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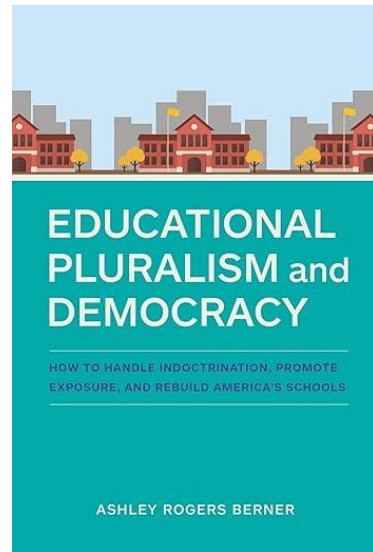
Berner, A. R. (2024). *Educational pluralism and democracy: How to handle indoctrination, promote exposure, and rebuild America's schools*. Harvard Education Press.

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E Pluribus Unum—from many one—is our Latin motto, but in this challenging book, **Ashley Rogers Berner** claims that we've never really honored the *pluribus* part.¹ The several states that established public schools were originally Protestant but are now secular. This forced dissenting parents to either pay a financial premium for sending their children to schools consistent with their distinctive vision of the good life, or to send their children to a “public” school that would inculcate values and attitudes they deplore. It should not and would not have to be like that, she writes, as educational systems in many countries, including Canada, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands demonstrate. According to Berner, the government ought to fund *all* schools and even homeschoolers, so long as they adhere to the United States Constitution. The Constitution, Berner believes, would set boundaries, forbidding discrimination in hiring or admissions on the basis of race, to take one example.²



This may sound attractive to some, but dangerous to others. Doesn't it ignore the *unum* part of the motto? Would her proposed restructuring not lead to indoctrinating students, thereby intensifying already alarming polarization? No, argues Berner, because she identifies an “*unum*,” a *common* liberal arts curriculum that ought to be taught in all schools. These schools would not be guilty of the charge of indoctrinating their students, she claims, because they would expose students to alternative viewpoints on controversial

¹ At least not since prior to the establishment of public school systems in the mid-19th century.

² Chapter five provides a lucid and fair-minded review of Supreme Court decisions that indicate the boundaries of what parents or schools may do. Berner acknowledges that some of these boundaries are clear, others fuzzy.

subjects. Evangelical schools might, for example, teach the Biblical account of the origin of species, but would also have to expose children to the evolutionary account rooted in Darwinism. On the other hand, secular schools would need to expose children to the perspectives of the major religions. Another example: "...when considering the founding documents, 'multiple perspectives' could mean materials from the racial essentialist 1619 Project paired with interpretations by more traditional historians" (p. 58). Lest a reader conclude that Berner is a proponent of voucher programs, she makes clear that she is not. Why does she oppose the libertarian view? According to libertarians, the success of voucher schools is established by the market, and if schools fail because they fail to attract parents, so be it. But, citing Charles Glen (one of her favorite education writers) Berner contends that public policy should try to insure there are no bad choices. More important, she asserts, rightly in my view, that securing parental rights is *not* the primary aim of education: the next generation's "academic achievement and *preparation for democratic citizenship matter—for us all*" (p. 19, italics mine).

It has seemed to many of us—I include myself—that the American public school provides the best kind of apprenticeship for citizenship. Here, students from diverse backgrounds can get to know each other, discuss controversial issues across differences in background and viewpoint, and learn the basic civics information on which our system depends. Alas, as most of us have realized, this vision is largely aspirational. Many public schools are segregated (de facto) by race and economically homogeneous. Even in those public schools that do comprise diverse student bodies, formal and informal tracking and self-segregation often result in minimal intergroup conversation both in the classroom or in the lunchroom. Moreover, as Berner makes clear, basic civics knowledge in the US is appalling, e.g., fewer than half of American adults could name the three branches of government, p. 51. Moreover, studies have found that discussion of controversial issues occurs rarely in social studies classrooms.³ Finally, voter turnout in Canada's latest election was somewhat *higher* than in the latest U.S. election, and at least one peer-reviewed meta-analysis of schools around the world shows that "private schools outperform public in forming citizens, particularly in promoting political tolerance, political knowledge and skills."⁴

Believing that the social studies curriculum and that of the language arts are the keys to more robust democratic citizenship, Berner focuses chapters two and three on criticizing the existing curriculum and illustrating programs and practices that help students become more knowledgeable. After so much recent focus on the STEM fields, I must say it was refreshing to find an author emphasizing the importance of English and social studies. That being noted, these chapters were *not* what I was hoping for. Recall that in Berner's scheme, the curriculum has a critical function, that of creating the *unum* or what she prefers to call it, following E. D.

