


## EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

# The Public and Its Education

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The articles in this issue travel across time—from the late eighteenth century to the 1960s—as well as across three continents and a variety of subfields. They range in focus from primary schooling to postsecondary levels of education. And, collectively, they form what the *HEQ* editorial team affectionately calls a “potpourri” issue—one without a uniting theme beyond the high quality of the work it contains.

While diverse thematically, however, the articles in this issue do offer some new ways of looking at an enduring question that has been on our minds lately: *Why do we have public education?*

The question is salient right now for several reasons. Perhaps most immediately, it's because the first article in this issue, “The Extent and Duration of Primary Schooling in Eighteenth-Century America,” takes up the question fairly directly. Carole Shammass argues that participation in a transatlantic commercial society was a driving concern behind taxpayer-supported education in the early republic. In making such an argument, she builds on a long tradition of scholars who see the influence of capitalism in the emergence of public schools. And in this case, she offers some compelling new evidence in support of that position.

We've also been thinking about this question because we have been remembering Carl Kaestle, who passed away in January of this year. Kaestle was a leading figure among a generation that transformed the field in the 1970s and 1980s, giving Americans a new way of looking at the history of education. In *Pillars of the Republic*—a book that most *HEQ* readers will have on their shelves—Kaestle advanced the idea that America's common schools were shaped in form and practice not just by the nascent demands of capitalism, but also by the dominant values of Protestant Christianity and the secular religion of republicanism.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, the question of the public and its education extends to the postsecondary level, as well. In this issue, Lee Ward's “John Stuart Mill on the Political Significance of Higher Education” probes the university and its public function in mid-nineteenth-century Great Britain. Specifically, Ward looks at Mill's 1867 address as a way of identifying British concerns over which course of studies—classical, liberal, scientific,

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<sup>1</sup>Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

practical—served the public best. This case reminds us of similar worries that long had been simmering elsewhere by this time. The expansion and crowding of the curriculum in the US, for instance, led to debates over the place of all college courses, from ancient languages to zoology. It also stimulated the founding of professional colleges, separate scientific schools, and independent institutes. For Mill, the university's most important role was the creation of an "enlightened public" capable of preserving a liberal society, and his concerns overlap with many facing the public today.<sup>2</sup>

While Mill was delivering his address in Scotland, a new and more inclusive vision of public higher education began taking shape in the US. In "'Tuskegee Is Her Monument': Gender and Leadership in Early Public Black Colleges," Leigh Soares reveals an understudied link between the advancement of Black colleges and the advancement of Black women. Early public Black colleges relied far more on Black women leaders than previously assumed, and although these institutions tended to have male presidents, Black women took up critical leadership positions. As Harvard University welcomes Claudine Gay, the first Black woman to serve as president, Soares calls on us to remember this key role of public institutions—the creation of opportunities for historically marginalized populations and, further, those marginalized within the marginalized.<sup>3</sup>

By the mid-twentieth century, ideas about "the public" became decoupled from citizenship through publicly supported exchange programs. Kenda Mutongi's "The 'Airlift' Generation, Economic Aspiration, and Secondary School Education in Kenya, 1940-1960" provides one example. Her study focuses on the eight hundred or so graduates of elite African schools who received scholarships to attend North American universities. In this case, the public included members of the international community, though as Mutongi suggests, the students who benefitted from this effort at public diplomacy and mutual understanding were largely from elite backgrounds. In the decades since, the number of publicly funded exchange programs has skyrocketed and the composition of those programs has significantly diversified.<sup>4</sup>

Behind all forms of public education—whether common schools, postsecondary institutions, or international exchanges—there are hard-won and often forgotten battles waged by their advocates. Eleni Schirmer's "'Sterilizing and Fertilizing the Plant at the Same Time': The Class Formation of the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association" traces the activities of a union within a state that became increasingly unfriendly to collective bargaining. The union's push to secure rights and improve

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<sup>2</sup>Michael S. Pak, "The Yale Report of 1828: A New Reading and New Implications," *History of Education Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (Feb. 2008), 30-57; Roger Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education: Learning and Culture from the Founding to World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); William Tierney, *Higher Education for Democracy: The Role of the University in Civil Society* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2021); "Statement of Concern: The Threats to American Democracy and the Need for National Voting and Election Administration Standards," *New America*, June 1, 2021, <https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/statements/statement-of-concern/>.

