

**Striving for Equity: How the Privatization of Education is Complicating the Historical Debate
Over Public School Funding, Resources**

Zach Spindler-Krage

Department of Education, Grinnell College

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Education will remain inequitable until resources and funding are equitably distributed to schools. Since the inception of the U.S. public school model in the mid-19th century, students, parents, politicians, and public school advocates have debated school funding and the necessity of equitable schooling. Some have argued in favor of privatization, contending that the ability to choose a school is an essential form of parental rights and allows students to thrive in their desired atmosphere. Others argue that privatization breeds educational disparities, as only wealthy students are realistically able to access well-resourced private schools. While there are legitimate arguments on both sides of the school privatization debate, I argue that the increasing trend toward privatized schooling is detrimental to public school students, particularly those who are low-income or students of color. First, I will compare Minnesota's successful equity efforts to Iowa's increasingly inequitable school system. Then, I will highlight why the modern deviation from the proposals of Mann (1848) and Dewey (1916) is harmful and utilize the ideas of DuBois (1903) and Kozol (2005) to emphasize why equitably-distributed resources are essential in reducing racial disparities in education.

Since public schools are predominantly funded through property taxes, wealthier neighborhoods —where property values are higher — tend to have more funding and resources than schools in lower-income areas. These disparities are further exacerbated by the fact that funding is allocated at the state and local levels, resulting in significant differences in funding levels between school districts and states. Yet, this issue has been the subject of discussion and policy reform over the last half century. In 1973, the Supreme Court heard *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, a case concerning the constitutionality of the Texas public school funding system. The system created major funding disparities due to its heavy reliance on local property taxes, and the plaintiffs argued that the system violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment by unfairly discriminating against poor and minority students. The Supreme Court ultimately ruled 5-4 in favor of the school district, but the case spurred funding reforms in many states, including California, New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Maryland, and Minnesota (Oyez, 2023). One common equity

reform has been the adoption of funding formulas, which allocate resources based on students need, often providing districts with additional funding for low-income students, students with disabilities, and English language learners (Blagg, 2017). Secondly, some states have attempted equalization aid and resource equity, which may involve redistributing funding from wealthier districts to poorer districts and ensuring that all schools have equal access to high-quality teachers, curricula, and technology (Brixey, 2021).

Currently, Minnesota has been a beacon of hope in the fight to preserve public school quality in the face of privatization movements. This legislative session, the Democratic trifecta has introduced and adopted a slew of major policies. For one, Governor Walz signed a bill that will implement free school breakfasts and lunches statewide beginning in fall 2023. This step is expected to relieve families of the financial stress of providing meals at school and reduce the stigma that was associated with being on the free or reduced lunch plan (Shockman, 2023). The Minnesota House also recently passed a massive K-12 education funding and policy package that is likely to pass the Senate in the coming weeks. The bill would provide over \$2.2 billion in additional funding for Minnesota schools, a 10% increase in total education spending. Additionally, the general education funding formula would begin increasing annually at the rate of inflation, and the per-pupil allotment would rise to \$7,138, up from \$6,868. Furthermore, House Democrats included a mandate for collective bargaining with teachers unions to include discussions of class sizes and the personnel-student ratio (Griffith, 2023).

Contrarily, the Republican trifecta in Iowa has imposed policies that threaten the democratic approach to schooling. The school voucher bill, for example, will eventually allow all Iowa families to use up to \$7,598 a year in an “education savings account” for private school tuition. Additionally, Senate File 482 legally prohibits persons from entering single- and multiple-occupancy restrooms or changing areas in elementary and secondary schools that do not correspond with the person’s biological sex, and Senate File 496 would prohibit instruction on gender identity or sexual orientation through sixth grade and notify parents if their child asks to use different pronouns in school (Akin,

2023). These trends are becoming increasingly common across the country, and the repercussions dramatically reduce the quality of public school education.

The different approaches that Minnesota and Iowa are taking exemplify the broader debate about the goal of schools: Should the goal be schooling for social mobility or schooling for democracy? When Mann (1848) was spearheading the first common schools, he argued that “education...is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, — the balance-wheel of the social machinery” (p. 92). In this way, Mann firmly believes that the priority of education is to create a more just and equitable system where merit is a greater determinant of a person’s success than social status or wealth. Likewise, it acts as a “balance-wheel” by promoting social cohesion, democratic development, and individual well-being in society. Dewey (1916) adds to this framing by stating that “as much as we educate for democracy, we should democratize for education” (p. 104); Dewey explains that school is often seen as a necessary ingredient of a viable democracy, but we don’t always consider the benefit of democratizing education. This comes in the form of equal access to quality schools regardless of any other factors such as race or socioeconomic status, which requires policies that promote public education and ensure that schools are diverse, inclusive, and well-resourced.

Historically, however, public schools have experienced vast funding disparities, and minority communities often bear the burden of the effects. As Kozol (2005) argues, these impoverished schools not only provide an inferior education but also “effectively sentence [children] to a kind of intellectual poverty that will keep them isolated from the mainstream of American life” (p. 81). Policies that draw funding away from public schools, drive away high-quality teachers, and remove critical thinking from schools directly harm the intellectual experience of these students. For Kozol, there is a moral obligation to children and the nation to “renew the passion for equality that has been the heart of our democratic dream” (p. 13). DuBois (1903) argues that for the Black community, education is particularly salient because it functions as a form of liberation. Similar to Dewey, DuBois recognizes that education is about more than social mobility — it is about creating well-rounded people who have

the skills and intellect to contribute meaningfully and creatively to society. For the Black community, that includes a continued reclamation of autonomy and dignity that schooling has attempted to strip from them. Yet, privatization is doing the opposite, and it is leaving public schools with a lack of funding and resources. Thus, DuBois would likely contend that schools need to reevaluate their priorities and standards, as education is a “whole system of human training within and without the school house walls, which molds and develops men” (p. 141). In essence, schools — and frankly, society — must recognize that public schools must receive equitable funding in order to fulfill their intended goal of promoting social change.

The debate over public school funding has raged for centuries, but the recent rise of privatization has made resource access increasingly inequitable. While states such as Iowa have perpetuated problems with their modern interpretations of the historical equity debate, states like Minnesota are proving that the implementation of Mann’s and Dewey’s ideas benefits students, particularly those who are less privileged.

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