

# We Are What We Teach

Re-envisioning Public Education for a Just, Free, and Prosperous America

## Why a New Vision, and Why Now?

Public education is the most important investment America makes in its future, a tangible expression of our values and aspirations for society. Schools profoundly influence how students understand themselves, the roles and responsibilities they are expected to fulfill, and the country they will collectively create. A vision for public education is an essential touchstone for aligning strategies and actions to purpose and mission.

Two decades into the 21st Century, a new vision for public education is needed to ensure every young person develops the knowledge, skills, and character that enable their individual success and our success as a society. The Aspen Institute's Education & Society Program proposes three primary and interdependent areas of focus to undergird a new vision for public education: developing a healthy sense of self that supports students to understand who they are and how to make the most of their talents and passions; preparing students to engage effectively in American democracy and civic life; and enabling students to thrive in the world of work. Individually, each of these areas of focus for schools, or foundational purposes of schooling, is vital but incomplete. Addressing them in isolation inevitably leads to fragmented, siloed initiatives. A holistic, unifying vision forges coherence across the many strategies that have a role in improving public education.

Reorienting public education toward a new, richer vision of success is urgent and timely because the current vision is outdated and inadequate. The standards, assessments, and accountability framework that has dominated education policy for the last 30-plus years helpfully focuses attention on reading and math achievement but also needs updating based on lessons learned, including the unintended consequences of the framework's narrow definition of success. Evidence abounds that public education is not enabling students or society to thrive: record levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts among young people; income inequality that is unsustainably high; declining commitment to democracy. Furthermore, the pandemic-induced shift to online schooling gave families and policymakers sobering sightlines into the current state of instruction and the role of schools in community, and the racial reckoning sparked in 2020 raised awareness regarding the role of schools in advancing racial and social justice. Together, these dynamics are prompting demands for change and an openness to new ideas. How public education adapts in response to the pandemic in coming years will reverberate through society for generations.

## Three Primary Purposes for Public Education



Developing a  
Healthy Sense  
of Self



Preparing for  
American  
Democracy and  
Civic Life



Preparing for the  
World of Work

# Belonging and Opportunity

Among the most important reasons we need a new, rich vision for public education is the need to confront two existential crises that strike at the heart of who we are as a people and a country: a crisis of belonging and a crisis of opportunity.

*The United States is a diverse, pluralistic society: E Pluribus, Unum; Out of Many, One.*



86% of children ages 6-11 believe that people of different races are not treated fairly in America

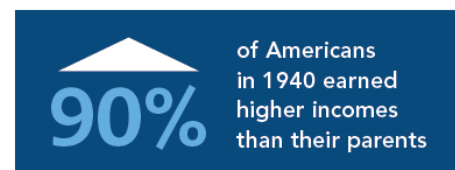


1/3 of American 15-year-olds report not feeling like they belong in their school

**Yet we confront an undeniable crisis of belonging.** Children know this: according to Sesame Workshop, 86% of children ages 6-11 believe that people of different races are not treated fairly in America.<sup>1</sup> One-third of American 15-year-olds report not feeling like they belong in their school.<sup>2</sup> Many Americans, particularly people of color and immigrants, experience “conditional citizenship,” a sense that they aren’t accepted or seen as equals.<sup>3</sup> Many White Americans also feel alienated, leading to epidemic-level deaths of despair from opioid overdoses and suicides, decreasing overall life expectancy of White Americans for three years in a row prior to the pandemic, especially among those with the least education.<sup>4</sup> The crisis of belonging is one we can’t afford to keep ignoring.

*This is also supposed to be the Land of Opportunity, home to the American Dream, where younger generations can expect to enjoy a higher standard of living than their parents.*

**Yet, that’s not today’s reality. Today, we face a worsening crisis of opportunity.** Ninety percent of Americans born in 1940 earned higher incomes than their parents, but upward mobility is now under 50% and keeps declining, leaving the United States with less intergenerational mobility than Canada, Greece, or Japan.<sup>5</sup> Income inequality is greater than any time since records have been kept and the worst among advanced economies.<sup>6</sup> The rising generations, Millennials and Gen Z, possess dramatically less wealth than their counterparts a generation ago.<sup>7</sup> Economic mobility in America has a racial hue, with the American Enterprise Institute concluding that “racial gaps in poverty and opportunity remain a cause for national shame,” estimating that Black families are 16 times more likely than White families to experience three generations of poverty.<sup>8</sup> The overall opportunity equation is broken, and worse still for Black Americans.



