

The recent widespread teachers' strike was the first time in years that we had to think of public education in terms other than cutting taxes. The teachers in many states are terribly underpaid, and the strikes gave them the first pay boosts in decades. But the teachers were striking for more than their own wages: they wanted funding restored for infrastructure, books, and materials. Strikers showed us outdated textbooks held together by tape, and no money for paper and pens.

Aside from the obvious mistreatment that teachers have endured since the tax-cutting fever that began in the 1980s, we have lost sight of how much democracy depends on public education. Democracy cannot survive without a literate, critical-thinking electorate: largely missing today. Expanding voting roles without expanding quality education can only give us an ignorant electorate with no understanding of their duties as citizens.

Public education is a unique gift of Western civilization. In the ancient world (looking at Greece, Rome, and China), education was largely private. Only the rich elites had access to the world knowledge of the day---except for China, which did have a system in which the State sought out bright boys who were educated and had to pass exams for entry into the world's first civil service, the Mandarins. It served China well for at least a thousand years, until replaced by European-style schools for the elites, and after the Chinese Communist Revolution, to all children.

The first people to mandate universal male education were the Jews, who by religious edict tested the literacy of boys at 13, who were then admitted to adult society. This model was not replicated anywhere else until the Protestant Reformation.

The Catholic Church provided an education system for elite families (male and female children), but also sought out bright boys for the priesthood. In theory (and sometimes in practice), a poor boy, if bright enough, could rise through the highest ranks of Catholic clergy. This was the first meritocratic system of education and it served the Church well. Considering the caste system during Feudalism, a peasant boy had no other options to rise in society.

The Protestant Reformation (fracturing the Catholic monopoly) was the big game changer that began propelling Northern Europe into the modern world we know today. Queen Elizabeth I began the first state system of universal education throughout England, seeking out boys, even from villages, who had the intelligence to go through schooling including university, which then made them capable of filling the ranks of government civil service and professions such as lawyers and doctors. A middle class was born.

Protestantism could not have happened without several inventions: the printing press and the scientific revolution. Public literacy burgeoned, and even the number of literate women ballooned. The British public education system traveled to the new country, United States, where it served to promote democracy and elevate even the poorest immigrant children to the possibility of equality.

We seem to have lost track of what we expect of public education today. We not only underpay teachers, but have eliminated such mandates as civics and geography, leaving many of today's graduates (even university graduates), ignorant of how our government is structured and which institutions protect a republic from becoming a dictatorship. The absence of Geography (a mainstay in the past) has given us a public not only disinterested in international relations, but ignorant of other countries who share our planet.

Western Civilization is no longer taught in many schools, leaving students ignorant of why our culture is different from much of the world and what role it has played in making us the world's superpower and envied model. The people who vote with their feet by coming here, or sending their children to our universities, do understand. Our own children may well become technological giants, but without understanding our unique institutions, may preside over our culture's demise.

We absolutely need to restore public education to the responsibility of providing a literate, informed electorate. The proliferation of unchecked "information" can only be defanged by people who can and do read and can and do think.

684 words

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