The Three Pillars of Educational Pluralism

Availability, Access, and Accountability

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July 2025

A Cardus Research Report

CARDUS

How to Cite

DeJong VanHof, Joanna. "The Three Pillars of Educational Pluralism: Availability, Access, and Accountability." Cardus, 2025. https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/the-three-pillars-of-educational-pluralism/.

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Key Points

- Educational pluralism is a system of education found in many democracies around the world, in which the government funds and regulates, but does not necessarily deliver, the education.
- Educational pluralism as a philosophy differs from school choice and privatization, which are two other ways of thinking about schooling options.
- To put it simply: educational pluralism views education through the lens of institutions and communities in addition to the individual and the state. By contrast, the lens of school choice is of the individual versus the state, and the lens of privatization is of state versus non-state actors.
- There are three pillars, or essential characteristics, that should undergird a robust policy of educational pluralism: (1) a commitment to the availability of educational options, (2) broad access to these options, and (3) accountability to families, civil society, and government for educational quality and student outcomes.
    - **Availability**: Schooling options should extend beyond the availability of choice within district systems. The options available should reflect the full range of diverse needs and values of children and communities.
    - **Access**: Broad access to options should be facilitated by government funding and by reducing or eliminating geographic and technical barriers.
    - **Accountability**: Schools should operate according to established norms that unify schools in their local spheres and build societal trust more broadly. Government has a role to play in ensuring that broad goals are met relating to educational outcomes, student safety, and the like.

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Introduction

Educational pluralism is a system of education in which the government funds and regulates, but does not necessarily deliver, the education.[1] Many democracies around the world, such as Australia, Denmark, and England, have plural systems. Some Canadian jurisdictions currently have a higher degree of educational pluralism than others do. The province of Alberta, for example, recognizes and funds district (public) schools, separate (Catholic) schools, independent schools, and charter schools. Alberta does not fund each type to the same degree, but it does provide some funding to each. Alberta also has a relatively robust set of regulations that help to ensure the quality of the education that is provided in each type of school. Ontario, by contrast, has less educational pluralism, since it provides no funding to independent schools and has minimal regulation of them.

This paper distinguishes educational pluralism from school choice and privatization, which are two other ways of thinking about schooling options. Next, it lays out three pillars, or essential characteristics, that should undergird a robust policy of educational pluralism: availability, access, and accountability.

School Choice, Privatization, and Educational Pluralism: What's the Difference?

School Choice

"School choice" is a term first popularized by the American economist Milton Friedman, who viewed education as a free-market enterprise.[2] Over time, it has come to encapsulate both a set of ideas and a body of academic research about education, as well as a popular movement toward education reform, based primarily in the US. Proponents of school choice typically emphasize parental involvement and choice in education,[3] an economic theory in which choices drive innovation and efficiency,[4] and the conviction that large bureaucratic systems do not adequately serve the needs of a diverse population.[5]

1 This definition is taken from A.R. Berner, *No One Way to School: Pluralism and American Public Education* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 3.

2 M. Friedman, "The Role of Government in Education," in *Economics and the Public Interest*, ed. Robert A. Solo and Eugene Ewald Agger (Rutgers University Press, 1955), https://la.utexas.edu/users/hcleaver/330T/350kPEEFriedmanRoleOfGovttable.pdf.

3 C.L. Glenn. "A Quiet Revolution: Putting Parental Choice to Work for Social Justice," *Journal of School Choice* 18, no. 2 (2024): 290–305, https://doi.org/10.1080/15582159.2024.2348890; C.L. Glenn, *Contrasting Models of State and School: A Comparative Historical Study of Parental Choice and State Control* (Continuum, 2011), https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350091313.

4 C.M. Hoxby, ed., *The Economics of School Choice* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), https://www.nber.org/books-and-chapters/economics-school-choice; P. Dolton, "A Review of The Economics of School Choice," *Economic Journal* 113, no. 485 (2003): F167–F179, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0297.00103.

