

Our Public Schools: Inclusive Mission Brings Us All Together

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On a May Iowa morning, I sat in the sunlight pouring through the colored windows into Herrick Chapel at Grinnell College as I listened to one of my daughter's classmates present her Baccalaureate address. Thirty-three years after my own graduation from this college, I had returned to celebrate with my daughter as she graduated. As I began to listen to Ms. Julia Haltiwanger, I did not realize that her speech and the other graduation events would become an important lens through which I would spend the summer reflecting on my work as a public schools advocate for the United Church of Christ.

Ms. Haltiwanger exhorted her classmates to change the world, not so much because of the horrible injustices that surround us all, but because, "A world so full of important and wonderful things leaves absolutely no room for apathy and no excuse for being jaded." "When we care, when we do the best we can to make things better, we're doing it because of the things and people that are important to us. We should all be activists because of all the things we love about our world, the beautiful things that make us glad to be alive."

Ms. Haltiwanger's speech has challenged me. Working as I do in the Justice and Witness Ministries of the UCC, I know that I cannot follow her advice entirely. Working as I do to eliminate economic and racial injustices in public schools in the United States, I am called to put the spotlight on injustice itself, to tear the blinders off the eyes of smug people who deny inequity and prefer to pretend we can manage away social injustice with a quick, simple remedy. As our nation's largest social institution, public schools embody attitudes that desperately need challenging-attitudes about race and poverty, power and privilege, and cultural dominance and marginalization. Our unwillingness as citizens to fund public schools in particular locations is especially troubling because it reflects our attitudes, our biases, and frequently a level of bigotry we all prefer to deny.

But what about following Ms. Haltiwanger's advice? Should we set about working for public education justice on the premise that the schools many have come to disdain as "failing schools" are somehow worthy and

beautiful? Could we imagine that we need to preserve our nation's system of public schools because it is one of our greatest blessings—that this vast system will be the key to enabling the vast majority of children to participate in meaningful work, to maintaining and enriching the vitality of our cities, to developing the arts and literature, to building our capacity to manage the environment, to helping us listen and appreciate the growing cultural diversity in our nation, and to developing some consensus across our vast diversity about the dreams we share for our children?

UCC Rejects Vouchers

After a stressful and busy spring, I had not taken time until we began our long drive out to Iowa to reflect deeply on the implications of the long awaited U.S. Supreme Court decision in the *Zelman* Voucher Case, a decision not yet announced in May, but anticipated within only a month. The Cleveland voucher program is something I know well. The UCC's denominational offices are here in Cleveland, and I have been watching this program since Rep. Mike Fox proposed the bill to the Ohio Legislature back in 1992. I watched a previous challenge to this program all the way through the state court system in the late nineties, and I've been watching the *Zelman* case itself move through the federal courts beginning with Judge Solomon Oliver's 1999 finding in federal district court that the program was unconstitutional.

On June 27, 2002 the United States Supreme Court finally released its 5-4 opinion overturning district and appellate decisions, and making it constitutional for public tax dollars to be used for vouchers in private and parochial schools. The *Zelman* decision signals a major shift in judicial interpretation of the Constitution's First Amendment, which has until now prohibited the use of government funding to establish or favor particular religions at public expense. In Cleveland, more than 99% of the vouchers have been used at religious schools,¹ many of which have been requiring children to participate in religious instruction, regardless of their family's faith tradition.

Zelman will also have long term public policy implications for allocation of public dollars for education. While the UCC has always defended the right of parents to choose private or parochial education, the denomination has historically supported public investment in the schools that serve all children on behalf of the community.² The voucher program in Cleveland redirects money away from Cleveland's public schools. In the 2001-2002 school year alone, the voucher program cost the city's public schools more than \$8 million in state Disadvantaged Pupil Impact Aid, the funding created by the Ohio legislature to assist school districts with a large percentage of children in poverty.³ The program serves the few (4,000 voucher stu-

dents) at the expense of the many (77,000 students in the public school system). And the Cleveland district, like many urban districts, has been dramatically underfunded, while facing the challenge of providing extra educational and social services for children to counterbalance the effects of poverty and racial discrimination. Child advocate and professor of public policy and education, Bruce Fuller, warns that market-based reform will abandon our society's most vulnerable children: "If we are to elect the proud pursuit of private interests in a revamped education marketplace... then why would a no-longer-civil society tax itself to support public schools? And once we all win our own private places, like private clubs surrounded by high walls, who will be left to rely on the public spaces?"⁴

