



# Phi Delta Kappan

The professional journal for educators

Sign up for our newsletter

Join/Subscribe

Donate

## Telling new stories about school

Sarah M. Stitzlein and Kathleen Knight Abowitz

November 25, 2019



Getty Images/photo illustration: J. Hirshfeld

*Reframing our narratives about school to focus less on individuals' economic futures and more on our shared responsibilities could improve outcomes for our children and our country.*

Many of us grew up hearing idyllic stories of olden days in one-room schools where children in hard-working communities gathered, with strict no-nonsense teachers keeping order. Decades later, we watched school life unfold in the 1950s and 60s with dull classes but fun-filled days in *Grease*, *Happy Days*, and *The Wonder Years*. At the turn of the century, we told stories of sitting in rows of desks listening to teachers drone on, of going to prom, and of cheering for the high school team — often assuming that everyone had the same experience across America.

The stories we tend to tell about education today are very different from past narratives; they reflect our era of school choice and competition. They often focus on parents attempting to give their kids every possible advantage by seeking schools that offer the best resources and the latest technology. For some families, this starts as early as preschool, as though Ivy League admission depends on which preschool a child attends. We see these stories play out in best sellers like *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* and in Facebook posts where parents simultaneously bemoan the rat race of finding the best schooling while boasting about their child's latest achievement, perhaps in hopes of setting their

## MORE ON THIS TOPIC

### It ain't easy to change the narrative

By Rafael Heller

November 25, 2019

### Dismantling the wall between church and state: The case of public education

By Tina Cheuk and Rand Quinn

October 22, 2018

### A Look Back: How Kappan has discussed the meaning and mission of public schooling

By Teresa Preston

October 22, 2018

### Public schools for private gain: The declining American commitment to serving the public good

By David F. Labaree

October 22, 2018

### The courts, the schools, and the Constitution

By Justin Driver

October 22, 2018

## PODCASTS

Featuring *Kappan* authors

In partnership with

[Research Minutes](#)



child apart from the pack. Responding to increasing economic inequality and competition, intensive parenting is on the rise, with the image of helicopter parents now widely recognized (Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019).

At the same time, there are contrasting stories of violent and poor-performing inner-city schools where no one wants to go. Traditional public schools — particularly those serving Black and Brown children — are often described as “failing.” And because families are willing to do anything they can to get their kids out of these schools, they’re ready to listen to stories celebrating charter schools that come to the rescue. We see these stories play out in popular films like *Won’t Back Down*, education documentaries like *The Lottery* and *Reborn*, and PBS documentaries like *School Inc.*

These stories about schools aren’t just the stuff of movie plots. They reflect people’s experiences in and with schools. They will not, of course, reflect what is happening in all schools everywhere, but they meaningfully convey significant, authentic experiences within our public schools.

### **The economic stories of schools**

The stories we tell about schools influence our collective imagination about what schooling is and can be. They are much more than just tales we tell; they actually shape our beliefs and the realities that result from them. Following political theorist Yaron Ezrahi (2012), we contend that stories about schools often function as “political imaginaries” or “fictions, metaphors, ideas, images, or conceptions that acquire the power to regulate and shape political behavior and institutions” (p. 3). They “become powerful tools that, when performed, can produce social and political facts” (p. 38).

When we tell the story that going to school and working hard is the path to a good and lucrative job, we are promoting a set of beliefs that may lead to specific actions and outcomes, such as seeking a school that maximizes one’s money-making potential. And so those stories mold the educational landscape through the policy makers we select (those who promise a strong return on our taxpayer investments in schools); the sorts of schools we offer (those aimed at preparation for well-paid careers, especially in areas high in social and economic capital); and the ways we go about assessing their quality (through tests that weed out poor-quality teachers and distinguish the best and brightest students). Our stories about education matter; they shape our preferences in the voting booth and actions on educational policies. They produce real political outcomes. Perhaps the most significant example of this was the film *Waiting for Superman*, which contained moving images of children who lost out on lotteries enabling them to enroll in the charter schools they so deparately desired. It led to financial support from the foundations of Bill Gates and others and caused citizens to donate money to the schools featured. It also led many voters to not only discover charter schools, but also to back pro-charter candidates and call for charter school expansion (Russo, 2014).

