

Efforts to Dismantle Traditional Public Schools: Literacy Consequences for Students

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Nearly 200 years ago, America's Common School movement began with Horace Mann's election as Secretary to Massachusetts' first Board of Education. He promoted taxpayer-funded nonsectarian education; professional, well-prepared teachers; and principles of a free society as the basis of instruction (Editors, 2020). Many states followed and public schooling eventually became a right of every young citizen. Imagine how surprised Mann would be to learn we are now at a tipping point where there is diminishing support for traditional public schools, initially the result of small but perceptible trends in government policy and public concerns that in today's polarized climate may suffice for a total collapse of Mann's vision for public education. These trends and challenges to the survival of traditional public schools were evident before COVID-19. But social media and the pandemic exacerbated them, creating the perfect storm for their complete dismantling.

Accounts of the public education crisis typically describe single events: unruly parents at board meetings, threats against board members, teacher strikes, attacks on curriculum, and politically driven budget cuts. But these singular events are actually part of a much larger story: trends in federal and state policy and in public perception of public schools that affect literacy instruction and achievement and collectively contribute to efforts to dismantle them.

Policy Trends Leading to Dismantling of Public Schools

Trend 1: School Choice

School choice has always had limited availability through expensive private schools and more affordable faith-based schools, but by the late 1900s and early 2000s state and federal governments offered families more cost-reduced or free options: vouchers for private schools, including faith-based schools, out-of-district public schools, public charter schools, and homeschooling. In all, 31 states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico now have private school choice

programs (Garnett, 2021). Table 1 illustrates how enrollment in assigned public schools declined and other enrollment options grew nationally for K–12 students between 1999 and 2016 (U.S Department of Education, 2020).

During the pandemic, many traditional public schools closed, and the overall number students attending public schools decreased by another 3% between school years 2019 and 2021, as other options became more popular and available (Irwin et al., 2021).

Voucher Options. Vouchers, the most common private school choice mechanism, are often scholarship tax credit programs where businesses and individual taxpayers donate to nonprofit organizations that manage, distribute, and grant tuition scholarships to eligible students. Donors funding vouchers receive tax credits, diverting tax dollars from state budgets. When students leave district schools, those schools lose funding based on enrollment.

As states increased funding and reduced eligibility requirements, vouchers became more popular. In 2016, 14 states had voucher programs; just prior to the COVID pandemic, they were available in 19 states with 24 scholarship tax credit programs (Erwin et al., 2021). Some states have used The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) law of 2020 that has three education funding streams to expand school choice (Mulvihill, 2021).

Religious groups advocated for vouchers for their faith-based schools, and this became inevitable when Supreme Court Justice Roberts wrote for the majority, "A state need not subsidize private education. But once a state decides to do so, it cannot disqualify some private schools solely because they are religious" (Espinoza v. Montana, 2020, p. 20). As E. Ray Moore, founder of the conservative Christian Education Initiative, observed, "This is a once-in-100-year moment for the growth of Christian education" (Graham, 2021, para. 5).

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Table 1
Enrollments in Assigned Public School and Other Enrollment Options Grades 1–12, 1999 and 2016

Option	1999	2016
Assigned public schools	74%	69%
Chosen public schools*	14%	19%
Homeschooled students	2%	3%
Private schools	9%	9%

*Charters; magnet; intradistrict public schools (adapted from U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

Further erosion of the separation of church and state occurred in June 2022 when, in a 6-3 ruling of the United States Supreme Court, the majority posed that religious schools in Maine could not be excluded from tuition assistance programs afforded through vouchers to public or private schools. Writing for the majority, according to Chief Justice Roberts, “Maine’s ‘nonsectarian’ requirement for its otherwise generally available tuition assistance payments violates the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment” (Makin, 2022, p. 18). In a statement for the three dissenters, Justice Breyer referencing Roberts’ 2020 ruling wrote:

We have never previously held what the Court holds today, namely, that a State must (not may) use state funds to pay for religious education as part of a tuition program designed to ensure the provision of free statewide public school education.

