

# **Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy**

## **Educational Policy Statement**

**January 22, 2000**

### **Objective:**

The Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy is dedicated to the study of the history of American philosophy and to the advancement and application of that tradition's principles, goals and intellectual methods to current social issues. Educational theory and practice have been central concerns to American philosophers from Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson through Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Dewey to such contemporary philosophers and educators as John Lachs and John McDermott. The fact that education has been at the heart of American philosophical thought since our colonial past suggests that the American philosophical tradition has something significant to say about the current debates concerning educational reform, student learning, and teacher education. This document speaks to those contemporary issues in light of more than two centuries of American thinking about the nature of pedagogy and the purposes of education in a free and democratic society.

### **Problem:**

Educational theory, policy and practice are among the most pressing of contemporary social concerns in the United States:

Many argue that there is a crisis in American education, and that our students are failing to learn to the standards necessary to face current and future challenges; others argue that in fact American students are doing as well or better than others, and that many contemporary reform efforts amount to an attempt to impose organizational structures from the private sector onto public education.

\*\* Some argue that there should be publicly financed alternatives to public education in the form of vouchers for private schools and/or charter schools; others argue that public education itself needs an infusion of resources and public support to fulfill its social purpose adequately.

\*\* Some argue that students are failing to learn adequately as a result of trendy and flawed methods; others argue that the call to return to traditional methods of education is a veiled attempt to reestablish and reinforce oppressive social relations.

\*\* Some argue that the practice and desired outcomes of teaching should be established by specialists and managers; others hold that teachers themselves must be empowered to play a greater role in the development of educational theory and practice.

\*\* Some educators argue that among the causes of the social problems we face is the fact that the basic characteristics of good character - honesty, respect, diligence etc. - are not pervasive enough in contemporary society, and that it is the purview of the schools to be developing students' character; others contend that despite the importance of honesty and similar character traits, the character education movement tends to take as a given many traditional views of

individuals and social groups that have been and remain detrimental to people's well being. Many also point out that schools reflect the larger society they serve; if schools have problems, it is likely that it is because society does. Social problems are complicated and defuse. To single out any one segment of society is to scapegoat and to avoid dealing with the problem. In this case, it may turn out that politicians, technocrats, business, industry, and parents are avoiding accepting their share of the blame as well as their responsibility to help solve the problem.

\*\* Some argue that teacher education should be structured such that prospective teachers study only or primarily what they will need to know in order to teach their respective curricula; others argue that prospective teachers must be liberally educated and helped to develop the habits of mind that commit them to open, reflective and ongoing inquiry.

Many educators, lawmakers and members of the public currently believe that rapidly developing educational technology will almost necessarily improve students' performance while lowering the cost of education; many others, though, suspect that much of contemporary educational technology is inadequate to the more important educational tasks of helping students learn to evaluate and analyze critically their own experience, to read with understanding and insight, and to establish the habits of reflective inquiry that mark an educated person and that are required for the real solution of contemporary problems. Furthermore, this potential problem may be complicated by the fact that in many school districts in many states there has been a widespread shift in funding toward greater dependence on advanced technologies before these questions have been settled.

In many states funding for education, from pre-kindergarten through university level, has seriously decreased in recent years, on the presumption that local communities or families themselves should take responsibility for children's education; in other places funding has stayed level or increased, in some cases on the belief that it is the society's responsibility generally to insure that its members receive solid and roughly equally education.

Some hold that the primary purpose of education is to prepare students to function and compete in the developing global economy; others contend that the health of a democratic society requires that its citizenry develop the capacities necessary for active and critical engagement in the economic, social and political issues of its time; and for many people one of the principle goals of education should be to nurture and develop talents and capacities of the nation's young people for the purpose of individual fulfillment.

### **Context:**

For the most part the perception of a crisis in American education begins with an observation of inadequate performance on the part of students. Many studies cite a low ranking in international studies of student performance, particularly in the sciences and mathematics. Others sense a problem in student achievement in the general area of cultural literacy, suggesting that contemporary students are simply not learning enough about their own culture, its history and most important cultural achievements. Still others point to youth crime rates, high pregnancy rates among teenagers, and other indicators of social breakdown or unrest, as signs of serious inadequacies in our educational theory and practice.

Whatever the truth may be with respect to social problems of young people, student performance and the breadth of student knowledge, the point of departure for an adequate consideration of contemporary educational policy and practice must be the nature and demands of a democratic society. Though there are surely many shortcomings in contemporary American democracy, both economic and social, it remains the case that American society in name and ideally in fact as well aspires to democracy. And from Thomas Jefferson to John Dewey it has been clear that democracy places expectations on and makes demands of education that other forms of social and political organization do not.

To speak negatively, a non-democratic society is one in which individuals' possibilities are imposed on them, whether by social custom, economic necessity or political fiat, and in which the development of the individual's critical and reflective capacities is at best ignored and at worst suppressed. By implication, education in such a society has the primary function of training children to take their predetermined place in social life and to do so with a minimum of friction and resistance. It may be that a small segment of the population in such a society must have a broader experience and outlook in order to fulfill leadership roles, in which case a special education will be reserved for the few. This two tiered approach to education has been characteristic of non-democratic societies since long before Plato gave it theoretical expression in the Republic: the mass of the population receives training in a trade, and the few are educated for leadership.