Black families are **16 times** more likely than White families to experience 3 generations of poverty



Belonging and opportunity are deeply ingrained in the American psyche, the vision of who we are, and the stories that bind us together. Challenges to belonging and opportunity don't begin or end in public schools, but public schools are a powerful lever for increasing belonging and opportunity. We need a new, comprehensive vision for the purpose of public education to connect the myriad policies and investments that shape students' public school experience.

Like the adage, "You are what you eat," it can be said of society, "We are what we teach." We are decades into deemphasizing character and ethics, reverence for civics and civil discourse, and the social-emotional dimensions of learning—and we are reaping what we have sown. A new vision has to integrate these priorities into academic instruction and "how we do school" and not lead to new and disconnected initiatives. A vision must encompass excellence in reading and math but not continue to privilege test scores above all else as the arbiter of quality, because these do not speak to essential and profoundly consequential aspects of education nor do they reflect parents' priorities.<sup>9</sup> A more human, less technocratic vision for public education is needed to advance an authentic opportunity agenda, one that fosters thriving, belonging, and upward mobility for each young person in every community.

**What follows is a statement of ideas that drive our work at the Aspen Institute's Education & Society Program.**

This vision is informed by research, historical context, and the experiences of education stakeholders. It is also inherently a statement of values, because values are fundamental in determining purpose. We offer this vision to be transparent about our starting place, to serve as a framework for ongoing inquiry and refinement, and to invite others to construct and articulate their own visions so that different views can be reconciled to fulfill the promise of public education.

## The Role of Schools in Society

The rhetoric of education reform has sometimes neglected to acknowledge the broader social and political structures that thwart upward mobility, claiming that education is the path out of poverty, powerful enough on its own to overcome other unjust barriers.<sup>10</sup> Public schools operate within a broader social-political context that influences belonging and opportunities beyond school, as well as students' beliefs about the power of education to help them in their lives.

As part of our work on a new vision for student success, we intend to become more precise about the mechanisms by which education expands belonging and opportunity— and clarify education's role relative to other important factors that influence life outcomes. For true economic and social mobility to become a reality, enabling conditions have to change inside *and* outside of schools.

By being more explicit about the role of education in relation to other policies, investments, and social structures, we hope to clarify for ourselves and the field where education can have the most relevance and efficacy, and what broader issues have to be addressed to positively impact the opportunity equation in America. This paper primarily addresses a vision for student and school success; subsequent work will examine the reciprocal relationship between education and broader social determinants of success and thriving. Through the pandemic, schools were forced to lead on public health, technology infrastructure, and provision of safety-net services. This level of primary responsibility is unsustainable over the long-term and needs to be right-sized relative to the essential roles of other agencies and partners. Addressing these issues will enable greater understanding of how education can best advance opportunity and mobility, while accounting for the work outside the responsibility of school systems.

# Foundational Purposes of Schooling

At the heart of our vision is a deep belief in the inherent dignity and potential of every human being. This idea, while still unrealized, is embedded in the ideal of America and in our founding documents. We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all people are created equal and deserving of education that enables thriving in life.<sup>11</sup> Learning academic content is core to the work of schools but needs to be connected to a deeper purpose. To fully engage and motivate students and the collective future they will shape, we believe in prioritizing three vital roles of public education—helping students develop a healthy sense of self, preparing youth for American democracy and civic life, and preparing for the world of work.



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## Developing a Healthy Sense of Self

School plays a significant role in each of us becoming ourselves—the best and most authentic version of who we are and how we relate to the world around us. Through school-based relationships and learning experiences, young children explore life outside of their home. As students grow older, they gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their relationship to the broader community and society overall and increasingly learn to exercise agency and independence. School should enable students to explore many aspects of identity, including seeing themselves as engineers, artists, educators, welders, writers, scientists, social workers and more, helping them determine who they want to become and the futures they want to pursue. To catalyze this development, schools should design active learning experiences that help students build confidence in their abilities and strategies for setting and pursuing their own goals and dreams.<sup>12</sup> Of course, family plays a primary role in developing a healthy sense of self, with faith and civic/community institutions often playing important roles, too. But schools have a vital role as the space for learning and development provided to everyone as a matter of right and responsibility.

Important breakthroughs in science reveal that the developing brain is profoundly shaped by relationships, experiences, and context, making lived experience overwhelmingly powerful in determining who each of us becomes.<sup>13</sup> Through school experiences, young people pick up powerful messages regarding their place in society and the character attributes and morals valued by society. Schools should express the broader community's aspirations for the development of its young people to thrive as adults, complementing the roles of family, faith, and civic and community institutions.