What happens once “may” becomes “must”? Does that transformation mean that a school district that pays for public schools must pay equivalent funds to parents who wish to send their children to religious schools? Does it mean that school districts that give vouchers for use at charter schools must pay equivalent funds to parents who wish to give their children a religious education? (Breyer, J. dissenting, p.7).

A plethora of complex issues arise from the ruling. Will state and federal tax dollars support religion-affiliated groups large enough to have multiple schools within a state, but not smaller religious groups that have few or none? Will these same dollars be used to support religious schools that deny enrollment to gay or transgender or that require teachers to be of certain religious faiths? How will traditional public schools fare under this ruling, and what will be the consequences for an already polarized nation?

Charter Schools. Charters, independently run public schools, were originally justified as innovation

incubators, but researchers have found them to be otherwise (Network for Public Education, 2019). Because they are exempt from many rules and regulations imposed on traditional public schools, their quality varies. As with vouchers, charters siphon funds from traditional public schools, and as enrollment increases, traditional public schools have difficulty providing essentials.

In 1991, Minnesota was the first state to enact charter school legislation. President George Bush awarded states some federal funding for charters in 2006 as did President Obama (Incharters.org, 2021). Enrollment increased nationally between fall 2009 and fall 2018, from 1.6 million students to 3.3 million students, representing growth from 3% to 7% of all public-school students. Simultaneously, traditional public schools’ enrollment declined. During the first full year of the COVID pandemic, they lost 1.5 million students while charters gained 237,000. In fact, “the charter sector is likely to have experienced the largest rate of increase in student enrollment increase in half a decade” (Veney & Jacobs, 2021, p.1).

As support grew, so did the number of charter schools. Between 2009–2010 and 2019–2019, charters grew from approximately 5,000–7,400 charter schools, while that of traditional public schools decreased from 93,900 to 91,300 (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Homeschooling. In 1993, multiple state governments recognized homeschooling as a legitimate form of education, amending compulsory attendance laws accordingly. Growth was gradual until the 2020 pandemic. In 2003, just 1.1 million students were homeschooled (Redford et al., 2017). By 2019, there were 2.5 million K-12 homeschoolers, representing 5.4% of total K-12 population, (Ray, 2021). During the pandemic, this tripled by mid-May of 2020 to 19.5% (Eggleston & Fields, 2021). Hanover Research found that 47% of those parents conducting homeschooling during the pandemic were very or extremely likely to continue even if schools return to fully in-person learning during the 2021–2022 school year, only half of whom homeschooled prior to the pandemic (Hanover Research, 2021).

Supporters claim homeschooling benefits state and federal budgets. “[These] students represent a savings of over \$68 billion for taxpayers. This is \$68 billion that American taxpayers do not have to spend” (Ray, 2021, para. 4). However, in some states, for example, Florida and West Virginia, homeschool vouchers equal a district’s per-pupil expenditure, and most others offer reimbursement or tax credit for homeschooling consumables such as textbooks and school supplies as well as educational activities (Kimont, 2017). Few states require federal or state assessment and curriculum mandates

for homeschoolers. Thus, districts still have associated costs, but homeschooling has little oversight or accountability, and quality varies.

Finances for traditional public schools worsen as the school year progresses because charters and voucher-funded private schools, having already received funding for each enrolled student, can expel children with learning or behavior challenges, and traditional public schools must accept their return, without immediate compensation.

Trend 2: Changes in in Public Perception of and Support for Public Schools

Anyone attending recent school board meetings has undoubtedly witnessed chaos: disgruntled individuals shouting about parental rights, with police often escorting belligerent protesters out of meetings. News and social media are replete with such accounts. One reporter comments,

In most Florida counties, school districts are the biggest employers, running multimillion- and even billion-dollar budgets while controlling issues that impact families and children daily. Yet their profile has remained low, with many parents and taxpayers taking the system for granted. The pandemic is changing all that (Solochek, 2021, paras. 1–2).

Parents have always advocated for quality education for their children, but charter school growth, increased voucher programs, remote learning requirements, and homeschooling experiences during the pandemic have made parents more aware and supportive of other education options. And it is not just parents demanding more of schools. By exploiting social media, conservative groups widened their audience, reinforcing already negative perceptions some parents may have about traditional public schools. Their criticism is aimed not at improving these schools but dismantling them.

