



Private Schools and the Making of Americans

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There is a strange notion going around that public schools are the only place, or the best place, to inculcate students with the values of citizenship. David Labaree, a professor in Stanford's School of Education, made this claim recently in his piece, *Public Schools for Private Gain: The Declining American Commitment to Serving the Public Good*. By his assessment, citizens are made by bringing children together in public schools; and by this very act of congregating together, we somehow teach children what it means to be an American. As Labaree puts it in his description of the 19th-century common-school movement that laid the foundation for our modern public education system, "The key characteristic of the new common school was not its curriculum or pedagogy but its *commonality*."

That simply is not the case.

In his 1953 book, "Educational Wastelands," Arthur Bestor, an advocate for strong liberal arts education in public schools, argued:

The school is not creating a democratic structure of intellectual life merely by gathering all the nation's children within its walls. It becomes an agency of true democratization only if it sends them forth with knowledge, cultural appreciation, and disciplined intellectual power—with the qualities, in other words, that have always distinguished educated men from uneducated ones.

Bestor's argument is that what we teach in schools matters more than simply gathering children together.

I was reminded of Bestor's comment as I watched the children of The Classical Academy de Lafayette (including my own) on [KSDK News](#). The school was featured because the students memorized the Gettysburg Address last month in commemoration of the 155th anniversary of Lincoln's speech. You can watch the full video of the students reciting the Gettysburg Address [here](#).

Listen to the words of the address and listen to the comments by Katy McKinney, the school's director. I think you will see that it is quite possible for any school, even a private school, to instill a virtuous character in students and to teach them what it means to be a citizen.

There are many arguments against school choice, but it is time we put this one to bed. We do not need enforced conformity to teach students what it means to be an American.

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