analysis: State Laws Leave School Districts Unprepared for Looming Fiscal Cliff,” *The 74 Million* (blog), July 20, 2023, <https://www.the74million.org/article/analysis-state-laws-leaving-school-districts-unprepared-for-looming-fiscal-cliff>.

¹⁰⁷ That is, mainstream conservatives such as those represented by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and American Compass, are in favour of regulatory guardrails, whereas libertarians, such as those at the Stand Together Trust, are not.

¹⁰⁸ D. DiSalvo, “How Teachers Unions Became a Political Powerhouse: A Nuanced Look at the Role of Unions in Education Policy,” *Education Next* 23, no. 2 (February 2023), <https://www.educationnext.org/how-teachers-unions-became-a-political-powerhouse/>; D. DiSalvo, *Government against Itself: Public Union Power and Its Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Brill, *Class Warfare*; S. Brill, “The Rubber Room,” *New Yorker*, August 24, 2009, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/08/31/the-rubber-room>.

These unions also litigate many of the country's school-choice laws.¹⁰⁹ As a recent *New York Times* article put it,

Under [Randi] Weingarten, who was elected president of the A.F.T. [American Teachers Federation] in 2008, the national union has gone all in on electoral politics, significantly increasing its political spending in the belief that the best way to serve its rank and file is by electing Democrats.¹¹⁰

The political pressure is not trivial. It can be costly for Democrats to support the expansion of charter schools—much less private-school scholarship laws—particularly in purple or blue states. For instance, the first tax-credit scholarship in Illinois became law in 2017 in a carefully calibrated grand bargain that increased funding for district schools (especially in Chicago), allowed low-income students to apply for private-school scholarships, and required these students to take state assessments for accountability.¹¹¹ But in 2023 the Democrats denied funding to continue the program, leaving nine thousand low-income students bereft of funds to attend private schools.¹¹²

The hope for educational pluralists, left, right, and centre, is to create enough common ground, or to remove the most barriers, so that both the structure and the content associated with excellence can be enacted *well* and for the *long term*. Particularly given the real-world consequences for Democrats who part ways with teacher unions, there is no silver bullet to get there. However, taking the progressive arguments above into consideration, what follows are a few suggestions towards a more pluralist end.

First, it can be helpful to highlight the normality of educational pluralism in countries around the world and its implied presence in the major social and political covenants of the United Nations.¹¹³ As Brighthouse put it, “Neighborhood schooling [i.e., assigning students to a school based on their residence] has never been elevated to the level of a guiding principle in the UK, for example.”¹¹⁴ Illuminating cultural blind spots can be the first, important step in legitimating diverse kinds of schools.

¹⁰⁹ Stern, *Breaking Free*. See 218–220 for an example.

¹¹⁰ J. Mahler, “The Most Dangerous Person in the World Is Randi Weingarten,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 28, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/28/magazine/randi-weingarten-teachers-unions.html>.

¹¹¹ C. Phenicie, “Illinois Passes Landmark Funding Bill Creating Tax Credit Scholarship, Sending More Money to Poor Schools,” *The 74 Million* (blog), August 29, 2017, <https://www.the74million.org/article/illinois-passes-landmark-funding-bill-creating-tax-credit-scholarship-sending-more-money-to-poor-schools/>.

¹¹² Editorial Board, “The Illinois Scholarship Scandal”; Editorial Board, “School Choice Dies in Illinois,” November 12, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/school-choice-dies-in-illinois-education-pritzker-2bf45e2b>.

¹¹³ United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 2200A, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (16 December 1966), <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx>; United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 2200A, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (16 December 1966), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>.

¹¹⁴ Brighthouse, *School Choice and Social Justice*, 21.

Second, identify common ground between left- and right-of-centre pluralists. The greatest convergence is around the (minimum) premise that *not every school serves every child well*, particularly those from low-income homes and cultural minorities. Pluralists from both camps, too, find convergence in at least some of the proposals for quality control.

Third, both sides can avoid using language that alienates the other. The language of “parental rights” does not seem to resonate widely with progressives, nor that of “individual development and free expression” with conservatives. (Ironically, both the educational far-left and far-right are aligned *against* public accountability, albeit for different reasons.)

Fourth, a unified pluralist message is more likely to reach new constituencies by being generous toward all school sectors instead of playing the zero-sum games that have characterized US education policy for so long. Coons and Sugarman can be role models here; they do not doubt the importance of district schools. They claim, rather, that counter-cultural school communities offer much-needed clarity, which they hope will redound to district schools’ moral and psychological improvement.¹¹⁵ Progressive pluralists may have to work hard to endorse fundamentalist schools that cater to gendered roles, for example, and conservatives may have to work hard to distinguish the “exposure” inherent in the liberal arts from “indoctrination” typical of the curriculum wars.¹¹⁶ Pluralism entails funding schools we wouldn’t necessarily send our own children to. It also means honouring individual schools in every sector (private, district, charter, home) that demonstrably serve young people’s academic, civic, emotional and, if applicable, spiritual, wellbeing.

¹¹⁵ Coons and Sugarman, *Education by Choice*, 4.

¹¹⁶ I address this issue head on in A. Berner, “Educational Pluralism and Democracy,” Johns Hopkins University, December 18, 2023, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IapalmX-qcU>.

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