Claims of Indoctrination by Government-run, Government-funded Schools. Some critics suggest that public schools are leftist indoctrination centers, injuring children. This view is not new, but attacks have become more frequent and louder. Of the McCarthy era, Hunt (2015) reports “Concern about Communists in education was a central preoccupation in the U.S. through the middle decades of the twentieth century” (Hunt, 2015, p.1). In 1993, Hood laments, “What has clearly been on the rise in recent decades is the use of America’s public schools for the purpose of engineering some social outcome deemed desirable by political leaders. This is an unavoidable, and perhaps insurmountable, failing of government-run education” (Hood, 1993, para. 40). And today there is an outright assault. “The education system

designed to teach them how to think critically has been weaponized by the radical left to push an anti-American agenda” (Blair, 2020, para. 1).

Claims of indoctrination are often engineered and amplified by such conservative groups as The Heritage Foundation, The American Enterprise Institute, and The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. “Conservative-owned publications like *The Weekly Standard*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* routinely publish and cite conservative think tanks, ensuring that their message reaches, and influences, nationwide audiences” (Kovacs & Boyles, 2005, para. 12). Recent anti-public school articles are regularly published through various print and online news outlets: *28 Signs That U.S. Public Schools Are Rapidly Being Turned Into Indoctrination Centers And Prison Camps* (Snyder, 2014); *How Public Schools Indoctrinate Kids Without Almost Anyone Noticing* (Meyrat, 2018), *I’m a former teacher. Here’s how your children are getting indoctrinated by leftist ideology* (Blair, 2020).

Pandemic-related mandates for masks, social distancing, and vaccinations raised the temperature, increased polarization, and embroiled school boards, school staff and teachers in vitriolic debates with local communities they serve. One activist right-wing group, Turning Point USA (2021), created a School Board Watchlist, self-described as

America’s only national grassroots initiative dedicated to protecting our children by exposing radical and false ideologies endorsed by school boards and pushed in the classroom. SBWL finds and exposes school board leadership that supports anti-American, radical, hateful, immoral, and racist teachings in their districts, such as Critical Race Theory, the 1619 Project, sexual/gender ideology, and more. SBWL also provides information on how parents and students can get involved in their local school board and put an end to the racialization of the classroom (SBWL home page, 2021).

Polarization on Some Key Issues. Although *Phi Delta Kappan’s* 2016 survey of parents’ views of their community’s public schools yielded generally positive views by parents whose children attend them, some responses reflected polarization, a defining feature of United States’ current political landscape. For instance, ratings were evenly split, 48%–46%, on whether charter schools should meet the same educational standards as other public schools or set their own, or should a failing school close, 49%–47% (Richardson, 2016).

Partisan divide remained evident in *Kappan’s* 2020 survey, conducted shortly before the COVID pandemic. Fifty-three percent of Republicans and conservatives wanted greater availability of vouchers compared to 29% of Democrats and 26% of liberals (Heller, 2020). Van

Green's research for Pew (2021) found polarization in views toward traditional public schools strengthened in 2021, "77% of Democrats say they have a positive effect, compared with 42% of Republicans. A 57% majority of Republicans, including nearly two-thirds of conservative Republicans (65%), say public elementary and secondary schools have a negative effect" (para. 4).

The pandemic increased public awareness of traditional public schools' organization and what they can deliver, with many asking whether they provide what they believe their children need. Expansion and accessibility of school choice options by state governments, and growing efforts to influence public perceptions of and attitudes toward traditional public schools, often characterized as "culture wars," intensified the potential for accelerating their dismantling. These trends affect literacy instruction in these schools regarding who teaches, what is taught, how it is taught and, ultimately, student literacy achievement.

Effects on Literacy Instruction and Student Achievement in Traditional Public Schools

There have been tremendous learning losses during the pandemic, especially among students of color (Dorn et al., 2020). But the pandemic alone did not damage literacy programs and cause decline in student achievement in traditional public schools. Contributing and continuing are conservative activists' efforts to mount public dissatisfaction with what traditional public schools offer and raise questions about their *raison d'être* and intent. Their advocacy for school choice results in fewer resources for schools, severely affecting literacy programs. Their claims of indoctrination have limited curriculum and instructional material necessary to challenged readers. Parents and communities are pitted against schools and teachers and support for traditional public schools is diminished.

