

Fast Facts on Educational Pluralism

Educational pluralism is a structure for public education in which the government funds and regulates a wide range of schools (Catholic, secular, Jewish Montessori, Waldorf, etc.), equally. In fact, *most* democracies think of “public education” as a mosaic of different school types – all of which are held to high academic standards.

Educational pluralism reflects five core beliefs:

1. Education simply *cannot be neutral* with respect to values; therefore, democracies should fund a variety of schools that differ from one another in meaningful ways;
2. Educational outcomes *affect all of us*; therefore, democracies should ensure that all schools meet high academic standards.
3. Education belongs within *civil society*; neither the government nor individuals should have absolute control.
4. *All families* – not only well-off families - should have access to schools that fit their children’s needs.
5. When democracies incentivize strong, distinctive school culture and intellectually challenging curriculum, *all kids benefit*.

Because the United States is so used to “uniform” delivery through the district school, we pit charters against districts, districts against private-school scholarship programs. Pluralistic countries don’t pit entire sectors against one another. In pluralistic democracies, all schools count; all schools can get better. That’s their philosophy, and that could be ours. We need a new conversation.

Myth: Educational pluralism is just a fancy word for “school choice.”

Fact: Educational pluralism **isn’t** just a different word for “school choice.” Pluralism is an entirely different way to structure public education with both choice and academic accountability built in from the beginning.

Myth: “Public education” means one thing: neighborhood, district schools.

Fact: Not in most countries. Most democracies fund *all different kinds of schools equally*, and hold all of them to the same academic standards. That’s what public education means in countries like England, Sweden, Indonesia, Finland, Australia, and Israel. In fact, the Netherlands funds 36 different kinds of schools, from Jewish and Islamic to Montessori and secular.

Myth: The U.S. has always done public education through the district school.

Fact: We used to be pluralistic! Cities and counties used to fund Catholic, Lutheran, secular, and even Jewish schools. But the 19th-century Protestant majority felt threatened by the huge number of Catholic immigrants, and so after the Civil War, legislatures began to shut down funding for “sectarian” (or “Catholic”) schools.

Myth: Pluralistic countries like England or Belgium over-regulate their schools.

Fact: No, in pluralistic systems, schools have missions and values that are quite different from one another, even while all students learn specific content consistently across the board. Having a similar body of background knowledge is a good thing. It creates common reference points. And requiring all students to master rigorous content actually closes achievement gaps.

Myth: Educational pluralism would never be possible here, because of the separation of church and state.

Fact: The federal constitution permits funding of non-district and even religious schools, under specific circumstances. Many states, such as Indiana and Florida, have created numerous alternatives – from charters and tax credits to education savings accounts – that help *all* families access schools that fit their children’s needs.

Myth: We have enough “pluralism” through charter schools and vouchers.

Fact: Charters and vouchers move us in the right direction, but they are still bitterly contested and do not represent a comprehensive, pluralistic approach. Once we quit pitting schools against each other, and help all schools improve academically, we will be closer to the pluralist ideal.

How can I learn more about pluralism?

A few introductory resources, below.

[“No One Way to School: Educational Pluralism and Why it Matters.”](#) TEDxWilmington.

[“Education for the Common Good.”](#) *Education Next*.

[“To Improve Education in America, Look Beyond the Traditional School Model.”](#) *Brookings Institution*.