While proponents of market "choice" extol vouchers for improving public schools through competition, critics of vouchers raise serious philosophical questions on top of concerns about spreading scarce resources even thinner. A system designed to serve the private choices of parents is more likely to encourage parents to insulate their children from those who do not share their family's or their group's particular beliefs or values in schools where specific constituencies can push their own particular interests. An education marketplace may portend the fracture and polarization of society. Political philosopher Benjamin Barber rejects, "...that proud disdain for the public realm that is common to all market fundamentalists, Republican and Democratic alike... Democracy...demands the consideration not only of what individuals want (private choosing) but also of what society needs (public choosing). These ends are public, the *res publica* that constitutes us as a common people."⁵

UCC Legacy on Public Education

Universal education was introduced into the New England colonies by our Puritan forebears who believed in literacy as the basis of religion and of community. "Convinced that all persons should have direct access to the Bible, for it was 'one chief project of that old deluder Satan to keep men from knowledge of the Scriptures,' and also convinced that sound learning contributes to good citizenship, Puritans in America immediately established schools."⁶ By 1647, Massachusetts required that every town of fifty families hire a school teacher.⁷ Congregationalists as well as our German Reformed forebears continued to expand community schooling throughout the nineteenth century,⁸ and missionaries of our American Missionary Association founded schools as the path to full and productive citizenship for former slaves. While our modern denomination has supported the separation of church and state more emphatically than our eighteenth and nineteenth century UCC forebears, we have never wavered from our commitment to universal literacy as a public responsibility.

UCC General Synod policy reminds us that universal public education is one of our great blessings. In 1985 General Synod 15 warned, "...public schools seem to be losing public support. Yet this development must not be allowed to obscure the great strengths and accomplishments of American education."⁹ In 1991 General Synod 18 proclaimed: "As Christians we believe that God desires for children the life abundant which comes from the fullest development of their gifts—physical, intellectual, social and spiritual."¹⁰ It is precisely because of the importance of our system of public schools that in 2001 General Synod 23, called upon "the United Church of Christ in all its settings to proclaim public school support and advocacy for the same as one of the foremost civil rights issues in the twenty-first century."¹¹ Even as they have challenged our congregations to reduce injustice by advocating for expanded access and opportunity for children who have been marginalized, our General Synods have reaffirmed the value of universal public education.

Biblical Foundations

Responsibility for community, especially for the least privileged and most vulnerable, is at the core of the ethical teaching of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. We are exhorted, "to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke."¹² Oppression and injustice as addressed in Isaiah are social pathologies of repressive communities, and the redress of these injustices will depend on a community response. In a 1980 UCC resource, Malcolm Warford interprets the mutuality implied in the concept of the public: "At the heart of the public is a set of personal, social and economic relationships that exist between ourselves and others. In this regard citizenship is nothing less than the way we care for these relationships."¹³

The New Testament body of Christ is a mutually dependent, mutually responsible community, where each one is necessary and where all are cared for: "As it is there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'...but the members may have the same care for one another."¹⁴ While the bible never specifically names public education as a social concern, because agrarian societies in biblical times had no system for formal education, our Christian theology of mutual support, care, and nurturing has caused the UCC historically to support a system of universal formal schooling, managed through the public sphere, to enrich all the members for the mutual benefit of all: "The inclusiveness of the public schools is taken as an image of God's all-encompassing purposes. Affirmations regarding the ultimate purpose and meaning of human life support the neces-

sity to ‘secure for each child of God that education which will fully develop his or her capacities and which will enable that person to serve as a responsible person in the common life.’”¹⁵

What are the Issues?

Because ninety percent of children in the United States attend public schools, a system of excellent, well-funded public schools is our society’s best hope for universal economic participation. Public schools, after all, are mandated and equipped to develop the gifts of even the most challenged students. Certainly in a twenty-first century information economy, education has become a necessity for individual survival and prosperity. In earlier agrarian societies, the skills for participation in remunerative work could be passed on within families from parents to children. Even in the industrial world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many jobs required skills that could be learned on the job through apprenticeship or specialized experience and training within factories. Today’s well-paying jobs require sophisticated literacy and numeracy as well as computer skills. Formal education has become the means to life through economic survival. Those who are educated can prosper; those without a high school diploma are now left few opportunities other than minimum wage jobs in the service sector, where even when both parents work full time, a family of four cannot rise above the federal poverty level.