Narratives celebrating economic aims are not new. Americans have long emphasized the economic aims of education, whether those be earning certifications that lead to lucrative employment or inculcating the skills needed to succeed in a hierarchical marketplace (Labaree, 2007). Since the late 19th century, business and education leaders have often been united in their expression of the idea that schools would be viewed as irrelevant and even wasteful if they could not directly link education to future job preparation and outcomes. (Labaree, 2007, p. 95). In recent years, as market-based educational competition has become more entrenched in policy making, stories about economic values and practices have ushered in the idea of schooling primarily as a vehicle for private gain (Labaree, 2018). This was recently demonstrated to us in a meeting with an Ohio state senator talking with constituents about education reform. The senator used an increasingly common narrative about school choice to illustrate how he wished the public education system worked. If he could wave a magic wand, he stated, he would create a new system wherein choosing one’s school would be as easy as choosing tasty cereal from well-stocked supermarket shelves and paying for it with a credit card (Abowitz & Stitzlein, 2018).

Produced by the  
Consortium for Policy Research in Education  
at the University of Pennsylvania  
Graduate School of Education

## **COLUMNS & BLOGS**

### **CAREER CONFIDENTIAL**

Phyllis L. Fagell

**Administrator unsure how to handle teacher complaints about his own son**

November 19, 2019

### **ON LEADERSHIP**

Joshua P. Starr

**Gen Z on race and teaching**

November 25, 2019

### **THE GRADE**

Joseph Williams

**A bold, imperfect start for the Washington Post’s Laura Meckler**

November 20, 2019

### **UNDER THE LAW**

Julie Underwood

**Balancing free speech and student safety**

November 25, 2019

### **WASHINGTON VIEW**

Maria Ferguson

**The higher education crisis**

November 25, 2019

### **BACKTALK - A GROUP BLOG**

**Keep religion out of mindfulness**

Thomas Armstrong

November 25, 2019

Those advocating for market-based approaches tell stories with a purpose. And their stories are powerful in part because they obfuscate the interests and ideologies at play behind them. An image of happily selecting a school from an array of good choices — much as one does when selecting cereal — emphasizes the power of the consumer, but not the monetary benefit to those whose product is selected, or the harm to those who were left behind or unable to make the same choices. Policy makers, like the one we witnessed in Ohio, can employ such stories about school choice to increase privatization, reduce government oversight, and advance market-based reforms. Such stories have agency; they are not neutral, but rather act to bring about change, often working with the interests of school privatizers (Erikson, 2011).

Because of the power of our stories about education, we need to carefully consider the stories we tell, recognizing their potential not just to reflect experiences in schools, but to shape them. Indeed, some widespread stories may be aiding in the erosion of support for public education. The current choice-based climate is replete with narratives that foster little reflection on public schooling's value as a public institution, its role in sustaining democracy, or its history of working to bring equal educational opportunity to more children — all of which are key aspects of the common school model and its democratic aims in early America.

Because of the power of our stories about education, we need to carefully consider the stories we tell, recognizing their potential not just to reflect experiences in schools, but to shape them.

Share this on



The individual choice and market-based stories have in many ways gained prominence over the often nostalgia-driven stories of the traditional common school. But what stories might more powerfully guide the future of education? If citizens want to shape schools with democratic purposes in mind, citizens and public education advocates need to intentionally craft new stories about present and future policy choices, resisting narratives of competition and the individualistic values driving them. Telling new stories that foreground the public or shared purposes of public education may lead us to choose candidates and back policies that better serve our children and our communities.