# Preparing for American Democracy and Civic Life

Schools prepare young people to understand and enact their roles as full participants in “government of the people, by the people, for the people.”<sup>14</sup> Preservation of democratic norms and progress in becoming a more perfect union are not inevitable or easy; they require attention and work and must be actively cultivated in each generation. Thomas Jefferson considered public schools “for the diffusion of knowledge among the people” to be “the most important bill in our whole code” because “no other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom and happiness.”<sup>15</sup>

There are many indications that American democracy is in peril: trust in institutions of American government is at an all-time low;<sup>16</sup> young Americans express waning commitment to democracy;<sup>17</sup> active disinformation is leading to “truth decay;”<sup>18</sup> and polarization has deepened to the point that political opponents are seen as evil, undeserving of respect and civility.<sup>19</sup>

Public schools are the first and most significant civic institutions many young people interact with, so they send important signals about what it means to be a full participant in the community and in society. A primary role of schools is to foster students’ civic identity, building a sense of belonging initially in the school community as an embodiment of fully belonging in American society. Yet, our current ways of working in public education do not prioritize this dimension of school success.

Preparing students to steward American democracy should include learning about the functions and structures of government, how the different branches and levels of government work together in America’s unique federal republic, and how this has changed over time.

Students need deep engagement with American history and the social and political currents that have influenced it, as well as exposure to alternatives throughout history and in other countries. It is important for every American to know about the great accomplishments of American democracy and America’s history of genocide and slavery and the enduring, current manifestations of discrimination in American laws and culture. Public schools shortchange students and society when either of these competing narratives predominates. Crucially, schools must develop students’ faculties of discernment and critical thinking, so they can distinguish fact from fiction, interrogate the tsunami of information and misinformation emanating from the internet, and make independent judgments about right vs. wrong.

Preparing for the rights and responsibilities of democracy is not only about knowing facts and figures. The Shanker Institute eloquently summarized the norms and values that schools need to cultivate for democracy as “devotion to human dignity and freedom, to equal rights, to social and economic justice, to the rule of law, civility and truth, to tolerance of diversity, to mutual assistance, to personal and civic responsibility, to self-restraint and self-respect. All these must be taught and learned and practiced.”<sup>20</sup> American democracy will not survive if we do not impart these values in our public schools.<sup>21</sup>



## Preparing for the World of Work

The role of schools in preparing young people to seek and secure economic independence and fulfilling careers has taken on greater urgency over the last few decades as mobility declined and income inequality grew, due partly to globalization and technology and policy decisions made in response.<sup>22</sup> *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 galvanized a policy agenda aimed at increasing America’s competitiveness through more rigorous academics.<sup>23</sup> Yet, today, job growth and wage increases are most robust in roles that require interpersonal “people skills” and technical knowledge.<sup>24</sup> And disruptive changes in the labor market are accelerating—from further automation and increased use of artificial intelligence to the need to address sustainability and resilience in the face of accelerating climate change and global migration. All of this is leading to skills becoming obsolete and replaced by new demands more quickly than ever before. The economic convulsions of the pandemic also are exacerbating employment and earning gaps associated with lifelong learning and adaptability—with deep implications for school design.

Public education norms, however, are aligned to the routine work of a bygone era: sitting in rows facing forward, working individually to complete discrete tasks with single answers, rewarding compliance over creativity. To respond to changes in the world of work, schools need to develop evergreen skills in every young person. These include the ability to pursue lifelong learning and build networks of relationships in their communities and online; develop teamwork, communication, and leadership skills; and learn to empathize and work effectively across lines of difference.<sup>25</sup> Academic instruction can be designed to cultivate these skills and habits, including through rigorous project-based learning.<sup>26</sup> We see this in many independent/private schools and highly resourced suburban schools, but education oriented to the future of work is neither the norm nor what’s measured or expected under current approaches.

Students who know themselves and know how to navigate the worlds of work and civic engagement are prepared for thriving, belonging, and mobility. These three pillars are inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing, so we need a vision that embodies them together. The skills of analysis and argument are valuable across civic and vocational contexts; likewise, employers are emphasizing teamwork, communication, and leadership skills for the future of work, but they are just as important for engaging in civic life. And everything in school should support students in answering the questions they inherently are asking themselves: “Who am I? “What is important to me?” How can I make the world a better place?” A vision for public education that is too narrow to encompass all three pillars is unworthy of the lives and infinite futures that have been entrusted to it.