³ I was pleased to learn that since 2017, my own state of Wisconsin requires all students to pass a civics exam identical to that taken by those wishing to become naturalized citizens. However, Wisconsin is *not* one of the 38 states that mandate at least one semester of civics instruction.

⁴ Shakeel, M. D. (2024, April 25). *The evidence is in: Private schools make good citizens*. EdChoice. <https://www.edchoice.org/the-evidence-is-in-private-schools-make-good-citizens/>

Hirsch, “a common speech community” (p. 49). Shared references, she avers, “create social cohesion, even for otherwise quite heterogeneous populations” (p. 49). Shared content does not imply, so she says, a shared narrative, nor does Berner favor a national curriculum. *So what exactly is the knowledge that is to be shared in all schools?* It’s not enough to say that it can be found in the liberal arts. Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect Berner to identify precisely what these “shared references” are, but at the least she could be expected to specify a procedure for identifying them. Perhaps the answer is already available, to be found in Hirsch’s *Core Knowledge Program*, based on his famous—some would say infamous—lists of what every American should know, a program currently implemented in many school districts around the country. Perhaps Hirsch’s program is not the answer Berner seeks, but she simply fails to tackle the question.

Berner’s middle chapters attempt to answer two different questions. First, how did American schools discard their earlier focus on knowledge of the liberal arts to adopt what she calls derisively the “anything-*but*-the-academic-curriculum” at the beginning of the 20th century (p. 25, p. 26, italics in original)? Second, what models of robust, content-rich curricula can be pointed to? Berner’s answer to the first is superficial, drawn almost exclusively from a single book published 25 years ago, Diane Ravitch’s *Left Back*. I am not a historian, but I know that Ravitch’s reputation among historians of education is decidedly mixed, and I looked in vain through the voluminous citations for references to classics in the field such as Herbert Kliebard’s *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*, Carl Kaestle’s *Pillars of the Republic* or William J. Reese’s *The Origins of the American High School*.⁵ Nor can I refrain from mentioning my incredulity at finding a book that contains the words “education” and “democracy” in its title yet contains not a single reference to John Dewey, much less to numerous contemporary philosophers of education who have written about the challenge diversity poses to public education, writers such as Danielle Allen and Meira Levinson.

Berner describes various programs and curricula that exemplify promising directions, several of which she has been involved in herself. One is an English language arts curriculum in Baltimore where ninth graders read the graphic novel *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, a coming-of-age tale set during the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79. Berner relates how her team worked with the district to identify background facts and concepts needed to understand the story (e.g., the difference between Sunni and Shiite Muslims), and her team found creative ways to incorporate this information. I grant that Berner’s intervention helped provide a more coherent, knowledge-rich experience for the students; but I found it odd that in the chapter entitled *A Common Conversation* Berner would focus attention on a novel about *Iran*. Is

⁵ Full Disclosure: All three of these distinguished scholars were once my colleagues in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Let me add another note of disappointment. A perusal of Berner’s citations reveals that she favors journals like *Education Next* that I identify with right of center politics. The work of somewhat more conservative scholars *is* important, but an author who promotes viewpoint diversity might be expected to also refer to authors on the left who often adopt a different stance on these issues.

the difference between distinct branches of Islam part of the “shared knowledge” *all* American students ought to acquire?

Berner describes a number of programs she admires (e.g., the International Baccalaureate Program), and she cites some of their test questions to indicate the level of mastery she’d like students to display. Here is one from language arts, and another one from social studies:

Awakenings or changes in consciousness are often explored in literature. Discuss, with reference to two of the works you have studied, how and to what effect writers have explored such phenomena. (p. 81)

How have mechanisms of majority vote interacted with minority-protecting mechanisms over time? (p. 60)

Do these really seem like the kind of questions the median American high school student could respond to intelligently? I know, I know! I will be told that we have always had low expectations of students, that they can rise to the occasion if given a rigorous curriculum and teachers who don’t underestimate their potential. That is no doubt true to some degree, but if our education system is as woefully inadequate as Berner suggests, is it reasonable to propose a standard that would challenge many university undergraduates, even those at selective colleges?

Augmenting the fund of knowledge American students acquire in school is a worthy goal for dedicated professors in schools of education, of which Berner is surely one. I wish, though, that she had pointed out that the situation regarding subject matter knowledge has changed markedly from the time of Diane Ravitch’s book a generation ago. Currently seven states, including several of the most populous (Florida, New York, Texas, Ohio) require students to pass subject matter tests to be eligible for high school diplomas. My main point here is that these middle chapters are only peripherally connected to the primary purpose of the volume, which is to argue for a dramatic restructuring of American education. I have already noted one large gap in the argument, the failure to identify what common knowledge all students ought to acquire, but there are four other significant gaps.