Reduced Allocations for Traditional Public-School Programs that Support Literacy Instruction for Struggling Learners. Resources for literacy instruction in traditional public schools are considerably reduced as more taxpayer dollars go to vouchers for private schools, homeschoolers, and public charter schools, resources often used to support challenged readers: afterschool tutoring, smaller classes, literacy coaches, instruction for English language learners, preschool programs, parent education, and professional development for teachers.

Title I, a supplemental federal funding stream for children from low-income families to assist with meeting challenging state academic standards, provides schools either targeted or schoolwide financial assistance.

Critically important for literacy services, it has not kept pace with inflation or student needs. In 2015, district schools lost considerable Title I funding when its services became portable, following eligible children to private schools where they would receive equitable services. Children's residential public school districts were now required to consult with private schools to determine the proportion of its Title I funds those schools should receive for Title I services. Districts also incurred administrative, transportation, and other costs to achieve equity (United States Department of Education, 2019). Portability supporters linked it to school choice. "By enabling the portability of Title I funds, families will be better equipped when making decisions about the education provider that is in the student's best interest" (Miller, 2015, para. 12).

Declining Federal dollars for enhanced literacy programs in traditional public schools after 2015 was measurable. Charters benefitted. In 2018, charter schools received a 16.9% increase for discretionary programs as compared to 2017 funding, but few such programs available to traditional public schools received more funding as compared to 2017 (Committee for Education Funding, 2017). While dollars allocated to education in 2020 appeared to increase, they were actually almost \$6 billion below that of 2011 when adjusted for inflation (Committee for Education Funding, 2019). The U.S. Department of Education's 2020 Budget Summary requested the same Title I funding for traditional public schools as in 2019, without considering inflation, while requesting an increase of \$60 million for charter schools and admitting that "the Request reduces the overall Federal role in education" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., p.4).

The Education Commission of the States reviewed how 50 states fund charter schools and reported districts losing between 95 and 100% of funding per child for each child opting for a charter (2018). High poverty cities suffered. In just one academic year Albany City, N.Y.'s school district lost \$24.9–\$26.1 million to charter schools (Bifulco & Reback, 2014). Los Angeles, CA district public schools lost \$591 million due to students going to charters (MGT of America, 2016). Michigan researchers found choice policies greatly contributed to financial problems of Michigan's most hard-pressed districts, especially when the percent of students attending charter schools approaches 20% (Arsen et al., 2015). When students transfer to charters, traditional public schools still must honor teachers, staff, and vendor contracts. Other fixed costs, such as pensions and heat, do not change with fewer students, and schools have fewer dollars for support services.

These cutbacks have a spiraling effect. Parents and others decry lack of services for children, blaming school

boards, administrators, and teachers but failing to see their own role in this. Instead of fighting for traditional public schools, they say these schools are not working for children. They seek alternatives, further reducing resources for traditional public schools and strengthening them for other options.

Nationwide Teacher Shortages and Dependence on Others Less Prepared to Develop Children's Literacy. Experienced teachers in district schools are essential to improving students' literacy (Papay & Kraft, 2015; Ladd & Sorenson, 2017). Funding issues coupled with mounting public criticisms and restrictive legislation have affected teacher retention and job satisfaction. Pre-pandemic, traditional public schools addressed shortages by increasing reliance on non-college graduate substitute teachers; teachers teaching out of their field; or alternate route teachers. Darling-Hammond (2017) found for school year 2017–2018, more than 100,000 classrooms in the United States were staffed by instructors who were unqualified for their jobs.

When the pandemic began, many traditional public schools initiated remote or hybrid instruction, requiring unique teaching skills. Parents were removing their children from these schools while criticizing teachers, curriculum, and instructional materials, and claiming indoctrination was rampant. Teacher frustration was understandable; many left the profession. Teacher shortages worsened. A 2020 national survey of nearly 500 district school leaders found that staffing shortages increased by 75% and substitute availability diminished, leaving some classes uncovered. Substitutes were available for only 50% or fewer classes, and substitute quality decreased (Kurtz, 2020). Shortages led to weakening teacher requirements such that candidates can now postpone taking a required certification test, and though not fully certified, they are being hired to teach. Districts were asking administrators and even volunteer parents to cover classes.

