



# THE POWER OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

*By Robert M. Stwalley III, Ph.D., P.E.*



Public education holds the most essential place possible within a society that functions as a representational democracy. It is outlandish to expect that an uneducated citizenry could make rational and logical choices about their leadership if they are ignorant of the key issues of the times and unaware of the background of those individuals vying for office. A minimum amount of education is vital before one can be trusted responsibly with the franchise. This idea in many ways explains the American Founding Fathers' lack of trust in the common people and why under the constitution, they insulated the highest offices in the land from direct voter accountability. American citizens during the revolutionary period had fairly low general levels of educational achievement. However, the Founding Fathers understood the deficiency within their new nation and sought to correct it. In particular, Thomas Jefferson wrote in multiple documents about his concern for the collective American "mass of the mind." Jefferson had seen European society and understood how a lack of education within peoples' lives kept many from the success they might have otherwise achieved. He understood that education was the key to personal betterment, and he set-out to do something about it for his countrymen. Jefferson was a huge proponent of what today we call public education. He promoted it throughout the United States, and eventually, founded the University of Virginia.

Jefferson understood that by educating the people of the country, he was raising the caliber of the country. Public education has become far more successful than he could have imagined. It provides opportunities for all students, regardless of their backgrounds or resources. It provides social mobility for ambitious and determined individuals, contributing to economic growth and societal advancement. Public schools prepare individuals for fruitful participation in society. The beliefs of active citizenship, democratic principles, and responsibility are taught in public schools, and these ideals within our culture are the sustainable concepts that form the

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common core of the society that we live in. Public education serves as the largest unifying factor within our nation, and it prepares all citizens for participation in our form of government.

Public education is aspirational. It emphasizes the positive, encourages social cohesion, and acts as a unifying influence within our culture. Students of all families are brought together under a single, unified system to learn about their society, heritage, and world. This educational enterprise provides a deep-seated sense of community to the students because it allows people of different races, backgrounds, and upbringings to come together and participate in all kinds of activities as equal partners. Public schools expose our children to a broad range of subjects, including science, applied technology, literature, and the arts. The wide range of learning encourages an appreciation for diverse perspectives, critical thinking, and creativity. By schooling the community's

children within a single local system, public education is able to diminish social barriers and foster understanding between those of different upbringings.

Public education drives economic activity and social mobility. Beyond educating our youth with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in the workforce, public schools foster healthy competitiveness. Student participation in rules-based athletics, formalized academic challenges, performance art, and STEM competitions simulates the methods of the Western professional and commercial world, where these students will work and earn their livings. Public schools set the tone for their lives by promoting team-based activities, which will continue throughout their working careers and drive forward the economic development in our society.

Public schools contribute to the cultural commonality of our nation. Public schools are diverse and draw strength from that diversity. They expose children to a wider world than they could ever hope to see through their family's efforts or on their own. They utilize a common curriculum and promote positive, inclusive values in students. Public schools play a critical role in civic education, encouraging volunteer activity, charity, and engagement at the local level. They provide equitable access to educational resources for all students, giving them an equal opportunity to succeed in life. Public schools represent the best of our various community's cross-sections, and they prepare our students for adult participation in our pluralistic society.

The list of inspirational and positive activities within the public school system is nearly too numerous to provide, but it is essential that all of these activities take place, so that no child comes through the system without finding something of interest or lacking the tools for survival and happiness in our modern society. Schools are a safety net. We provide food and health services for students whose families cannot afford them. English is taught to non-English speakers, and students are shown that other adults in their lives care about their success and are available to them as mentors. All children, including those with special needs, are welcome in our buildings. Our schools demonstrate daily the power of inclusiveness, tolerance, and understanding. Teacher-led lessons break down stereotypes and prejudices. The extra-curricular family activities run by the public school system encourage a sense of unity and shared community identity among the participating children and families. Public schools train our children how to act in society after they leave school.

It is a time-tested truth that the classroom of today will be the society of tomorrow. Lincoln observed and made note of this fact over 150 years ago, which is precisely why we need to be so careful with this extremely valuable and important cultural institution. The job of public schools is not to instill a state religion, create worker-bee employees, or condition one-sided partisan voters, but to develop an enlightened citizenry. Those who would diminish or destroy public education are ultimately attempting to change our society into something very different from what we have today, and we should remain extremely skeptical of those efforts and the motivation of those promoting the plans to do it. Public schools produce creative and insightful graduates, who can think for themselves. Great things are happening every day in our public schools, and each day brings a renewed effort to improve upon the performance of the day before.