As Jefferson, Emerson, Dewey and others knew, a democratic society cannot survive, let alone prosper, with such an approach to education. In a sense the rest of this document is an attempt to describe at least the general directions in which our thinking on educational theory, policy and practice must lead if it is to be appropriate to our own stated democratic ideals. We can best begin with a consideration of what those ideals are.

### **The Democratic Ideal:**

Democracy looks in two directions, to the social and to the individual. A democratic society is one organized such that its social structures, habits and expectations develop on the experience and contributions of all its members; it is a society in which custom and tradition are continually tested and modified against the experience generated by contemporary conditions and circumstances; and it is a society that seeks not to isolate itself but on the contrary to remain open to the needs and interests of its neighbors, which in current conditions means the entire globe. In short, a democratic society rests on the principles and characteristics of a community. Internally, a democracy functions as a community both of individuals and of the many smaller and diverse communities of which it is composed. Externally, a democratic society understands itself as one component of a larger global group of societies, which also must increasingly relate to one another as members of a single community, if peace and prosperity are our goals. A democratic nation is not one in which some of its members rule economically, socially or politically over others, nor is it one that seeks to dominate other nations economically, socially or politically. On the contrary, a democratic society and nation prospers to the degree that it pursues and promotes shared interests among its members, as diverse as they may be, and that builds its international relations on common aspirations and goals.

Democracy as an ideal has explicit implications at the individual level as well. It means, first, that the individual is presumed to be important in at least two ways. In one sense, an individual's own potential is worthy of development, with a meaningful and fulfilled life as a paramount

goal; in another sense, each individual in a democratic society is a significant constituent member of that society, and as a result his or her interests matter, as do each individual's potential contributions to the welfare of the society as a whole. Second, at the individual level a democratic society is one in which the relations of individuals to one another is a matter of social concern. To say that individuals are important is not to suggest that society is composed of discrete units, like human atoms, that need not have anything to do with one another. On the contrary, a democracy is a society in which our relationships with one another promote rather than hinder our individual and general well being.

These conceptions of democracy, at the individual, social and international levels, are the bedrock for any adequate approach to educational issues and problems.

### **Educational Issues:**

#### **The General Goal of Education:**

Thomas Jefferson held, correctly in our view, that the health of a democratic society rests on a fairly high educational level of the population. Among the several reasons he had for this opinion, he thought that the best leadership for a society will emerge if the citizenry as a whole has the opportunity to develop its potential. This means that we can not expect the best leaders to emerge only from the wealthier and privileged segments of the society. If that is the case, and if the society as a whole is committed to generating the strongest possible leadership, then it follows that a strong education must be made available to all the members of society, not just to the strongest, or the wealthiest, or the most politically influential.

The ramifications of this view are significant. It indicates that good educational opportunities for all members of society are in the interest of the society as a whole, and are therefore the responsibility of the whole society. Whether that responsibility can best be met at the national or state level is a matter for consideration in particular cases, but it does suggest that the goal cannot be achieved simply at the local level, if only because material conditions differ so widely from one locality to another.

In a democratic society, however, education cannot simply concern itself with producing leaders, since the interests and prospects of all its members are important. Jefferson's interest in broadly available public education, then, is also based on the view that the personal development of all members of a society is a matter of concern for the society as a whole. A democratic society remains healthy only to the extent that its citizenry develops the knowledge, experience, and habits of mind necessary for self development and self governance. Without it weaker segments of a society either allow themselves to be dominated by the stronger or simply fall prey to the interest and machinations of the stronger. Jefferson's ideal of a well educated populace, adapted of course to current democratic commitments to equality of opportunity for all people in a diverse and multicultural society, must remain a fundamental educational goal today.

Any consideration of the goals of education must also address the international aspects of contemporary life. Many current discussions of the role of education in light of international relations place it in a competitive context, suggesting that a high level of education is necessary for the United States to be able to compete successfully in world markets, which in practice means to continue to dominate the world economy. This view of the goal of education is not consistent with the international dimension of a democratic society described above. John Dewey has argued more plainly and compellingly than any other that, whatever individual and social

differences we have, the democratic reliance on shared interests and purposes within a society must, if democracy is to prosper, extend as well to international relations. In other words, an aggressive, domineering approach to other nations and peoples damages our own democratic social character - a society can not be democratic at home and dictatorial abroad, at least not for long. If that is so, and we believe it is, then one of the critical goals of education must be not to compete with the world but to learn how, in concert with international partners, we can construct international political, economic and cultural relations that are conducive to individual, social and international development.

### **The Role of Public Education:**

As points already made suggest, public schools are the keystone to a democratic society's educational policy and practice. It is through the public schools and universities that the nation's students have access to the education they need for personal growth and for social vitality. Historically those two goals were not necessarily the reason for the development of public schools, but they are the goals we should embrace today.