Using a dynamic interactive data application available through the U.S. Department of Education, the author determined that in 2021 44% of public-school districts could not fill vacancies across all grade levels and subjects, compared to 34% the previous year. Half the states reported 2021 teacher shortages in language arts-related areas, including reading resource teachers. Urban school districts experienced extreme shortages; special education teachers were the greatest need across all districts (2021).

Non-certified, substitutes, and out-of-field teachers are obviously problematic, but what about alternate route teachers? Can they be relied on to develop

children's literacy? The author's review of the 47 states offering alternate route programs found as many as 60% of alternate route teachers may have had absolutely no preparation in literacy instruction. For those having some preparation, it may not have been appropriate or sufficient because states "[varied in] requirement in literacy instruction for alternate route certification, including specific direction to providers, mentors, or school administrators that attention to literacy instruction must be included in the program" (Lewis-Spector, 2016, p.7).

The prospect that increasingly students in traditional public schools will receive literacy instruction from individuals not fully certified, alternate route teachers, substitute teachers, and teachers teaching outside their field of expertise does not bode well for students' literacy achievement nor for producing the analytical citizens on which our democratic society depends. Test scores will decline. Public school supporters will call for teacher incentives, more resources, and purposeful, creative solutions. For others, it will justify dismantling them, arguing if public schools fail, so be it. They were not worth taxpayer dollars anyway.

Increased Parent Censorship of Reading Materials and Criticism of Curriculum and Standards. When instruction was delivered remotely at many traditional public-schools during the COVID pandemic, parents were able to observe firsthand and express concerns about their children's schooling. Newly legislated guarantees of parents' rights buoyed their voices. In 2021, "Indiana" *Parents' Bill of Rights*, described as a "roadmap," assured parents of six "rights" regarding their child's education, including choosing and approving academic standards, reviewing the curriculum, questioning the local school board and school administrators (Rokita, 2021). Other states have similar assurances that, like Indiana, get considerable press coverage, fomenting suspicion about what these schools do and whether to support them.

While objections to curriculum and efforts to ban books are not new, recent claims of indoctrination and criticism of curricula and instructional materials have intensified. Conservative groups have raised loud objections to what they have termed "woke" curriculum in public schools. One such group, Moms for Liberty, incorporated January 1, 2021, had grown in 18 months "to 100,000 members in more than 200 chapters across 38 states" (Varn, 2022, para 2). Witness recent attacks on critical race theory (CRT). Activists falsely claim CRT is part of local school curricula. Their activism successfully pushed legislation banning it and sparked parents' demands to omit significant historical events from the curriculum, for example, slavery, or America's history of discrimination against various

immigrant groups, because inclusion might make white students feel guilty (Camera, 2021). Education Commission of the States reported that as of September 2021, 22 states had introduced at least 37 bills and 2 resolutions that prohibited culturally inclusive curricula (Francies, 2021).

Some activists who may not even have children in public schools demand censoring books that include LGBTQIA+ portrayals or depict injustices experienced by persons of color (Fox, 1990; Sendak, 1970; Reynolds & Kendi, 2020; Richardson & Parnell, 2005). In 2021, requests increased for removal of anti-racism books, such as Jason Reynolds' *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* (Flood, 2021). Popular children's literature that frequently jumpstarts a child's literacy interests and improvement of reading skills is challenged and often removed from classroom libraries, for example, *Guess What?; In the Night Kitchen; And Tango Makes Three*. Books offering children relatable characters, raising important questions, or introducing complex situations are pulled from shelves, with instructional opportunities lost. Extreme pressure is exerted to teach a single point of view.

Alarmed by such occurrences, nearly 150 professional organizations were signatories to a statement decrying legislative efforts at censorship, arguing "Suppressing or watering down discussion of 'divisive concepts' in educational institutions deprives students of opportunities to discuss and foster solutions to social division and injustice" (PEN.org, 2021, para. 2). In this climate, educators are severely limited in their ability to introduce students to diverse viewpoints or have robust discussions about text. From some parents' perspective, however, if public school will not teach the ideas and values they deem appropriate, they'll take their children elsewhere. They have lots of choices. Who needs government-run public schools?