The first and most important of these is the failure to come to grips with the question of how to finance all these schools. Berner contends that “the ‘right school’ must be accessible to all families” (p. 18). What does that mean? Currently in the United States about 5.5 million students attend private schools, including religious schools. Their parents pay an estimated \$10,000 per student on average.⁶ That comes to 55 billion dollars. To make *all* schools accessible to all students, *taxpayers*, not parents, would have to pay this additional amount. Will they be willing to do so?⁷ If

⁶ The number of students come from the Pew Center (<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/06/06/us-public-private-and-charter-schools-in-5-charts/>). The tuition costs come from Greater Collinwood (<https://greatercollinwood.org/public-vs-private-school-statistics/>). Elementary students pay on average \$9,000, high school students \$14,000. (Elite private schools can charge upwards of \$50,000.) I used the 10,000 figure for ease of calculation.

⁷ Of course, education is a state matter so each state’s voters will have to decide if they are willing to pay the extra costs.

not, an alternative is to maintain the current level of taxation but distribute it to a larger number of schools and families, in which case the amount spent per student will be *reduced*. Another alternative is to provide all schools with a guaranteed minimum per student, allowing parents to pay whatever additional amount the school levies on them. Is that the kind of accessibility Berner wants? I doubt it, but my point is that Berner does not even broach this problem.

The second omission concerns whether students with disabilities will be eligible to attend *all* schools. Under the *status quo*, only public schools are required by law to enroll such students, and the financial costs of doing so are *very* high.⁸ Does Berner's proposal require all schools to admit students with disabilities? She does not broach this problem either.

The third omission concerns the admission process to all schools. Let's agree with Berner that schools would not be allowed to discriminate by race or sex. What should happen if applicants to a desirable school outnumber places? May the school select students or (like many voucher programs) would they be required to admit by lottery? Berner is silent here as well.

The fourth omission is the failure to engage with the digital revolution in general, and the dawn of the age of Artificial Intelligence in particular, which developments ought to change the way in which we think about education. Chat GPT was introduced just before, or maybe just after, the book was completed. Perhaps Berner couldn't respond to the multiple challenges AI poses to educators, but in a book promoting a redesign of our nation's education in both structure *and* content, I would have expected the author to at least touch on the technological revolution that is profoundly impacting all our lives.

Do I wish my fellow citizens had absorbed more knowledge in school? Of course, I do. Indeed, I wish I myself was able to retain information I was once able to readily call up for examinations in, say, calculus or ancient history. But surely, the fact that we all (including almost every child older than 12) carry in our pockets a device providing immediate access to an entire library of encyclopedias in multiple languages ought to have some bearing on what they need to learn in school and how they need to learn it.

Berner believes, rightly, that we can learn a lot from other nations. Perhaps because she wrote a dissertation on the history of British education while at Oxford, she thinks we could learn a lot from the UK system, which provides state funding to religious schools while also mounting a nationwide examination regime. But what do education experts in England say about their own system? A 2023 document, "Benchmarking English Education" notes that "Only 5% of primary schools reached the Government's target of 90% of pupils reaching the expected standard in key stage 2 reading, writing, and mathematics in 2019."⁹ The report goes on to identify

⁸ According to a recent *Ed Week* report no one knows how much special education costs today, but in 2000, it was estimated to cost the nation about 50 billion dollars.

<https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/how-much-does-special-educ>

⁹ Education: the fundamentals—Jon Andrews, Eleven facts about the education system in England, p.1. <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/education-the-fundamentals-eleven-facts-about-the-education-system-in-england/>

the following problems: a substantial attainment gap among students from disadvantaged backgrounds; large skill shortages in manufacturing and construction; and, persistent absence from school. Sound familiar?

Many commentators and observers have remarked that graduates of American high schools and even college graduates possess a very limited fund of knowledge. Indeed, as H. L. Mencken is reported to have said, “Nobody ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American public.” Let’s stipulate that this is *much* more true now than it was when Mencken is said to have uttered it around the time of the First World War. How consequential is it? Some might say that the absence of even basic civics knowledge allowed a majority of voters to elect a would-be dictator as President. But note that those European nations (including the UK) whose education is often perceived as far superior to our own all have strong far right movement. At least one far-right leader is in power in Italy and others, in France and Germany to take two examples, are poised to take power. Even Finland, a leader in most global measures of educational progress, has a significant far-right movement.