### **Public persuasion through storytelling**

How might telling new stories lead to real and significant changes in education? One way is through the process of “public persuasion” described by political theorist Deva Woodly (2018). To understand how public persuasion works, Woodly studied how support for gay marriage policies increased between 1994 and 2014, despite many people’s continued reluctance to embrace the morality of homosexuality. During those years, LGBTQ+ activists recognized the power of the dominant narratives about marriage being between one man and one woman and related religious views of the immorality of gay and lesbian sexual relationships. Those activists sought ways to get the public to see the issue of marriage from a new perspective that did not hinge on sexuality or sexual behavior, but rather on family and equality. As a result of seeing more stories, interviews, and artistic displays about thriving queer families, as well as a renewed emphasis on equality as an American ideal, the public came to more widely support gay marriage. Chronicling the appearances and impact of these stories, op-eds, and interviews over a decade in two major newspapers, Woodly (2018) uses this example to explain how storytellers can frame the problem they’re concerned about in a way that will expand how people “interpret what is at stake in political debates and shift attention to new bases for decision-making” (p. 24). Through this reframing, the public meaning of a concept or policy changes.

As with the case of gay marriage, Americans today also hold many and sometimes conflicting values about education. For example, while many parents agree that their children should work hard in school to earn a good job later in life, few would reduce their child’s educational experience *only* to the purpose of employability or earning potential. Many also want their children to be happy, to enjoy learning, and to find and develop passions in schools that may have little to do with job preparation. This idea that parents

value schools for more than one reason is one of the lessons of the opt-out movement, in which parents have asserted their power to make a statement about how high-stakes testing detracts from meaningful learning (Kirylo, 2018). Processes of public persuasion in such parent campaigns can bring these varying priorities to the foreground, compelling the public to shift its attention away from a narrow focus on one educational purpose, and toward a broader set of aims. Reframing education narratives in this way may enable more citizens to question dominant economic narratives and bring other values into clearer perspective. For example, a parent who deems children's happiness as important may decide to support a school levy or budget to fund extracurricular activities that bring children joy, even though it is costly to taxpayers and may not deliver specific job skills.

To enable this process, we can create stories that reframe the issues at stake so that citizens can reconsider how they view schools, their purposes, and their practices and, as a result, weigh their conflicting values about schooling differently. These new stories should not simply or blindly celebrate all public schools; we reject simplistic marketing approaches designed to "sell" public schools. It is far better to promote authentic narratives that present education's democratic and public purposes, activate our sense of shared responsibility for public schools, and enliven our shared interest in the educational successes of all children in our communities (Abowitz, 2014; Stitzlein, 2017).

### **Crafting political and moral stories**

So what stories should we tell as citizens to reframe the issues, expose all that is at stake in public education, and encourage people to weigh values about schooling differently? Stories that emphasize the political and moral aspects of public education, rather than solely focusing on economic benefits, are a good place to start. Such stories can affirm a vision that better embraces all students, provides quality learning, and builds citizens for regional, national, and global problem solving.

Two narratives stemming from long traditions in the United States might be recovered and reworked to serve as alternatives to narratives of economic competition. First, we might tell the story of our country's founding and continued growth and success by focusing on how the phrase "We the people" centers all citizens within the Constitution (Tarcici, 2017). It implies a narrative of engaged citizens who not only work and contribute to our country's economy, but also take responsibility for fulfilling our country's political ideals of freedom, opportunity, and equality. Within this story, schools become places where we cultivate the habits of good citizenship necessary for self-government and enable children to fulfill American ideals. The preservation and improvement of such schools become more than an economic investment in individual taxpayers' children. Rather, actively supporting and participating in schools become the responsibility of all citizens because our schools are central to our continued strength and well-being as a country.

