What Is the Role of Public Education in Our Society?  

Level 1

Center for Ethical Leadership

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We hear a lot of negative commentary in the media about our public education system. “We have lots of bad teachers.” “Unions don’t want to make any changes and prevent school reform.” “Schools waste money.” “Schools are failing to educate kids for the job market.” “Teachers are unaccountable.” “Public pensions cost too much, particularly in tough economic times.”

With this constant messaging, it is easy to believe that public education is a complete failure and that the only way to save it is to fire more teachers, increase accountability, or privatize public education through vouchers. In the midst of all of this anxiety, what role do we want to claim for public education in our society?

Americans are increasingly concerned about their place in the world. They view quality public education as a way to be globally competitive. In this view, the role of education is to prepare students for college and careers. While preparing young people to participate in our economic system is an important role, it is not sufficient. We need public education to prepare people to be citizens capable of engaging the world. Education is vital for democracy to work. Because of the challenges we face, the inadequacies of our government and economic institutions, and the great anxiety we feel about our future, the need for informed citizenry is going up. We need to able to hold the complexity of our challenges, construct ideas together, and work toward creative solutions, not rely on simplistic and inadequate sound bites. This requires a different public engagement, where each voice matters and we can hold the creative tension of differing and competing ideas.

Adding to this is the need to work with communities of color and those living in poverty, as they are most often the ones left behind by our society and public education. In this role, public education offers liberation from the limits of discrimination and marginalization. It offers a way into sharing the opportunities and benefits of society. As Central Texas educator Monica Valadez suggests, “Education is a positive tool, a powerful possibility born out of the power of human spirit. We need to raise the consciousness and possibility of transformation in society.”

What Then Is the New Narrative That Will Support Public Education?

We need to claim a central role for public schools. Public education is foundational to a healthy democracy and developing our humanity. It should help students to not only engage in the public decision-making and economic systems, but transform these systems to work for the entire society. Public education requires the whole community - we all have a role. As a community, we need to respect teachers, honor their professionalism, and support the development of their skills in pedagogy. Schools need to create space for relationships and
community collaboration. We need multiple solutions created within the local context. And we need to acknowledge that we are not manufacturing products, we are creating the conditions for kids to grow and develop. This is a hopeful narrative for a hopeful future.

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