

Public Education Vs. Public Schooling

I am a true believer in, and a full supporter of, public education.

The trouble is that public education and public schooling have become synonymous. Schooling is one method of education; but it is certainly not the only one and, I argue, not the best one. Until we separate public education from public schooling—to truly “de-school” our perspective on learning—we will be mired in a debate about reforming one, singular method of education (that is, mass schooling), while ignoring other methods of education that could be better.

The industrial model upon which compulsory public schooling was founded in 1852 is no longer relevant in a new economy that increasingly values creativity over conformity, knowledge workers over factory laborers. Despite the fact that sociologists and economists believe we have left the Industrial Age for the Imagination Age—an era defined by creativity and innovation and technological application—American education is stuck with an outdated system of mass schooling. Instead of adapting to the changing needs of a creative culture, American schooling has sought to become even more restrictive and entrenched. We need a new model of learning, separate from our modern experiment with mass schooling, that taps into the innate, self-educative capacity of humans.

In his path-breaking 1970 book, *Deschooling Society*, Ivan Illich wrote about the need to de-institutionalize learning and invest in decentralized education models that support learners in educating themselves. Illich said: “Universal education through schooling is not feasible...The current search for new educational *funnels* must be reversed into the search for their institutional inverse: educational *webs* which heighten opportunity for each one to transform each moment of his living into one of learning, sharing, and caring.”

A perfect example of educational webs, as opposed to funnels like school, is the public library. Libraries are ideal examples of existing, taxpayer-funded, community-based, non-coercive learning hubs. They are openly accessible to all members of a community and, unlike public schools, do not segregate by age or ability. They offer classes, lectures, cultural events, ESL lessons, computer courses, mentoring opportunities and a whole host of other public programming. They are brimming with gifted facilitators who love “learning, sharing, and caring” and who are eager to help guide community learning. Increasingly, libraries are expanding their offerings beyond books and digital information to become makerspaces and tinker labs. Many libraries lend out items such as tools, musical instruments, kitchen supplies, recreational equipment like fishing poles and snowshoes, and even gardening plots. If one library doesn’t have what you want or need, you can freely choose another. In some cities and towns, libraries take over summertime distribution of the federal free and reduced-lunch program to help nourish children all year

long. Some libraries, like the McAllen Public Library in McAllen, Texas, which made headlines for taking over an abandoned Wal-Mart building, are open 350 days a year. It's public education at its best.

The primary difference between public education and public schooling is that the former is openly accessible and self-directed, while the latter is compulsory and coercive. Both are community-based and taxpayer-funded; both can lead to an educated citizenry. But public education—like public libraries, public museums, public parks, community centers, and so on—can support the education efforts of individuals, families, and local organizations with potentially better outcomes than the static system of mass schooling.

Despite data showing that the U.S. spends more on education than most developed countries, current schooling outcomes are disappointing. On international comparison tests, such as the well-regarded Programme for International Student Assessment, U.S. students are lagging far behind their peers in other nations, with U.S. 15-year-olds ranking 38th out of 71 countries in math and 24th in science. According to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress report, student reading and math scores declined. For minority students, outcomes are particularly troubling. In a 2010 report, the National Center for Education Statistics found that only 14% of African American eighth graders scored at or above the proficient level in reading, and only 17% of Hispanic eighth graders did so.

By moving beyond the paradigm of public schooling, toward public education for all, we can open ourselves up to enormous possibilities for learning. We can foster a citizenry that is not only highly educated, but inventive, skilled, and fulfilled because individuals' innate curiosity and natural drive to learn and do have not be smothered by mass schooling's narrow, one-size-fits-all method of education. We can encourage innovation and entrepreneurship—skills profoundly important for the 21st-century economy and that are nearly impossible to cultivate within a 19th-century mass schooling model.

We can support public education in its truest sense and open ourselves up to the panoply of education possibilities that will sprout when we step outside the shadow of the mass schooling dinosaur.