Public education enriches our private lives beyond the economic function of enabling people to produce and distribute and spend and get. Education opens the worlds of literature, art, and music for children. It also offers the more direct public benefit of enabling us to preserve our physical world and our health through scientific discovery. But according to sociologist, Robert Bellah, there is a greater purpose: “However pluralistic its forms, education can never merely be for the sake of individual self-enhancement. It pulls us into the common world or it fails altogether.”¹⁶

Public schools provide young people the opportunity to examine history and equip them to conduct public life. Our democracy requires that all citizens can understand and evaluate complex social issues, be informed enough to vote intelligently, be able to serve on juries, and understand each other’s points of view. Could these functions be met if education were provided in private contexts without a large public system? The answer is yes for some of the people—for particular individuals with the means to pursue private education, for the children of parents with the personal connections and ambition to be active choosers, for children promising enough to be sought out and chosen. For our nation as a whole to benefit, however, education must reach all corners of society. Public schools can potentially enable each

child to realize her or his promise, and if our schools do a good job, they can ensure for each citizen an opportunity to contribute. Public schools can thereby improve our collective well-being by enhancing the gifts of each one.

Public schools also provide a civic arena for consensus-building about our shared dreams and expectations for children. According to Rev. Dr. John C. Lentz, Jr., “True diversity celebrates the varied gifts to be found in all children regardless of race, income, religion, or status. Only the public schools have the inclusive mission to invite all the children to come together and learn from each other. This is where spirited democracy is nurtured.”¹⁷ While the nineteenth and early twentieth century common school was seen as the way to Americanize, to assimilate, immigrant children into a dominant and seemingly homogenous society and to unite those in the cities with those on the frontier, a pluralistic society such as ours in the twenty-first century United States challenges our willingness to work for a level of consensus necessary to support schools that may no longer reflect the hegemony of one dominant culture. Educational philosopher Walter Feinberg believes public schools will provide a place for our children to learn to appreciate each other’s cultures and to explore the human needs that bind us all together. “The common school must be involved in teaching students both to speak from the knowledge that their cultural identity provides and, as audience, to hear the voices of others... It is within and across this medley of difference that the common school continues the dialogue begun during the American Revolution about the nature of national unity and the character of national identity.”¹⁸

As we seek to remedy the challenges for public schools, we must pay attention to the location of the issues we seek to address. Many of the “problems” we imagine to be located in public schools themselves are, in fact, our nation’s primary social and cultural dilemmas. Rev. Raymond Roberts warns that for public schools to thrive and succeed, society must develop consensus within and among many institutions including the family, religious institutions, and the political realm.¹⁹ By naming the challenges for public schools as civil rights and economic justice concerns, the UCC’s General Synods have chosen to frame many of the serious public school issues at education’s intersection with other important social institutions including health care, housing, and child care. Today’s government policy, on the other hand, with its focus on performance accountability and privatization, ignores the broader social and economic context for schools and instead blames particular schools, particular school districts, and public school educators. Sanctions and punishments for “failing” schools and vouchers that allow students to “escape from” particular buildings are remedies that locate all the problems inside the school, not outside in society.

Because the United States is among the only nations in the world to have aspired to develop consensus about how to formally educate all children, we have much to lose if the system we may have taken for granted is undermined. The *Zelman* Decision threatens the freedom and funding of public schools and compromises our understanding of education as a public good. Our UCC heritage and our theology, on the other hand, would cause us to value public education as an institution tightly interwoven with the dynamics of the family, with the dynamics of economic opportunity and race, with other social institutions, and with faith communities as formative influences. Our heritage and our theology would cause us to appreciate public education as perhaps our nation's most powerful tool for overcoming poverty and injustice, if we would choose to understand public finance as a way to share God's abundance.

Later in my visit to Grinnell College last May, I was surprised when the Commencement jolted my attention to the importance of public education. When talk about public schools surfaced, I paid attention because of my work. I noticed also because I and a handful of others had earned Iowa teaching certificates thirty-three years ago at Grinnell, in a small, minimally staffed program that never seemed particularly valued within the life of the college. While my English Literature major came with some prestige in 1969, nobody paid attention to my teaching credential. At the 2002 Commencement the tone was different. The College seemed to feel the need to lift up the importance of excellent public schools.

