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## Preserving the Public in Public Schools: Visions, Values, Conflicts, and Choices by Phil Boyle & Del Burn

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## BOOK REVIEW

### **Saving our Public Schools for the Sake of Democracy**

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*Review of Boyle, P. and Burns, D. (2012). Preserving the Public in Public Schools: Visions, Values, Conflicts, and Choices. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Education. 209 pp; ISBN 9781610485432*

*Preserving the Public in Public Schools* is a timely intervention in the current discourse on educational policy and research where the word *public* has become synonymous with failure, inefficiency and something to get rid of. It is not too surprising that the term has become part of the popular jargon; and as a victim of political polarization (McAvory & Hess, 2013), has been used to invoke passion in advocating for or against the status quo. As a starter, Boyle and Burns deconstructs the term *public* with an introduction captioned, “The Public in Public Schools.” Written in an easily accessible language, the book explains the term *public* in relation to *republic*, as well as to other values which define the concept *American*.

The book’s preface includes seemingly provocative statements such as these: “Public schools have little to do with children” (Boyle & Burns, p. xiii); and “there are no new arguments or solutions in the battles over the direction and future of public schools” (p. xiv). The provocation does not only get the reader glued to the book, but its simply articulated arguments also make such claims interesting and convincing. The writers do not hide their support for public schools as they state the purpose of the book as an attempt to “identify the right questions that would preserve public schools” (p. xv). Written primarily for school boards and administrators, public school leaders, and citizens at large, the book is organized into five sections with 10 chapters and useful subheadings to get the attention of reluctant readers.

Using four American public values as a framework – liberty, equality, community and prosperity-- the book explains in thorough detail the tensions between individual freedoms and rights on the one hand, and the common good on the other; and the inherent contradictions embedded in their usage. Taking the term *freedom*, for example, depending on which preposition comes after it, its meaning changes drastically. For example, as home-schoolers want freedom *from* government-sponsored education and *from* social and political influences, other groups want freedom *of* choice in order that they can choose either from options in public schools, or to use vouchers and tax credits to select schools of their choice. If you hear both groups shouting *freedom*, they might not be advocating for the same thing. Similarly, people feel they are being fair when they advocate for a flat budget cut for all schools. The paradox of equity is that context is important: “Sometimes treating everyone or every district the same is fair. But sometimes treating everyone or every district differently is fair” (p. 179).

The book asserts that these tensions come into play in debates about public schools whether the issues are political or technical. For example, the attempt by Massachusetts to require preschools to teach children how to brush their teeth became a four-value policy problem as people raised issues about mandates (liberty), minority children (equality) disease and hygiene (community), and the use of time and resources (prosperity) (p. 136). Democracy is therefore not just about voting, as people erroneously believe, but also about the opportunity to engage in moral and ethical choices, such as “how we choose to treat those values, colleagues and fellow citizens with whom we disagree” (p. 151). For this purpose, public schools are tools of democracy and an indispensable part of Americanism. To the authors, any attempt to do away with public schools would be robbing democracy of educated minds that are able to tolerate opposing arguments without accepting them. In this era of stringent testing and accountability, I join Boyle and Burns in asking, “If we think it’s important to ask how well students score on standardized tests, shouldn’t we also ask how well students are prepared to protect religious freedoms and uphold the standards of the Constitution?” (p. 36).

The latter part of the book, written in a how-to-style, attempts to provide directions to inform educated debates on subjects without narrowing answers to a yes-no or either-or. In their words, policy problems are like onions: “They have layers ... peeling the layers to identify the public values involved is the key to crafting solutions that make collective decisions possible” (p. 142). Consequently, step-by-step guides with illuminating examples are provided in the book to aid the facilitation of controversial deliberations without inviting the acrimonies associated with political debates. I do not fully subscribe to this part of the book because it over-simplifies the issues and attempts to discourage controversy. I have doubts if the one-solution-fits-all approach would be the panacea for all divergent and complex public school debates in all contexts.

I also have an issue with the structure and organization of the book. With a total of 14 chapters, including a prologue, introduction, conclusion and epilogue, the book is divided into five sections, with each of the sections having an average of a two-page introduction. In my opinion, this is too many chapters for a 200-page book. Although the arrangement might have served a purpose, the frequent breaks (18 in all) do not make for a smooth read, as recurrent truncations take away from its literal flow.

These issues notwithstanding, the book is a must-read for everyone interested in education. Besides the people that it targets, I recommend *Preserving the Public in Public Schools* to educational researchers. Reading the book provides more insight into public perceptions and misconceptions about public education and would inform studies on public education, democracy, citizenship and Americanism. Although the title might be off-putting for opponents of public schools, I still recommend it for them because they often miss the fundamental arguments involved in public education debates, and this book would be a great starter.

## References

Boyle, P., & Burns, D. (2012). *Preserving the public in public schools: Visions, values, conflicts, and choices*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Education.

McAvoy, P., & Hess, D. (2013). Classroom deliberation in an era of political polarization. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 43, 14-47.