One hundred years ago the Horace Mann League was founded to endorse and promote Horace Mann, the founder of public education in the United States, and his ideas on sound basic educational theory. This book commemorates that development while furthering the visions of Horace Mann, such as universal education being a necessity for democracy. Mann promoted “common schools” (later changed by others to public schools) as a way to ensure a stable workforce, serve as a child-rearing partner, promote wealth, provide moral education, and foster equity.

The list of contributing authors is impressive as they represent significant thought leaders on education covering the last thirty years. Names like Michael Apple, David Berliner, William Ayers, Edward Fiske, Jack Jennings, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Deborah Myers, Jeannie Oakes, Diane Ravitch, Kevin Welner, etc. are well known to readers of educational literature. Consequently, each chapter is well written as might be expected from such well published liberal leaning collaborators.

As a former president of the Horace Mann League, this reviewer was excited about the publication of this book and most pleased to be asked to review it. My expectations were undoubtedly unrealistic as I found it to be a disappointment in that the offered defense of public education was not robust. Having multiple authors resulted in a somewhat disjointed collection of ideologies, although each writer seems to appreciate public education, especially when compared to charter schools. Nevertheless, Public Education: Defending a Cornerstone of American Democracy will emerge as classic educational literature.

The introduction provides a general sense of Horace Mann’s opinions about the need for educating everyone and sets the stage for what follows. The rest of the book “…is informed by our authors’ multiple perspectives on the history, success, failures, and above all, the aspirational and transformative potential for our public schools.” (p.3) Readers should be forewarned there is as much criticism as there is praise for public education.

It has been generally accepted that by the 1950’s universal free public education had gained widespread acceptance in this country. By 1965 there was a realization that more needed to be done, and thus, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act became Federal law with reforms following. Some innovations have had short term positive effects, but few realized the desired goals. Testing and
accountability have endured, although heavily criticized. The authors in this volume for the most part look askance at these last two related ideas.

In one recounted conversation at a 2018 conference, one speaker decries the lack of progress towards closing the achievement gaps after fifty years, citing all the time, effort, and money expended.

“What we have to show is the debris field of politicians’ magic bombs. None of the initiatives were well thought out or supported in time or money…We might as well have measured the effects with a kaleidoscope…We took a law that was designed to ensure equal opportunities for all, took away their resources, demanded even higher test scores for impoverished schools and punished them for failing. And that’s our dirty little secret.” (p.13)

Parts of this kind of condemnation, which in one form or another are continued throughout, are valid, especially the lack of funding. Politicians are always a handy target, although it is fair to say that most of the reform notions were first created by others—university professors, think tank analysts, and consultants. Politicians usually carry someone else’s water.

Diane Ravitch provides a brief but excellent history of public education, despite taking a shot at “fake school reformers,” such as Walton, Gates, Koch, etc. -wealthy members of the elite (p.29). She goes so far as to write that “… it is time to abandon the status quo of disruption and turmoil. It is time to reimagine our public schools and to bring a fresh vision to planning for them” (p.28).

A short and cogent chapter by Peter Greene entitled, “Our Schools and Our Towns Belong to Each Other,” makes the point that each community issues a guarantee or “a promise that every child will have at least twelve years at this facility to learn as much as they can…”. He continues after acknowledging that we have not always met that promise. But the promise has been made, and that means we know what we are supposed to live up to” (p.62).

Horace Mann was an extreme optimist. Kevin Weiner disagrees. According to Weiner, “…Horace Mann was right to argue for the power and potential of schools. But he oversold the product, and children suffer from the Great Equalizer myth. School systems shouldn’t be asked to prevent poverty, let alone to equalize students’ opportunities in life” (p. 92).

Several authors agree with the sentiment about education being incapable of making our society more equal or that public schools can increase a child’s merit without a great influx of money – from parents or society. Other authors apply a similar line of thinking to the issue of race and the achievement gap. Thus, these latter writers would have us redirect our attention from the achievement gap to the opportunity gap.

Essay 20 leads off with the statement “It seems bizarre to argue about whether money matters for schools. How could more money not improve a school? …Certainly, money can be wasted. But it is impossible for schools to spend efficiently if they don’t have adequate funds to spend in the first place” (p.204).
James Harvey makes the case that the government has “enormous wealth” that can be tapped if the will is there. He acknowledges that this will not be an easy task as the public has been persuaded that the politicians have limited funds to dispense. He presents a five-part agenda for action:

1. Refuse to Accept the Conventional Wisdom,
2. Make Your Case,
3. Enlist Allies to Deal with Out-of-School Challenges,
4. Note That You Lead a Large and Complex Enterprise, and
5. Preach a Crusade Against Ignorance (pgs.222-224).

An important subtext to Public Education: Defending a Cornerstone of American Democracy is that tax dollars should not be spent on charter schools or other nontraditional public schools.

Consequently, David Berliner has written an exceptional piece about the misuse and fraud associated with the expenditure of tax funds by such entities. His research is accurate and compelling. However, individuals familiar with traditional public schools can identify a long list of fraud and misdemeanors involving public funds, even not counting poor judgement calls. If this analysis were done, it would be a draw regarding public financial scandals.

Berlinger paraphrases Steven Stringer in delivering ten reasons for defending America’s public schools even with all their flaws:

1. Public Schools Attract Better Qualified Teachers.
2. Public Schools have Greater Community Responsibilities and Community Relations.
3. Public Schools Are Not Strangers to Education Choice.
4. Public Schools Have Greater Diversity.
5. Public Schools Are More Fiscally Responsible.
6. Public Schools Are More Reliable.
7. Public Schools Have Greater Commitment to Students.
8. You Own Your Public Schools.
10. Public Schools Match or Outperform Private Schools. (pgs. 281-284)

In his chapter Michael Apple reiterates that “… large numbers of people recognize that there is a crisis in education” (p.308). He further realizes that there is a growing home school movement and credits the “Conservative forces (who) have not rested, which are to be balanced by the ongoing labor of teachers, community members and social movements…we need to celebrate the gains that we make in defending and rebuilding more responsive public institutions” (p. 308).

The last chapter, “A New Deal for Public Schools,” takes on both Republicans and Democrats for their policies since President Reagan’s term:

“… each one more backward on educational policy than the last (p.314). Given the harsh and unresolved history of white supremacy in the US and the adaptable and slippery nature of social capitalism, it is no surprise that the descendants of enslaved workers, of African-ancestrored youth, the children of indigenous people and immigrants from formerly colonized nations, often experience schooling as oppressive and colonizing rather
than liberating. This must change. The public schools must become primary sites of resistance, vigorously combatting institutional racism, racial discrimination, segregation, and oppression.” (pgs.315-316)

Public Education: Defending a Cornerstone of American Democracy is a powerful tool for advocates of public schools—if they have the traditional liberal viewpoint that public education is the best means of educating children.

Reviewer Biography

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