Roberta Atwell, Professor of Education, was honored for her role in helping this liberal arts college expand its commitment to public school teaching by developing a special program, the "Ninth Semester Leading to Iowa Teaching Certification." In this program students earning an academic liberal arts degree can now stay for an extra semester, earn their teaching certificate, and have the tuition for the extra semester written off by the college if they teach even for one full year. In this demanding program including extensive course work preceding the professional semester, "leading ideas in education are considered in relation to their political, social, and economic setting and to psychological theories of effective learning," and a course called, "Educational Principles in a Pluralistic Society" is required.²⁰

What had caused the board of this small college in central Iowa to take the step of expanding and strengthening the college's lone professional program, a program I was shocked had even been retained by a college that has in my lifetime produced the inventor of the integrated circuit, a Nobel Prize winning chemist, a famous jazz musician and a well respected jazz critic, and that sends the majority of its students on to graduate and professional schools to become attorneys, doctors, economists, scientists, math-

ematicians, and professors? Certainly Grinnell has never considered itself a normal school. Yet prominently listed in the Program of the 2002 Commencement were twenty-eight students recently graduated from or accepted to the Professional Semester Leading to Iowa Teaching Certification.

As I looked across the faces of the graduates on that sunlit May morning on the central campus lawn, I realized that Grinnell College has retained the goal of its 1846 Congregationalist, Iowa Band, missionary founders to educate the promising students of the Midwest, among the other bright minds that now make their way to this campus in central Iowa: “The best cure for ‘prairie-mindedness’ is found in that spiritual-mindedness which creates scholars because it requires a knowledge of the deep things of our own nature and of God.”²¹ This college has chosen to name and thereby honor the vocation and profession of teaching as one path by which students can realize the values paraphrased from the Latin motto of the college: Seek Truth and Serve Humanity.

Many of the students accepting their diplomas had originally made their way to Grinnell College from public high schools, many in Nebraska, Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois and Wisconsin. Those planning for the future of this historically UCC liberal arts college realize that the quality of public school teaching in towns like Oshkosh, Sioux City, and North Platte, in hamlets like Hayes, Grundy Center, and Princeton, as well as in cities like Milwaukee, Omaha, Chicago, East St. Louis, and Kansas City will determine not only the future of Grinnell College but also the future of our nation.

Grinnell College has found a way to support public education in this time when our nation’s largest and arguably most important social institution is being challenged. What will you as an individual and your congregation choose to do to support public schools and to advocate for improving their capacity to serve all children? We need to improve this system of public schools that our own UCC forebears helped establish, because universal public education is a beautiful concept whose blessing we must help every child to realize.

Notes

1. Hanauer, A. “Cleveland School Vouchers: Where the Students Go,” *Policy Matters Ohio*, (January 2002): 2.
2. “Pronouncement on Public Education,” General Synod 15, 1985; “Resolution Regarding ‘Choice’ in Education.” Board of Directors, United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, 1991; Board of Directors, Justice and Witness Ministries, October 14, 2000.
3. People for the American Way, “Five Years and Counting: a Closer Look at the Cleveland Voucher Program,” September 25, 2001, 2.

4. Fuller B., *Inside Charter Schools: The Paradox of Radical Decentralization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 4.
5. Barber, B. R., "A Failure of Democracy, Not Capitalism," *The New York Times*, July 29, 2002, A 23.
6. von Rohr, J., *The Shaping of American Congregationalism: 1620-1957* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1992), 171.
7. Ibid.
8. "The Church and the Public School: A Position Paper of the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries," 1981, 5.
9. "Pronouncement on Public Education," General Synod 15, 1985.
10. "1991 Pronouncement: Support of Quality, Integrated Education for All Children in Public Schools," General Synod 18, 1991.
11. "Resolution: Access to Excellent Public Schools: A Child's Civil Right in the 21st Century," General Synod 23, 2001.
12. Isaiah 58:6
13. Warford, M. L., *The Education of the Public*, (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1980), 5.
14. I Corinthians 12:20-25
15. Bass, D. C., "The Churches, the Public Schools, and Moral Education: A Historical Perspective," *Public Education: Selected Writings About the History and Role of Public Education and its Curriculum* (United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, 1995), 36.
16. Bellah, R., et al, *The Good Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 176.
17. Lentz, Jr., Rev. Dr. J. C., Forest Hill Presbyterian Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio, 1999.
18. Feinberg, W., *Common Schools: Uncommon Identities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 245.
19. Roberts, R. R., *Whose Kids Are They Anyway?* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), 129-130.
20. Grinnell College Website, <<http://www.grinnell.edu>>.
21. Jones, A., *Pioneering: 1846-1996* (Grinnell, Iowa: Grinnell College, 1996) 11-12.