Blue Jean Nation 'Blowing off the Founders'

Posted on Aug 25, Posted by Mike McCabe, Blue Jean Nation Category Wisconsin



Our founders saw public education as basic to cultivating the moral and civic virtues needed for people to exercise their rights and duties as citizens. But over the years, this mission has been lost, putting democracy itself at risk.

ALTOONA, WI - If you take the long view of history, our school system has strayed far from its roots. What today are called public schools originally were known as common schools. Central to the mission of common schools was making democracy possible.

In 1779 Thomas Jefferson proposed providing basic education to the masses. Civic literacy was at the heart of Jefferson's plan. He emphasized the study of history as a means of cultivating moral and civic virtues and enabling the masses to know and exercise their rights and duties. To Jefferson, schooling's purpose was basic education for citizenship, a public investment in the capacity for self-government. He famously observed, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."

Noah Webster, whose spelling book and dictionary of the English language immeasurably aided the fragile new republic by helping to expand the lettered population, considered education to be the most important business of civil society.

The common school movement really took off in the 1830s, led by reformers like Massachusetts lawyer and legislator Horace Mann who called on government to guarantee the schooling of all children and with evangelical zeal pitched free universal education as "the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance wheel of the social machinery."

The idea of schools as first and foremost laboratories of democracy and builders of social capital continued gaining momentum as the next century dawned. In 1911 Wisconsin identified schools as “social centers” where not just students but anyone in the community could gather to discuss the issues of the day and develop solutions to the challenges facing society.

Somewhere along the line, this mission has been lost. Today’s schools focus on serving the needs of our economy but not our democracy. Responding to intense public pressure to place ever greater emphasis on vocational preparation, they concern themselves more with producing skilled workers than good citizens. Civic instruction has been pushed aside as more hours of math and science and the addition of technology classes and vocational training were ordered while neither the school day nor school year has been lengthened.

Today, civics is hardly taught at all. Even at the college level, occasional lip service is paid to the idea that the highest office in a democracy is that of citizen, but what it takes to be an active and constructive citizen is researched less and taught less by political scientists than any other dimension of their discipline. Look at the political science course offerings of just about any higher education institution and you find courses on the American presidency and on Congress and the court system, but not Organizing 101. There are many courses in public administration examining how the bureaucracy works, but almost none on how social movements get built.

How strange that in a country that boasts of being the world’s greatest democracy, we really don’t teach democracy. We teach government, reluctantly and half-heartedly, and we teach it in a way that puts elected officials, appointed bureaucrats, career civil servants and judges in the spotlight. Jefferson’s call to invest in the capacity for self-government is no longer heeded. Horace Mann’s balance wheel of the social machinery has come off the vehicle. Webster’s dictionary surely can be found in today’s school libraries, but his dedication to the school’s role in promoting civil society is conspicuously missing.

A nation that claims to be a democracy but neglects to make citizenship education a priority is one that is very much at risk.

Tags: Untagged