<sup>3</sup>Stephanie Saul and Vimal Patel, "Harvard Names a New President, an Insider and Historic First," *New York Times*, Dec. 15, 2022.

<sup>4</sup>Sam Lebovic, "From War Junk to Educational Exchange: The World War II Origins of the Fulbright Program and the Foundations of American Cultural Globalism, 1945-1950," *Diplomatic History* 37, no. 2 (April 2013), 280-312; Liping Bu, "Educational Exchange and Cultural Diplomacy in the Cold War," *Journal of American Studies* 33, no. 3 (1999), 393-415.

working conditions adds another dimension to questions about the public and its education, situating public education in terms of its broader role in the evolution of labor rights and activism.

Ultimately, our reflection on the purpose of public education is driven chiefly by a matter of pressing concern. Across the US, taxpayer-supported, open-enrollment, democratically controlled, non-sectarian schools are presently under siege. In Iowa, for instance, the state legislature recently forced through a private school voucher program that will eventually pull \$340 million out of the public education system. In Arizona, a recent expansion of the state's voucher program has chiefly benefited those never enrolled in public schools, effectively turning part of the public education budget into a rebate for private school families. And in New Hampshire, the state's "education freedom" program—enacted in the face of widespread opposition—was designed fairly explicitly to redirect students out of public schools and into private ones.<sup>5</sup> These are unprecedented times.

Support for public higher education has, likewise, been on a steady downward trend for decades. Since the 1980s, the political mood has shifted—away from funding colleges and universities for the public good, and toward treating higher education as an individual matter to be sorted out in the free market. According to recent polls, a college education, like homeownership, is still part of the American dream. But for how long? Real doubts exist over whether college will remain affordable for average Americans in the future. And if higher education falls out of reach, so too may be the possibility of intergenerational mobility.<sup>6</sup>

In seeking to counter these trends, it's possible to make a case for public education without any substantive knowledge of its origins and evolution. After all, there are obvious consequences to dismantling public K-12 and higher education systems. Students in a privatized system in the US, for instance, may have more options, but they're also less likely to have actual *rights*. Private institutions are also free to reject the kinds of values that tend to characterize their democratically controlled counterparts. And the potential for deeper social fragmentation seems far greater in a system that operates on the principle that students and their families are customers, without any regard for broader social, political, or economic concerns.

Yet making the case for public education without a knowledge of history is akin to fighting with a hand tied behind one's back. What have we learned about schooling and higher education across time that illuminates possible futures? How does an

<sup>5</sup>Libby Stanford, "The Push for School Choice Is Accelerating," *Education Week*, Jan. 27, 2023, <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/the-push-for-school-choice-is-accelerating/2023/01>; Rekha Basu, "Opinion: Your Tax Dollars for Their Private School? More and More States Are Saying Yes," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 12, 2023, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2023-02-12/school-vouchers-private-public-school-iowa-kim-reynolds-lgbtq-parental-rights>.

<sup>6</sup>Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Newfield, *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016); Mohamed Younis, "Most Americans See American Dream as Achievable," Gallup, July 17, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/260741/americans-american-dream-achievable.aspx>; Michelle Singletary, "Most Americans Believe the American Dream's Out of Reach for Their Kids," *Washington Post*, Oct. 28, 2022.

understanding of where institutions came from and who they were designed to serve help us reimagine what we mean by “the public” in terms of its needs today? After two centuries of activism and advocacy to make public educational institutions fairer and more equitable, what do we stand to lose if we walk away from them? The answers to such questions offer guidance about the present moment—a moment that will no doubt figure prominently in future histories.