5 J.E. Chubb and T.M. Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (The Brookings Institution, 2011).

The Canadian scholars Lynn Bosetti and Dianne Gereluk see the views of philosophers John Locke and John Stuart Mill as precursors of school choice:

> For [Locke and Mill], state-provided and regulated schooling curtailed the fundamental aim of education, which was to foster autonomy and diversity in a liberal society. The constraints and uniformity found in state-regulated schools acted as tools of control and oppression rather than vehicles for freedom and choice. The role of the state . . . should be limited to providing funding for education, ensuring that the curriculum provided students with basic skills in literacy and numeracy.[6]

Because it tends to emphasize the freedom of the individual over the involvement of the state, school choice often attracts supporters of a conservative, classically liberal, or libertarian bent. Yet school choice is a broad and diverse movement. From its inception, it has also attracted support on the left of the political spectrum, primarily by advocating for access to schooling options for low-income and minority students.[7] School choice often champions the expansion of choice within district (public) systems, not only outside of them.[8]

School choice focuses primarily on the availability of options, but it is also concerned with students' access to options, through government funding. In recent years in the American context, this access has increasingly come through funding that "follows the student," such as tax credits, voucher programs, and Education Savings Accounts.[9] Because the school choice movement seeks to limit the role of the state, the extent to which it includes an accountability to government is not always clear.

Privatization

The term "privatization" is often used interchangeably with "school choice" by critics of options outside of government-run, district schools. Yet the two movements differ in important ways. School choice is centred primarily on the US experience, while privatization is a global phenomenon connected to the global expansion of education over the last half century.[10] School choice begins with the assumption that alternative options to district (public) schooling should exist—in other words, it casts itself in relief to a common schooling system—while privatization denotes a steady process in which non-governmental options increase. These non-governmental forms of education may exist as schools, but they also include such educational forms as tutoring businesses, curriculum providers, testing bodies, and for-profit online course offerings.

6 L. Bosetti and D. Gereluk, *Understanding School Choice in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 2016), 20–21.

7 J.E. Ryan and M. Heise, "The Political Economy of School Choice," *Yale Law Journal* 111, no. 8 (2002): 2043–136; D.M. Houston, "Polarization, Partisan Sorting, and the Politics of Education," *American Educational Research Journal* 61, no. 3 (2024): 508–40, https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312241228280.

8 Bosetti and Gereluk, *Understanding School Choice*, 23.

9 EdChoice, *The 123s of School Choice: What the Research Says About Private School Choice Programs in America*, 2024, https://www.edchoice.org/research/the-123s-of-school-choice-2/.

10 For a discussion of the mechanisms of this global expansion, see S. Davies and N. Guppy, *The Schooled Society: An Introduction to the Sociology of Education* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 67–76.

Privatization is seen particularly in countries in which state-provided education is viewed as inadequate or absent, causing private for-profit or non-profit actors to enter the space. School choice views education through the lens of the individual versus the state, whereas privatization uses the lens of the state versus non-state actors.

Verger et al. define privatization broadly as "a process through which private organizations and individuals participate increasingly and actively in a range of education activities and responsibilities that traditionally have been the remit of the state." They go on to clarify that privatization "tends to happen more at the level of service provision (with a higher presence of private schools) and funding (with families and other private actors paying for a larger portion of total educational expenses) than at the level of ownership in a strict sense."[11]

Privatization offers availability of options but does not address the question of access for those who cannot afford them. Critics of privatization argue that education is a human right, to which all students should have access. The perceived threat of privatization around the world has culminated in the Abidjan Principles, an unofficial but influential document that advocates for state-delivered education systems and expresses deep skepticism of private interests in education.[12]

Privatization also does not address the question of accountability to the state or other entities for the outcomes of education. Privatization with low or no accountability may produce adverse outcomes.[13] In jurisdictions with minimal capacity for state regulation, corruption may also be a concern.[14]

Educational Pluralism

The term "educational pluralism," and the outlook associated with it, attempts to broaden the capacity of school choice to respond to both individual and communitarian purposes.[15] The term has primarily been introduced through the work of Boston University professor Charles Glenn.[16] While educational pluralism is the norm in many democratic countries around the world, its roots lie in northern Europe, particularly in the Netherlands and Belgium.