These same commentators and observers will also say that our inferior education system has already begun to cripple our strength in science and impede our economic growth. Perhaps. But consider that since 2000, the United States has won by far the most Nobel Prizes in physics, chemistry and medicine, 72, with the UK its closest rival at 16. Of the U.S. winners, about 60% were born here, about 40% were born abroad. Another index: In recent years, the U.S. share of global patents is about 18%, Germany, the next highest Western country, received about 4%. China leads in this category with 38%, an unknown number the result of theft of intellectual property, but I doubt that Berner would like to model our education system on China’s.¹⁰

What about the economy? Political scientist and commentator Yascha Mounck provides some comparative data on GDP *per capita* in a recent Substack post:

When I was in graduate school, the United States and the richest countries in Europe remained similarly affluent. In 2007, on the cusp of the financial crisis, for example, Britain was in the lead (\$50,000), with the United States (\$48,000) and Germany (\$42,000) following closely behind.

Since then, the two continents have markedly diverged. To an extent that few people have fully internalized, an economic gulf has opened up between America and Europe. On average, Americans are now nearly twice as rich as Europeans. According to the latest available data for GDP per capita, the United States stands at \$83,000, with Germany at \$54,000 and the United Kingdom at \$50,000.⁹

¹⁰ This information was found on *Perplexity AI*.

⁹ Mounck, Y. (2025, May 15). *The great divergence*. Substack. https://www.persuasion.community/p/the-great-divergence?r=18n2r9&utm_medium=ios&triedRedirect=true

Before offering a final word about Berner's book, let me try to answer two questions: (1) What is the current situation regarding state financing of private schools? Are we moving in a direction Berner would applaud? (2) If the US embraced Berner's vision, would it intensify or reduce the polarization of the citizenry? The answer to the first is both yes and no. On the one hand, a number of states have established or are in the process of trying to establishing universal voucher programs. Under such policies, parents who don't wish to enroll their kids in public schools can receive state funds for private school tuition, including religious schools. The U.S. Supreme Court has blessed this movement though just recently balked at allowing a Roman Catholic virtual school to receive public funding. This supports the *pluribus* side of the equation. In some states, such as my own state of Wisconsin, private elementary schools—but not high schools—may not charge additional tuition but private high schools may. On the other hand, in most states, private schools may charge additional tuition; and some states, such as Arizona, are considering measures to limit tuition increases. Schools receiving vouchers may not refuse admission to students with disabilities unless they cannot reasonably accommodate their needs.¹¹ In states where universal vouchers have been instituted, students already in private schools are eligible to receive them, but states that have initiated such programs have faced enormous budget increases, reducing funds available for public schools and forcing some to reduce or curtail staff and programs.

As for the *unum* side of the equation, there is no movement I know of to insure that *all* schools within a state, much less within the entire country, transmit a common fund of knowledge or that they insure that students be exposed to diverse viewpoints on controversial issues. Most states require *public* schools to teach the theory of evolution, for example, but private schools are exempt. Evolution is not taught in many evangelical schools or is taught alongside creationism, with the latter being given the school's stamp of approval. That being so, some states such as Wisconsin, mandate that all students whose schools receive public funds take the same tests in academic subjects. In other states, such as in Florida, there's no such requirement. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that state laws mandating viewpoint diversity, no matter how desirable, would run afoul of the religious clauses of the First Amendment, nor, in our federal system, would the Congress be able to pass such laws.

Would embracing Berner's vision for the US be a good thing? At first blush, it may seem that it would exacerbate separatism and polarization, especially between secular and religious citizens. But if all schools exposed students to a diversity of viewpoints, especially on controversial issues, one could argue that polarization would decrease. If those parents who cannot abide secular schools paid no penalty for sending their children to religious schools, much of the resentment they feel towards the government would abate. And much of the anger secular parents feel when public schools lose funding due to the defection of religious parents from public schools would also decline if all children in all schools (including homeschoolers) received the same amount of taxpayer funding and more affluent parents were not permitted to exceed that amount. Unfortunately, as I see it, such a

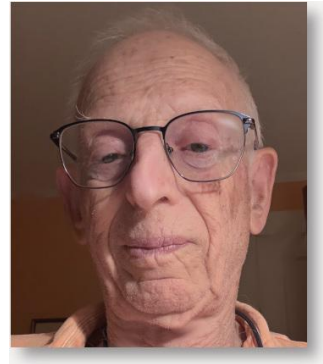
¹¹ All the data in this section come from *Perplexity AI*, <https://www.perplexity.ai/>

reduction in ill will and hostility is a necessary *precondition* for parents to voluntarily adopt the alternative structure Berner puts forward.

A final word about *Educational Pluralism and Democracy*. I commend Berner for the challenge she has posed to those of us stuck in a paradigm that we might want and need to reconsider. If she had written a book that answered more of the obvious questions raised by her proposal, we might be more open to that reconsideration.

About the Reviewer

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