Effects on Class Size and Early Literacy Instruction. Project Star's study of class size found 18 students or fewer per teacher produced the greatest benefits, especially for minority and low-income students. Teachers spent less time on classroom management and more on instruction and could interact more frequently with individual students, boosting student engagement in learning, tailoring literacy instruction, assessing progress, and adjusting instruction as needed (Mosteller, 1995). "Following a high-quality early care and pre-K experience, the kindergarten-through-third-grade years set the foundation upon which future learning builds; and strengthening this continuum creates opportunities for later success" (Education Commission of the States, 2021, para. 1).

Nevertheless, in 2019 Betsy DeVos, then Secretary of Education and strong supporter of vouchers, wanted traditional public-school budgets cut by 10%, offsetting the loss by increasing class size (Sokol, 2020). Testifying

before Congress, DeVos suggested, "Students may be better served by being in larger classes, if by hiring fewer teachers, a district or state can better compensate those who have demonstrated high ability and outstanding results" (DeVos, 2019, p. 6).

DeVos' proposal ran counter to the 1999 Class Size Reduction (CSR) program that aimed for no more than 18 pupils in grades K–3 and highly qualified teachers in every classroom. CSR ended just 2 years later, but communities continued investing in CSRs. Pupil–teacher ratios of 22.3 in 1970 declined to 17.9 in 1985, and 15.3 in 2008. Unfortunately, the 2008 recession increased ratios by 2016 to 16.0, in contrast to the private school pupil/teacher ratio of 11.9 in 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). When traditional schools shifted to remote learning, class sizes dramatically increased and some parents reporting public schools having nearly 100 children attending a single virtual classroom (Altavena et al., 2020).

Smaller classes dependent on district budgets are jeopardized when traditional public schools are poorly financed, as has occurred throughout the country, including New York City (Amin, 2021) and Fairfax County, Virginia, as well as all of South Carolina (Chen, 2021). "Parents who feel that their child needs the environment of a small classroom will no doubt consider sending their child to a private school. Small teacher-student ratios are frequently cited as a leading benefit of private schooling" (Chen, 2019, para. 11).

Conclusion

The National School Boards Association cautioned President Biden, "America's public schools and its education leaders are under an immediate threat" (Garcia & Slaven, 2021). They have been an endangered species for some time. Conservative activists target teachers for criticism and accelerate disinformation about traditional public schools, resulting in fewer teacher candidates and more teacher shortages. Considerable funding has been diverted to charter schools, private schools, and homeschooling, options having little accountability and the right to return struggling readers and/or children with disabilities to their district's public schools. Thus, while traditional public schools are losing funding, their need for highly qualified teachers and sophisticated instructional resources for challenged learners has not. Learning losses during the pandemic have created a more dire situation, while anti-school rhetoric has heated up. Test scores have dropped, classes are crowded, teachers are protesting and leaving. It looks like public schools are failing, and expanded school choice options make it possible for parents to simply turn away from them. Parents ask why they should choose a public school to educate their sons or daughters when

there are seemingly more attractive options? And if my children aren't using the public schools, why should I pay for them? Let us just get rid of them.

For those hoping to prevent the dismantling of traditional public schools, who want to continue to improve students' literacy with the best teachers and expanded programs, there are more reasoned responses. We must advocate harder, armed with data demonstrating the power of experienced teachers and experienced literacy educators who have successfully prepared students for positive futures. We must bombard the press with facts about the consequences for literacy achievement when funding is reduced. We must also caution the public about the dangers of silo-segregated schools, where students only engage with like-minded peers who share the same values, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or some other singular characteristic that ignores our nation's diversity. We must stop those who, for political or monetary gain, are attempting to undermine our schools, using blatantly false information to justify dismantling them. We must involve the public in critical discussion about what we think is a hopeful direction for this young country in which we can all participate and contribute to the realization of its possibilities.

Conflict of Interest

I have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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