This outlook asserts that education is a matter of institutions and communities in addition to individuals and the state. The state is one such institution, and there should be a pluralism of

11 A. Verger, C. Fontdevila, and A. Zancajo, *The Privatization of Education: A Political Economy of Global Education Reform* (Teachers College Press, 2016), 7.

12 "Abidjan Principles," March 2019, https://www.abidjanprinciples.org/en/principles/overview.

13 See for example J. DeJong VanHof, "Can We Call Them Credit Mills? Assessing the Legitimacy of Some Independent Schools in Ontario," Cardus, 2024, https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/can-we-call-them-credit-mills/; P. Srivastava and G. Walford, "Non-State Actors in Education in the Global South," *Oxford Review of Education* 42, no. 5 (2016): 491–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2016.1217695.

14 UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report: Non-State Actors in Education* (2021–22), https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/non-state-actors, 26.

15 A. D'Agostino and I. Grau i Callizo, "Toward Understanding the Global Landscape of Educational Pluralism," *Journal of School Choice* 16, no. 3 (2022): 365–87, https://doi.org/10.1080/15582159.2022.2088072.

16 See, for example, Glenn, *Contrasting Models*; and A.R. Berner, *No One Way to School*.

options within the state system in order to meet the needs and desires of varied individuals and communities. But beyond the state there should also be options offered by communities or civil-society organizations. In other words, educational pluralism does not place primary emphasis upon a conception of "common schooling" or a district system; it includes structural choice by design. All of these options should be considered to engage in public schooling: the education of those who are growing into citizens who will contribute to society's shared life in the public square.

These communities or civil-society organizations often have a particular cultural, linguistic, or religious/ethical character, or a particular educational philosophy. "The basic elements of pluralism," scholars Anthony D'Agostino and Ignasi Grau i Callizo say, "are an openness to the role of non-state provision and educational offerings that are reflective of particular philosophical or religious beliefs and value systems."[17]

International dialogue about education emphasizes its role in advancing human capital or human rights. While educational pluralists do not reject these aims (indeed, some of them ground educational pluralism within human rights discourse), the core purpose of education for many advocates of educational pluralism extends beyond these areas. Many of the schools and actors within this movement tend to emphasize the holistic formation of persons, often referred to in this context as "human flourishing."[18] Each school has a unique understanding of how to bring about flourishing, and each one applies its particular pedagogical approach toward the formation of its students.[19]

A Note on Terminology

Scholars of educational pluralism point to challenges relating to an inconsistent use of terminology and unclear or limited definitions. The most frequently applied terms to describe state and non-state schools are "public" and "private." These terms are inadequate, however, in contexts of robust pluralism. For example, charter schools are "public" schools that may be privately managed, and "private" schools may be government-funded. Moreover, the term "private" carries the connotation that such schools exist to exclude others or to advance private interests. This may be accurate in some cases, but many "private" schools in Canada are non-profit institutions that strive to be accessible to applicants and view themselves as contributing to the public good.

Cardus uses the terms "district" and "independent" schools to denote public and private schools. The term "district" was chosen because it accurately reflects the reality that in most education systems, students attend a public school for their district, based on their place of residence. The term "independent" was chosen for schools that are fully or partially managed independent of government. Thus the category includes charter schools, independent schools that are state-funded, and independent schools that receive no state funds.

17 D'Agostino and Grau i Callizo, "Toward Understanding," 366.

18 See, for example, L. Swaner and A. Wolfe, *Flourishing Together: A Christian Vision for Students, Educators, and Schools* (Eerdmans, 2021); "The Human Flourishing Program," Institute for Quantitative Social Science, Harvard University, https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/.