The power of public schools is what they do for the future. The students of today will become the citizens of tomorrow. They will understand and know what we teach them. Our primary job is to ensure that the knowledge they gain is sufficient for them to make their way in the world. However, our role as board members also means that we set the tone and gestalt for the entire enterprise. If we expect our society to stand the test of time, then the culture that

we create within our school buildings must be worthy of that goal. We must insist that all students be included in the educational enterprise, with no one excluded. We must ensure that the

diversity of human culture be respected in our lessons, and we must provide the resources that are adequate to the task of educating the next generation. We must create the culture within our schools that we want to see in our society. If we do these things correctly, then we will develop productive, self-reliant students with creative talents, empathy for others, and civic responsibility. Our graduates can be trusted to play their role in our form of government. Public education is

a foundational cornerstone of our society, and it holds a significant role in our nation. It is vital that we proceed with intelligence and caution when discussing changes within an institution that allows our country to function as the world's leading representational democracy. That result is due to the power of public education. 🌱

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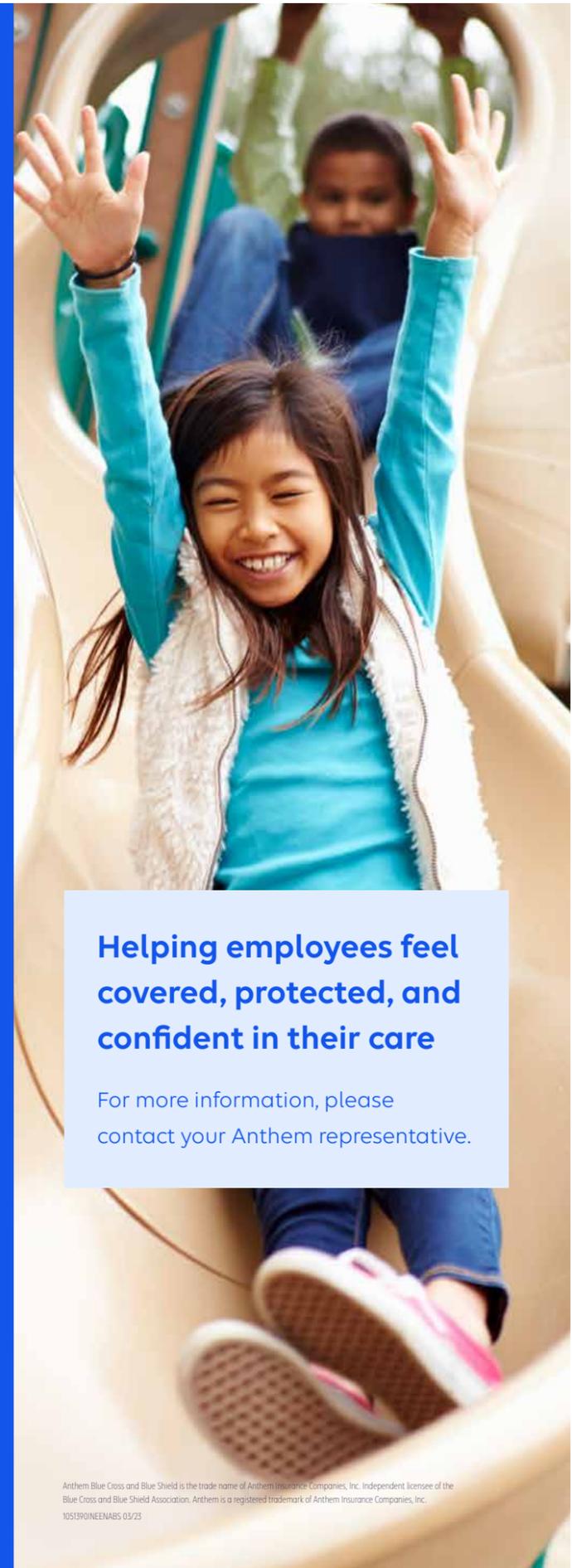


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