

Why public education must be preserved

This paper was written by Peggy Zugibe , a member of the Haverstraw-Stony Point (N.Y.) Board of Education. She is also a member of the Rockland Board of Cooperative Educational Services and a member of the board of directors of the New York State School Boards Association.

People often ask me why I'm a school board member. To be sure, it is an unpaid and largely thankless job. You make decisions that affect people's wallets and their children, and emotions can run high. No matter what forms of academic progress our students achieve, some will say our schools are failing and call for radical changes.

But I love being a school board member because I believe in public education. I believe that all of us associated with public schools - school board members, administrators, teachers, students and involved parents and community members - are working to preserve one of our nation's greatest assets.

Our Founding Fathers believed in public education. In 1785, John Adams wrote, *"The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people and be willing to bear the expenses of it. There should not be a district of one mile square, without a school in it, not founded by a charitable individual, but maintained at the public expense of the people themselves."*

In the 1800s when our country took in more immigrants and it became more diverse, education reformers saw public education as a means of creating productive citizens, ending poverty and crime and unifying an increasingly diverse population. Those societal goals are as relevant today as they were then. Polls show that the American people value public education. But the current political climate is downright hostile to public education. Teachers are viewed as underperforming, administrators are overpaid and school boards as overly contentious if not dysfunctional. In certain cases, the criticism might have merit. But overall, schools and school boards do vital work. This is what democracy looks like. Political scientist Benjamin Barber has argued that our public schools don't merely serve the public but actually create the public. "Public schools are not merely schools for the public, but schools of publicness; institutions where we learn what it means to be a public and start down the road toward common national and civic identity."

As a nation, we need to remind ourselves of the value of public education. This has been recognized by national education organization such as the American Association of School Administrators, which has a terrific campaign called "Stand up for Public Education."

Also, the Center of Educational Policy has a great publication called Why We Still Need Public Schools that covers the history of public education and explains how public schools are linked to the common good. It cites six missions that our country has expected public education to fulfill. Our schools:

- Provide universal access to free education.
- Guarantee equal opportunities for all children.
- Unify a diverse population.
- Prepare people for citizenship in a democratic society.
- Prepare people to become economically self-sufficient.
- Improve social conditions.

Are those not worthy goals? Like our Founding Fathers, I believe that, that my district and public education in general is serving the public interest. How else can we offer an equal chance for success to all students?

We owe it to future generations to preserve the ideals which have served our nation since its beginning. Our public schools have produced presidents, statesmen, scientists, sports and entertainment figures. We can't let outside forces result in public education becoming a system of haves and have-nots. We must make sure that we remember what our Founding Fathers saw, that public education is essential to our country's common good.