19 For a summary of the variety of such schools that exist in Alberta and Ontario, see D. Hunt, J. DeJong VanHof, and J. Los, "Naturally Diverse: The Landscape of Independent Schools in Ontario," Cardus, 2022, https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/research-report/naturally-diverse/; and D. Hunt and J. DeJong VanHof, "Exploring Alberta's Independent School Landscape: Diversity, Growth, and Trends," Cardus, 2024, https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/research-report/exploring-albertas-independent-school-landscape.

Understanding education as fundamentally about personhood formation often means guiding students, through a content-rich curriculum, to acquire the skills to identify their unique gifts and interests and apply them meaningfully toward a chosen vocation. It also means forming students with a deep-rooted sense of their own identity, able to glean from the virtues of their religious tradition or cultural heritage and thoughtfully engage with others beyond it. Such an overarching purpose changes educational priorities. It also necessitates embracing a pluralist approach to education, if one truly believes that holistic student formation—developmental, social, and academic—is best served by education that aligns with one's culture or moral tradition.

Because of this holistic purpose, educational pluralists advocate for the inclusion of low-income students through accessible school choice, and the movement has historically been embraced by progressives and conservatives alike.[20] And because of its recognition of the communitarian aim of education—that education is for a common good, with social outcomes—it also recognizes the need for accountability to government.[21] On the world stage, however, educational pluralism is often misconstrued as privatization, when in fact the two ways of thought have different philosophical perspectives on personhood, social and civic formation, the rights of parents and children, and the duty of the state.[22]

We now turn to the three pillars that a robust policy of educational pluralism requires.

Availability

The availability pillar refers to the presence of diverse schooling options in a particular location or jurisdiction. If education is an inherently moral enterprise, as the educational pluralism movement argues, then availability of schooling options based on different visions of the good life is key to serving diverse needs and communities. The major international human rights covenants also affirm that education cannot be separated from the values that undergird it, when they acknowledge that parents should choose "religious and moral education of their children in

20 A. Berner, "The Progressive Case for Educational Pluralism," Cardus, 2024, https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/perspectives-paper/the-progressive-case-for-educational-pluralism/.

21 A. Berner, *Educational Pluralism and Democracy: How to Handle Indoctrination, Promote Exposure, and Rebuild America's Schools* (Harvard Education Press, 2024).

22 For an in-depth analysis of this debate and advocacy for robust pluralism, see D'Agostino and Grau i Callizo, "Toward Understanding," 370–76. The more recent distinction between children's rights and parents' rights in education is a departure from the understanding of relevant human rights treaties and the primacy traditionally afforded to parents, community, and culture in raising children. D'Agostino and Grau i Callizo argue that proponents of child autonomy rely on a flawed anthropology and the illusion of neutrality in state schools and that they are unable to demonstrate consistent empirical support for the idea that children become better citizens when they are exposed to different teaching than they receive in their home or community.

conformity with their own convictions."[23] The meaningful availability of schooling options is an expression of a given jurisdiction's commitment to these principles.

Charles Glenn, in his book *Contrasting Models of State and School*, describes the pillar of availability as a form of "horizontal subsidiarity," necessarily inclusive of schools formed as civil-society institutions that deliver education.[24] Since civil-society institutions lie between the state and the individual, they are "the principal expressions of the real values and the real needs of people in our society. They are, for the most part, the people-sized institutions."[25] In Glenn's view,

> Market forces are incapable of generating the sense of moral obligation which is essential to good education and effective social services. Thus subsidiarity in education is concerned not only with organizational forms and dynamics but also and more centrally with the spirit and the values which may animate schools. What they do and how they treat those entrusted to them is, for good or ill, the expression of deeply held beliefs about human life.[26]

He notes that these subsidiarity principles—encompassing the right of people in society to both form and attend schools reflective of their needs and values—were embedded in international human rights covenants after World War II, partly as a response to democracies' abuse of education for conformist or fascist purposes.[27]