# A Rich Vision Must Advance Racial & Economic Justice

**Public education occupies a unique role in American culture, a concrete commitment to every young person learning, belonging, having opportunity to thrive, and getting a fair shot at the American Dream.** While discrimination and unequal opportunities present in many different ways, we focus particular attention on addressing inequities based on race and poverty: Most public school students in America receive subsidized nutrition at schools because of inadequate family income<sup>27</sup> and most public school students are students of color, yet both groups of students are woefully undereducated in our schools. Race and class continue to exert enormous and inequitable influence on student opportunities, experiences, and outcomes. When Americans address the crises of belonging and opportunity, we have to do so with race and class and their impact in mind.

2020 sparked a more proactive, cross-racial call for racial justice in America than any time in the last 50 years—since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Public schools continue to shortchange students of color in every important educational resource: funding;<sup>28</sup> qualified and experienced educators; quality facilities and a safe and welcoming school climate;<sup>29</sup> and adult assessment of potential<sup>30</sup> and expectations.<sup>31</sup> Race and racism patently influence educational opportunity, experiences, and outcomes—in schools as much as in broader society.<sup>32</sup> Education leaders and policymakers have pledged to address the needs of students of color in new and promising ways: through greater investments in both rigor and supports; through greater representation of diversity in the curriculum and the teaching profession; and through culturally responsive practices that activate students' sense of themselves as scholars who are worthy and capable of meaningful work.

Education's role in ameliorating the odious impact of race also encompasses teaching all students about racism. Standards and curriculum materials in both liberal and conservative states have made slow, steady progress over the last several decades in treating racism more explicitly and honestly.<sup>33</sup> Despite pushback and some resistance to change, there is a growing understanding that White Americans need more accurate knowledge of the way race and discrimination have and continue to influence power and opportunity in America and deeper engagement across lines of difference. For America to transcend its history of race-based discrimination, a new vision for education has implications for *all* students, not just those from historically marginalized groups.

Growing up in poverty creates material disadvantages, but we need to acknowledge that those disadvantages are replicated and exacerbated in schools. Over the last several decades, as income inequality has grown dramatically, family income has become even more predictive of student success, as compared to previous generations<sup>34</sup> and as compared to other countries.<sup>35</sup> Because Black, Hispanic, and Native American children are disproportionately living in poverty, the intersection of race and class is especially important to address in education.<sup>36</sup>

Race and class are not the only arbiters of opportunity in schools. Gender and gender identity, disability status, sexual orientation, citizenship status, language, and geography are all associated with marginalization and disinvestment in American society. Schools reflect and reinforce these dynamics.

We believe that if the education sector redesigns opportunities and experiences in ways that enable students living in poverty and students of color to succeed and thrive, schools will change in ways that better serve all students. University of California- Berkeley professor John A. Powell's theory of targeted universalism posits that when we design solutions centered on those who have been most marginalized, we create innovations that improve the experience for everyone and improve conditions for building trust and reconciliation across lines of difference.<sup>37</sup> This concept is illustrated in Angela Glover Blackwell's analysis of the "curb cut effect."<sup>38</sup> The analysis showed that designing more accessible sidewalks, intended to address the needs of people who use wheelchairs, turned out to benefit almost everyone (think baby strollers and suitcases on wheels). An education vision with equity and intersectionality at its core is the path to developing responsible, engaged students who can participate in and help build a more just society.

# Looking Ahead

## Who Sets the Vision For Student Success?

Excellence and equity can only be authentically achieved if those most directly impacted by public education's problems are empowered and included in designing the solutions. A silver lining emerging from the educational disruptions of the pandemic is that parents and caregivers experienced increased engagement with teaching and learning, sparking a renewed recognition that families are—and deserve to be treated as—experts in their children's education. Similarly, students are stepping up to claim the mantle of leadership, advocating for what they want and need from schools. Existing power dynamics need to be renegotiated to respect the agency and ownership of local communities, devolving some power that has been centralized in state and federal policies. This issue cuts across rural, urban and suburban dynamics as well as race, ethnicity, language status, and affluence.

Recalibrating authority for education decisions demands careful balancing. There are important roles for centralized policies and systems and important roles for locally responsive, locally owned decisions. One critique of education policy over the last 30 years is top-down decision making privileged external expertise over family and community perspectives. Parents, students, and educators experienced education reform as being done “to” and “for” them rather than “by” and “with” them, even as the stated purpose was to advance equity.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, standards are crucial for consistency and setting a high bar for academic expectations and empowering educators to share instructional resources and best practices. A pendulum swing to local control without the right guardrails could undermine transparency, accountability, and access to expertise without commensurate benefits for students. Getting the balance right is critical.

As states and communities devise education visions for the future, it's important to think inclusively about who is being consulted and who gets to actually make the decisions.