When the public school system began to expand at the turn of the twentieth century the concern was to create an adequate industrial work force and to Americanize the children of immigrants. Even if we grant that those were appropriate goals at the time, which is debatable, we are positioned today, largely because of a stronger, more developed material foundation, to reach farther in public education. First, as a society we are nearly twice as old now than we were then, and we are able on the basis of our own history to look to a broader notion of what it is to be an American. We can today acknowledge that an American is not necessarily an English speaker who identifies with a European cultural heritage. As important as the English language is, and as profound as European cultures are, they no longer exhaust the possibilities of "Americanism." If the public schools today are concerned with making Americans of people, it is not in the sense that children are to be inculcated with any specific cultural heritage. It is rather that given the variety of cultures, national identities and languages that characterize the United States today, it is through the public schools that children can be helped to understand one another and together forge the bonds of common interest that constitute a living and vibrant community. Public education is well placed to help make that happen.

Second, it is as true today as it was a century ago that young people need to develop skills and acquire knowledge that will enable them to make their way as they leave their homes. However, if we treat the public schools primarily as the place where we give children employable skills, we do both them and ourselves a disservice. John Dewey pointed out early in the twentieth century that people are not only employees - they are also parents, siblings, citizens, voters, neighbors, colleagues, makers and thinkers, and just plain ordinary individual people in pursuit of happiness through the satisfaction of their private goals and desires. The role of public education is to see to it that the nation's children develop the capacities for all these roles. No other social institution is as well placed to do so, and for public education to do any less would be to abrogate a central responsibility.

## **Funding Public Education:**

Whatever else we may do with respect to education, at local, state or national levels, the public schools and universities must be supported at a level that enables them to function well. Any attempt to institute a voucher system or to create charter schools, to use two currently popular examples, or to enter into partnerships with private enterprises that inhibit free inquiry, have to be evaluated in light of their impact on the system of public education.

A common argument for the both vouchers and charter schools is that either one will create a more competitive environment for the public schools. Since, it is argued, competition forces the competitors either to fade from the scene or to become better at what they do, the public will be better off no matter what the outcome. Either the public schools will not compete satisfactorily, in which case people will simply choose to send their children to private or charter schools, or the public schools will improve through competition and the public will in turn be better served. There are two problems with this argument. First, it is not necessarily true that competition is better for the competitors than not. Especially in educational settings, it is often the case that people learn much better when they work together than when they compete against one another. Similarly, individual schools and whole school districts may developed more quickly and fruitfully through cooperative activities to pursue common goals. Second, the argument is too abstract, in that it ignores the very real danger that the result of vouchers, and especially of charter schools, will be to create, some might argue to harden, a two tiered educational system where some receive far greater educational opportunities than others. Such an outcome would be, as we have seen, inconsistent with the requirements of an educational system in a democracy. Third, even if it were true that competition will force improvement sometime in the future, this argument ignores the impact on the present generation of students who will suffer from decreased funding for their public schools but who will not benefit from the improvements competition would presumably bring at some future point.

This is not to say that vouchers or charter schools are necessarily inappropriate for a democratic educational system. It may be that we should apply in these cases, as we should do in many circumstances, an experimental approach. If we do so, though, we need to keep in mind two factors. First, in an experiment one has to be willing to accept the results and to modify one's views accordingly. If the experiment fails, we would have to be willing and able to give it up and try something else. Second, the measure against which we must evaluate such experiments is what we might call the "democratic imperative," by which we mean the fundamental characteristics of a democratic society and an educational system appropriate to such a society, as they have been described above.

## **Policy Proposals:**

In light of the general considerations summarized above, we strongly urge that the following considerations be adopted as policy guides for educational practice:

Funding for public education must be undertaken on local, state AND national levels - with spending decisions by and large reserved for local governments. That is, without imposing curricular or personnel decisions from the larger governmental units, we must support public education in ways that assure real equity in the distribution of public educational opportunity.

The goals of democratic education, and education for democracy, require broad liberal education, built on literacy, mathematical competence, knowledge of the sciences, and awareness

of the technological tools that are central to communication and production. Both the foundational competence and the critical reflection that liberal education demands must remain prominent in the legislation that governs our educational systems.

The emphasis on communities, both those embodied in our educational institutions and those in which we and our institutions participate, must be developed through our educational practices. If we are to thrive as individuals, as school districts, as a nation, as a global civilization, we must focus on building the respect for diversity, the recognition of shared interests, and the responsibility for the public lives of such communities. Respect, recognition, and responsibility are neither luxurious additions to, nor appropriate substitutions for, the traditional 3Rs. Rather, they must be constantly developed in the course of teaching the competencies and critical abilities already stressed.

As communication and computing technology become increasingly utilized resources in classrooms, we must be aware of the potential for harm as well as the promising possibilities. It is crucial that such technology be used to increase cooperation and varied human interaction, rather than employed in ways that emphasize individual, privatized, insulated experience. The dangers of commercialism in education ought to be given serious weight. And the resources must be made available to all.

Teacher education programs throughout the country, no matter how they might be organized, must address as a central issue the nature and purposes of education in a democratic society. For teachers who leave such programs an understanding of the broader context and consequences of their work is as important as mastery of subject matter and educational practices.