This horizontal subsidiarity—the availability of schooling options that deliver education independently of government—is broader than district (public) school choice; that is, choice *within* government-run systems. In the various Canadian provinces, for example, district-school choices include options based on language communities (anglophone, francophone) and religious communities (Catholic or separate), as well as alternative district schools. Nicole Stelle Garnett, an expert in education law, describes horizontal subsidiarity beyond district systems as not merely a reflection of choice but also an "institutional pluralism" that helps to ensure that

23 United Nations, "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights," Article 18:4, 1966, https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights; United Nations, "Convention against Discrimination in Education," Article 5:1b, 1c, 1960, https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-against-discrimination-education; United Nations, "International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights," Article 13:3, 1966, https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights.

24 The subsidiarity principle states that decisions should be made at the lowest possible level of authority. This principle has been adopted by the European Union in the Treaty of Maastricht and has important policy implications for educational pluralism (Glenn, *Contrasting Models*, introduction, x). For a fuller explanation of the relationship of subsidiarity to educational pluralism, see the introduction and chapter 6 of Glenn's *Contrasting Models*.

25 Glenn is here quoting approvingly from Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, *To Empower People: From State to Civil Society*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael Novak (American Enterprise Institute, 1996), 164 (quoted in Glenn, Contrasting Models, xi).

26 Glenn, *Contrasting Models*, xi.

27 Glenn, *Contrasting Models*, xii.

schooling options are reflective of diversity in conceptions of meaning, purpose, and the good life.[28]

Some researchers have found that where non-government schooling options receive government funding similar to what district schools receive, student performance, especially among underprivileged students, substantially increases across all schools—more so than where choice is offered within district systems only.[29] This work is corroborated by research finding that religious students who are matched with religious schools have higher academic outcomes in mathematics than unmatched students, for whom there is no "match effect" found.[30]

The availability of schooling options, then, is a fundamental pillar of educational pluralism, rooted in the principle that a morally neutral education is both impossible and undesirable. On this point, it is noteworthy that of the four standards for education articulated in a "General Comment on the Right to Education" by UNESCO in 1999, acceptability of education—that is, the extent to which it is deemed "relevant, culturally appropriate and of good quality"—is placed within the purview of students and their families, not the state.[31]

The extent to which a given jurisdiction embraces the pillar of availability may be measured by the presence of constitutional and legislative protections that permit independent education to exist and operate. These protections should extend to protection for education shaped by religious convictions, to home-schooling or home-education options, and to education that embraces a particular pedagogical or philosophical ethos. Another measure is the range of diversity within non-government options, relative to the population. The extent to which civil-society organizations, such as independent school associations or school boards, have formed and support the delivery of independent education can indicate this pillar's thickness and substance.

Access

The second pillar of educational pluralism is access. It is one thing for a jurisdiction to have many options available, and another for its citizens actually to be able to attend them, if the cost is significant. The principle of access is expressed in the same human rights covenants referred to

28 N.S. Garnett, "The Comparative Legal Landscape of Educational Pluralism," *Arkansas Law Review* 73, no. 3 (2020): 463, https://scholarworks.uark.edu/alr/vol73/iss3/1/. A pluralist vision of education includes accepting the existence of forms of schooling with which one does not agree; schools may exist that one would not choose for one's own children. There are, of course, limits to pluralism and to conceptions of "the good life" that must be reckoned with. For a helpful discussion regarding this, see "Limitations and Open Questions," in Ashley Berner's *Educational Pluralism and Democracy*, 85–105.

29 L. Woessmann et al., *School Accountability, Autonomy, and Choice Around the World* (Edward Elgar, 2009), 110.

30 C.R. Pakaluk, "What Good Is a Good Fit? Religious Matching and Educational Outcomes," *Cosmos + Taxis* 9, nos. 1 and 2 (2021): 3–30, https://cosmosandtaxis.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/pakaluk_ct_vol9_iss_1_2-2.pdf; C.R. Pakaluk and N. Swanson, "A Good Fit: How Matching Students and Schools by Religion Improves Academic Outcomes," Cardus, 2021, https://cardus.ca/research/education/reports/a-good-fit/.