- Which are state vs. district decisions, and what decisions are left to individual schools?
- What is the right role for national leadership and federal policy?
- How are the primary stakeholders in education—students, families, community leaders and educators—empowered to make consequential decisions and not merely implement the decisions of others?
- How can policy decisions be nested more coherently within a vision that sets broad priorities, imposes mandates judiciously, and invites pluralism and greater responsiveness?

An engaging, inclusive process for setting the vision for public education is as important as any specific decision on content.



## Next Steps

Now is the time to re-envision and reinvigorate the role of public education in society. Rising inequality, low levels of public trust fueling alienation and polarization, and disruptive changes in work and public discourse are engulfing America and the world. Meeting this moment means re-envisioning education and strengthening the supports on which schools and students can rely so that the fruits of education can take hold in welcoming soil.

Despite profound challenges, this is a moment of great promise—for education and for our country. Perhaps no American institution was more disrupted by the pandemic than public schools. Yet, educators' immersion in technology enables new approaches to teaching and learning, while massive investments in internet access and 1:1 device-to-student ratios built a technology infrastructure that would otherwise have taken years to construct. Inspiringly, and perhaps surprisingly, young Americans of all racial backgrounds are optimistic about their prospects and believe education and dedication drive success.<sup>40</sup> Honoring what young people experienced and believe, and what we've seen and learned through the pandemic, requires a paradigm shift in public education.

Over the next several years, the Aspen Institute's Education & Society Program will explore and refine a rich vision of student and school success. We will deeply examine the foundational purposes of schooling described above to surface promising practices and vexing challenges, study the social determinants of education success, and convene leaders to pursue improvement opportunities. We will synthesize and elevate emerging research on the role of education in advancing belonging and opportunity. And we will sponsor deliberative spaces for diverse leaders at all levels while seeking to learn what visions for students and schools are gaining traction. Throughout this inquiry, we will maintain an intentional focus on inclusion and engagement across lines of difference in deliberations and decision-making.

A rich vision for public education is essential for America to become a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, and secure the blessings of liberty for our posterity.<sup>41</sup> It is that simple and important: an outdated vision for education cannot meet the moment of crisis or seize opportunities for all Americans, and America, to thrive and prosper. From the rise of the steam engine and mass production, to the creation of the internet, the American ethos has embraced innovation amid disruptive change. That's reassuring, as further changes in the economy and society at-large are inevitable in the coming years. For families and young people looking to education to secure their foothold in these uncertain times, that future is now. This is worth fighting for: join this movement to align the vision and values of our schools to meet the needs and hopes of our students and ensure a just, free, and prosperous America.

Most readers will find ideas in this vision that align deeply with their own vision; many if not most will also take issue with some parts of it, at least regarding what is emphasized and omitted. This paper is intended to underscore that it is vital and urgent for Americans to actively, publicly grapple with these issues at this moment in history. Framing the purposes to which public education should be dedicated is highly consequential because pursuing a vision in reality is fraught with trade-offs; whatever is prioritized means something else isn't. We believe the elements in this rich vision are essential for young people and society to thrive, and look forward to learning and reconsidering our ideas as we facilitate others in delineating and debating their visions. This vision statement is meant to support robust dialogue, not end it or pretend it's not needed.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>8</sup> Winship, Scott, et al, Long Shadows: The Black-White Gap in Multigenerational Poverty, American Enterprise Institute (2021). <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/long-shadows-the-black-white-gap-in-multigenerational-poverty/>
- <sup>9</sup> See, for example, Jackson, K., Linking Social-Emotional Learning to Long-Term Success, Education Next, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2021); <https://www.educationnext.org/linking-social-emotional-learning-long-term-success-student-survey-responses-effects-high-school/>.
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<sup>11</sup> The Declaration of Independence states: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

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<sup>14</sup> President Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, 1863. <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/gettysburg-address/>

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<sup>18</sup> Roberts, John G. 2019 Year-End Report on the Federal Judiciary. The Supreme Court of the United States, 2019 <https://static.politico.com/5c/8a/f77f9a7f4d0e9eb43805ce7acb1a/2019-year-end-report.embargo.pdf>; Kavanagh, Jennifer, and Michael D. Rich, “About Truth Decay,” RAND Corporation, Access July 20, 2021. <https://www.rand.org/research/projects/truth-decay/about-truth-decay.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Why Political Sectarianism is a Threat to American Democracy, New York Times, April 19, 2021 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/us/democracy-gop-democrats-sectarianism.html>), citing Science article published in October 2020)

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<sup>41</sup> The preamble to the United States Constitution: “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”