Foregrounding public schools as the key setting and citizens as the key players in the story invokes a narrative about citizenship as shared fate, where we are connected to one another and are mutually shaped by the world around us (Ben-Porath, 2013). Importantly, we craft our shared fate as we work together to ensure our own well-being and that of our neighbors. In contrast to a story of "We the people" that draws on narrow or nativist notions of citizenship or individualist goals for our own families, such a story would urge us to broaden our educational values to include those of democratic citizenship. More than just a story, it becomes a call to deliberate about what we want from our schools and to work to shore up schools that promote those values.

Second, we could tell a story of schooling that demonstrates a moral commitment to embracing all children and fulfilling not just their economic needs, but also their social and emotional and other needs. This story might begin with the ideal of public education as a free system that provides high-quality education, a moral good that all children deserve, not just our own. Examination of how well this story has played out in our country would quickly reveal that, for far too long, schools have not sufficiently met the needs of all children in all communities. A focus on this story may shed light on how recent privatization and charter policies have exacerbated racial segregation and drained

money and resources from public schools, leaving some children (often poor children of color) behind while others flee to charter or private voucher alternatives (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013).

This is a story that uncovers what historian of education Jack Schneider (2018) calls “the limit of our embrace” — the reality that some children in our schools are often excluded or overlooked. By exposing inequities in school practices, teachers, and facilities, this story may play upon our moral outrage to provoke listeners to action so that the promise of public education is fulfilled for all children. As Schneider writes:

Perhaps, then, a reset is in order. Instead of telling a largely untrue story about a system in decline — a story that absolves us of any personal responsibility — we might begin telling a different story: about a system that works. It works to deliver a high-quality education to those we collectively embrace. And it works in a different way for those we have collectively refused. When a school fails, it is because we have failed.

This, then, would be a story about widening our embrace and acting on our responsibilities to others and thus fulfilling the promise of public education in a way that may open new pathways, new approaches, and new outcomes in the future. In this story, those characters who have not been well served in the past take a new role on center stage alongside others who have been long valued. The story should cast a spotlight on the poor children, the children of color, and those with less power who attend many of our public schools, yet tend to remain in the shadows when we emphasize stories about economic success or school choice.

An example of one such story, created by the Partnership for the Future of Learning, is conveyed in a short video called “The Promise of Education” (<http://futureforlearning.org/promise>). “Promise” demonstrates the power of this particular narrative, as well as the impact of new media to help share schooling stories across multiple

domains and audiences. It tells the story of how public education has supported some communities and failed others by shutting down, consolidating, and privatizing schools, thereby “abandoning those who need the most support.” Once it has raised viewers’ moral concern, the video shifts to ways that we can better support schools, delivering a moral imperative, reminding viewers that “a promise is a promise,” and urging citizens to act on behalf of our kids, our community, our country, and our democracy. Reclaiming a key word from the economic lexicon, it urges citizens to “invest” in our public schools for the benefit of all children and suggests that such investment is not merely monetary.

Such stories may activate our moral care for children other than our own by challenging the overemphasis on the economic concerns parents hold for their own kids or even for the country as a whole. Some charter and voucher proponents recognize this fact and use such narratives in marketing their schools. These strategies are successful to the extent that too many voters do not understand how charter and voucher policies have, built into their DNA, what Schneider (2018) would call a limited embrace and are decidedly not designed as avenues for well-funded, inclusive, and effective educational solutions for *all* children. As awareness is growing regarding charter and voucher policies and their problematic implications, so may public understanding grow about the importance of a moral commitment to all children. This awareness comes from citizens, researchers, and varied citizen associations pushing to ask broader moral and political questions about — and take actions to achieve — inclusive opportunity and well-being in our schools.

Citizens can and do look beyond their own economic self-interests when it comes to their schools. Social and cultural narratives that prioritize these and only these educational interests must be challenged, overtly and widely. Over time, new narratives may produce significant political shifts at the ballot box and in education policy preferences.

Over time, new narratives may produce significant political shifts at the ballot box and in education policy preferences.