31 United Nations Economic and Social Council, Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, "General Comment No. 13: The Right to Education," December 8, 1999, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/TBSearch.aspx?Lang=en&TreatyID=9&DocTypeID=11.

earlier, in which educational freedom includes the right of families and children to access forms of education that match their values. Since educational pluralism views education as a social good, the state should facilitate access to the forms of schooling that are available. And one of the main factors in increasing access is the government funding of independent schools and schooling options.

Various Canadian provinces offer substantial choice within district systems.[32] However, jurisdictions that also facilitate access to independent-school options through the provision of government funds, may thereby increase access to options for low-income communities.[33] Forms of assistance may include tuition grants and transportation and meal subsidies.

Beyond the provision of government funding to all school types, accessibility can also be measured by the existence and extent of open-enrolment policies, which enable students within district systems to go beyond the often socioeconomically divided options based on postal code. Numerous studies suggest that open-enrolment polices can have a positive impact on student outcomes.[34] Measuring student outcomes comparatively, then, may be a fruitful but limited measure of the effect of educational pluralism in a jurisdiction. And more broadly, accessibility can be measured by the proportion of students enrolled in each school type.

In its General Comment, UNESCO Right to Education refers to three dimensions of access to education: non-discrimination in its distribution, physical accessibility, and economic accessibility.[35] It is worth considering each of these dimensions as a part of the second pillar.

32 S. Asadolahi, J. Farney, T. Triadafilopoulos, and L.A. White, "Charting the Rise of School Choice Across Canadian Provinces: A Policy Index," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 1 (2022): 188–207, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423921000901.

33 As examples, consider the increased college graduation rate of low-income students in a Florida tax credit scholarship program and a Washington, DC opportunity scholarship or, more locally, the charter of Thrive Elementary School in Alberta, which exists to serve low-income families in Edmonton, as well as the funding policies for independent schools in British Columbia, which differentiate based on operational cost per student and provide greater access for students with special needs. P. Wolf et al., "Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Final Report," NCEE 2010-4018, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 43, https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED510451; M. Chingos and D. Kuehn, *The Effects of Statewide Private School Choice on College Enrollment and Graduation* (Urban Institute, 2017), 18–19; "Thrive Elementary," Thrive Charter School Society, 2023, https://thriveschool.ca/; Government of British Columbia, *Classification of Independent Schools* (Aug 2, 2024), https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/administration/legislation-policy/independent-schools/classification-of-independent-schools; Government of British Columbia, *Inclusive Education Programs and Funding—Independent Schools* (Sept 12, 2024), https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/administration/legislation-policy/independent-schools/inclusive-education-programs-and-funding-independent-schools.

34 See, for example: V. Ledwith, "The Influence of Open Enrollment on Scholastic Achievement Among Public School Students in Los Angeles," *American Journal of Education* 116, no. 2 (2010): 256–57, https://doi.org/10.1086/649493; D. Carlson and S. Lavertu, *Interdistrict Open Enrollment in Ohio* (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2020), 32–33, https://fordhaminstitute.org/ohio/research/interdistrict-open-enrollment-ohio-participation-and-student-outcomes; J.B. Cullen, B.A. Jacob, and S.D. Levitt, "The Impact of School Choice on Student Outcomes: An Analysis of the Chicago Public Schools," *Journal of Public Economics*, 89 (2005): 740–42.

35 United Nations Economic and Social Council, Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, "General Comment No. 13: The Right to Education."

Non-discrimination in the distribution of educational opportunities, broadly speaking, means that all members of society have access to their preferred form of schooling and that strenuous effort is made to remove unequal standards of schooling—in terms of both evaluation and quality. It is not intended to discourage the formation of independent schools and systems according to various pedagogical or religious values.[36] Physical accessibility refers to the requirement that schools be held to minimum health and safety standards, and that they be accessible geographically or via technology. Economic accessibility means that education should be affordable, if not free, for all students who wish to attend.

