National Association of *Independent* Schools

BLOG POST

The Purpose of School: Sustaining Democracy and Cultivating Humanity

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When I was a child, I remember being fascinated by the images on U.S. currency. I especially liked the mysterious ones—the all-seeing eye, the great seal of the U.S., the pictures of presidents, and the phrase *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one). These 13 letters appear on the great seal, reflective of the 13 colonies which became one republic founded on the principles of liberty and justice. As the motto of the nation, *e pluribus unum* reflects our founding, and it also holds the promise of our future: democracy.

Democracy depends on the ability to bring together diverse and informed perspectives, honoring the voice of the people who, collectively, express the will of the nation. Since informed perspectives require education, so too does democracy.

The philosopher and educator John Dewey famously emphasized the key role of schools in this endeavor when he said: "Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife." This sentiment not only highlights the important work of schools in educating each generation of students, but it also underscores the fragility of democracy, and the need to attend to its continuing rebirth

in every generation. How the future swings depends on the ability of our nation's schools to perpetuate democratic principles.

Independent schools are integral to this important work. In our independence, we can develop distinctive educational programs and convey more specifically how students can serve the greater good. And in this current time of increased polarization, the work of schools in sustaining democracy could not be more important. As midwives of democracy, schools should prepare students for their future, and they can do that by focusing on a few key actions.

Create Space for Civil Discourse

The ability to consider differing opinions is key for students to develop a balanced and informed perspective. But in many schools throughout the country, especially given our current cultural climate, that can be challenging. In some places, access to books and materials have been limited. In others, biased agendas prevent the balanced consideration of differing points of view and work against the spirit of educational discourse. Either way, students' ability to consider widely differing perspectives is limited.

In their book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff suggests that liberal progressive education shuts out more conservative perspectives from the dialogue, preferring "safetyism" over authentic engagement with difficult topics, thus undermining the underlying democratic aims of education.

Given the collective mission of independent education, independent schools should not avoid discourse on difficult topics. In their book, Lukianoff and Haidt write, "if we want to create welcoming, inclusive communities, we should be doing everything we can to turn down the tribalism and turn up the sense of common humanity."

Doing so requires creating space for civil discourse, creating the fertile ground from which democracy might grow in the next generation. It requires conversation and relationships with the ideas, people, and perspectives that challenge our thinking.

Move Beyond Diversity to Belonging

Creating a more diverse community is critical to enriching the quality of our civil discourse in schools. The *e pluribus unum* of the American dream is the firm belief that the strength of our unity lies in our diversity––woven together by the colors, patterns, and unique threads of individuals from many backgrounds: racial, ethnic, national, ideological. But diversity is only the starting point. Belonging—and ensuring that everyone feels a sense of belonging––defines who we are and who are becoming.

Feminist educator bell hooks, in her approach to teaching, believed education is the practice of freedom and the classroom a place of belonging where civil discourse encourages meaningful reflection and engagement. The classroom is the seedbed of democracy, the place "where paradise can be realized, a place of passion and possibility; a place where all that we learn and all that we know leads us into greater connection, into greater understanding of life lived in community." This collective endeavor creates synergy—in the classroom, the school, the nation, the world—where the whole truly is greater than the sum of the parts, where students and teachers are able to speak freely of their whole selves and able to wholly engage.

Emphasize the Moral Imperative of Education

The greatest purpose of our schools is to deliver on this moral imperative: to make the world a bit better than when we found it, to spread compassion, truth, and honesty. John Dallas, an early twentieth century independent school chaplain, highlighted this greater purpose in his reflections on founder of the Taft School, Horace Dutton Taft: "A good school shows the world what goodness is. It is more than cheering at a ballgame, it has a holy purpose: for truth, for honesty, for helping people."

Dallas emphasized that this "holy purpose" is to cultivate humanity. Rather than centering individual accomplishments, schools that live out this holy purpose contribute to the building and uplifting of society and the enrichment of the human condition.

The Common School Movement of the early 1800s reflected this focus; Horace Mann and Lyman Beecher developed the critical connection between the education that schools deliver and the strengthening of public unity and civic responsibility. Mann's essential belief was that the richness of our humanity far overshadows the richness of our natural resources and that investing in our human capital and cultivating the democratic spirit in every generation should be the principal product of education.

Independent schools are uniquely poised to fulfill this purpose. Thoughtfully and intentionally crafted and delivered programs can nurture heart, head, and hand through a holistic approach to education.

Cultivate Teachers as Models and Leaders

More than three decades ago, during my first job interview at an independent school, the head of school asked me, “What is the most important subject a student will study in boarding school?” He was a humanities teacher, I was a humanities teacher, and I said, “humanities.” He smiled, and said, “Close, but I think the most important subject a student will study in boarding school is the faculty.” Being responsible for assembling and leading a faculty is a highlight of my work in schools, assembling the most critical curriculum: the people who teach, coach, and advise, who mentor, inspire, and transform.

While education may serve as the midwife for democracy, it is the teachers who help students become the best versions of themselves. As a former mentor constantly reminded me, “teaching is serious work for serious people.” We should never take our vocation as educators lightly, for we are shaping the future.

Hank Rubin, visionary educator, and president of the Institute for Collaborative Leadership, underscores the importance of developing teachers: “As a nation, we must make it a national priority to recruit, prepare, support, and value teachers who will be disposed and capable of being democracy’s midwives for every generation of Americans. We, as a nation, need schools that do more than prepare children to capably take standardized tests and teachers who are more than competent content pedagogues.”

Delivering on the purpose of education requires investing in the professional growth and development of the faculty so that they can model and develop the knowledge, wisdom, and integrity of our students across all disciplines.

The road of our current generation is wide and treacherous, the rain of culture and crisis will continue to fall. Yet, we can hold the future in our arms—carefully with intention—nurturing, caring, teaching, giving birth to the democracy that has created our freedom and informs theirs into the future. This is our good work, part of a holy purpose that endures. *E pluribus unum.*

About the Author

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