Share this on



## Stories matter

Our stories about schools matter. They influence not only how we understand what schools do and whom they serve, but also our own actions and the political shifts that result from them. Using public persuasion, we can combat widely held individualistic economic views of schooling that have contributed to inequities in society and driven privatization. We can construct new stories that reframe the stakes around education by prioritizing political and moral concerns and highlighting the needs and interests of all of our children. We can craft and share those stories together, engaging in public reasoning and public work (Abowitz & Stitzlein, 2018) and building new political visions to reshape the future of public education.

## References

- Abowitz, K.K. (2014). *Publics for public schools: Legitimacy, democracy, and leadership*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Abowitz, K.K. & Stitzlein, S.M. (2018). Public schools, public goods, and public work. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 100(3), 33-37.
- Ben-Porath, S. (2013). Education for shared fate citizenship. In D. Allen & R. Reich (Eds.), *Education, justice, and democracy* (pp. 80-100). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Doepke, M. & Zilibotti, F. (2019). The economic roots of helicopter parenting. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 100(7), 22-27.
- Erikson, A.T. (2011). The rhetoric of choice: Segregation, desegregation, and charter schools. *Dissent* (Fall), 41-46.
- Ezrahi, Y. (2012) *Imagined democracies: Necessary political fictions*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Kirylo, J.D. (2018). The opt-out movement and the power of parents. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 99(8), 36-40.
- Labaree, D.F. (2007). *Education, markets, and the public good: The selected works of David F. Labaree*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Labaree, D.F. (2018). Public schools for private gain: The declining American commitment to serving the public good. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 100(3), 8-13.
- Orfield, G. & Frankenberg, E. (2013). *Educational delusions? Why choice can deepen inequity and how to make schools fair*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Russo, A. (2014). *How Waiting for Superman (almost) changed the world*. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute.
- Schneider, J. (2018, October 15). How are America's public schools really doing? *The Washington Post*.
- Stitzlein, S.M. (2017). *American public education and the responsibility of its citizens: Supporting democracy in the age of accountability*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Tarcici, A. (2017, September 23). The people who pledge allegiance to the U.S. Constitution. *The Atlantic*.
- Woodly, D. (2018). The importance of public meaning for political persuasion. *Perspectives on Politics* 16(1), 22-35.

[Sarah M. Stitzlein](#)

[Kathleen Knight Abowitz](#)

**SARAH M. STITZLEIN** (Sarah.Stitzlein@uc.edu) is a professor in the School of Education and affiliate faculty in philosophy at the University of Cincinnati in Ohio. She is the author of *American Public Education and the Responsibility of Its*

*Citizens: Supporting Democracy in the Age of Accountability* (Oxford University Press, 2017) and *Learning How to Hope: Reviving Democracy through Schools and Civil Society* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

No comments yet. [Add Comment](#)

[← Back to current issue](#)

## Phi Delta Kappan

*Phi Delta Kappan* offers timely, relevant, and provocative insights on K-12 education policy, research, curriculum, and professional development. *Kappan* readers include new and veteran teachers, graduate students, school and district administrators, university faculty members (researchers and teacher educators), and policy makers.

### CONTACT US

Email : [kappan@pdkintl.org](mailto:kappan@pdkintl.org)

Phone : 812-339-1156  
800-766-1156

Fax : 812-339-0018

Office : 1820 N Fort Myer Dr.,  
Suite 320, Arlington, VA  
22209

Mail : P.O. Box 13090,  
Arlington, VA 22219

Submit a manuscript: [manuscripts@pdkintl.org](mailto:manuscripts@pdkintl.org)

### 2019-20 THEMES

September 2019 :	PDK Poll
October 2019 :	ESSA Progress Report
November 2019 :	Education in a Stressed-Out Nation
Dec. 2019 / Jan. 2020 :	The Stories We Tell About School
February 2020 :	Language Matters
March 2020:	What Kind of Profession Is Teaching?
April 2020 :	Anti-intellectualism in American Education
May 2020 :	The Joy of School

Advertise with Kappan