In some cases, independent schools' autonomy may come into conflict with requirements that governments attach to funding.[37] Some independent schools may refuse the funding if they deem the compromise to be too great.[38] Jurisdictions committed to educational pluralism should seek to balance the goals of funding (greater availability and access to education) with the goals of accountability, which is the third pillar discussed below.

Access to education should come neither at the expense of school independence nor at the expense of educational quality; otherwise, the aims of access to educational pluralism will not be realized. This brings us to the third pillar of educational pluralism, that of accountability.

Accountability

The pillar of accountability serves to cohere schools around established norms, to unify schools in their local and societal spheres, to build societal trust, and to ensure that shared goals established for student outcomes are being met. This element of educational pluralism ensures school quality while preserving and protecting independence.

The state has an interest in the education of children, both in terms of the basic knowledge and skills needed to lead an adult life and in terms of the formation of citizens. One core part of citizenship in a modern liberal democracy is the ability to respect differences among diverse communities and to negotiate those differences through political participation and compromise. The state needs its citizens to do this in order for democracy to function. A state policy of educational pluralism reflects in the state itself the core attribute it desires to produce; an authoritarian approach to education in a common or conformist district system will not produce the type of citizen a democracy needs. Indeed, the tendency of the state toward uniform approaches to education has been exploited by authoritarian regimes for propaganda and indoctrination throughout history. Especially within a project so formative to personhood

36 UNESCO, "Convention against Discrimination in Education," Article 2, 1960, as cited by the United Nations Economic and Social Council, Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, "General Comment No. 13: The Right to Education," 15.

37 N. Kober, "Lessons from Other Countries About Private School Aid: Higher Public Funding for Private Schools Usually Means More Government Regulation," Center on Education Policy, Washington, DC, 1998, https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED447589.

38 M. Lee, E. Price, and L. Swaner, "The Effect of Private School Choice Regulations on School Participation: Experimental Evidence from the Christian School Sector," *Journal of School Choice* 18, no. 1 (2022): 138–56, https://doi.org/10.1080/15582159.2022.2113011.

as education, then, accountability must be undertaken in balance with the other two pillars of access and availability.

How can it accomplish this? Charles Glenn adopts the concepts of "vertical subsidiarity" and "sphere sovereignty" as instructive for the development of accountability policy. Vertical subsidiarity in some respects is similar to the organizational concepts of decentralization and localized control. Sphere sovereignty, a concept that comes from the Netherlands, argues that each institution of society (the family, the state, the school, etc.) has its own distinct role and responsibilities. All authority does not rightfully belong to government, which then loans or gives it to downstream institutions. Rather, social institutions, of which government is one, each has authority within its own sphere or domain.[39] Vertical subsidiarity in education aligns well with another of the four standards for education articulated in a General Comment on the Right to Education by UNESCO, that of adaptability. UNESCO defines adaptability as the feature by which education is "flexible so it can adapt to the needs of changing societies and communities and respond to the needs of students within their diverse social and cultural settings."[40] Systems of education in which organizational control is apportioned to immediate spheres of influence, and in which agency is appropriated within those spheres, will be flexible, adaptable systems.

Within a framework of vertical subsidiarity, there are three types of institutions that authority in education belongs to and that schools should be accountable to. These are the institutions of family (living within local communities), of civil society (such as schools, school boards, school associations, and accrediting bodies), and of government (in the form of applicable legislation, branches of government, and associated government agencies).

Family

That parents have some authority over the education of their children has been recognized by the Supreme Court of Canada and the US Supreme Court.[41] The application and extent of this authority varies according to jurisdiction, and the once-universal principle of *in loco parentis* ("in place of the parent") has diminished within state-delivered systems of education over time, as teachers are increasingly responsible to government rather than to parents and local communities.[42] Independent schools intentionally buck this trend, continuing to locate significant authority for education with parents and parent communities. This authority then takes shape in various schooling contexts as a negotiated partnership between family and school to achieve their shared educational purpose.

39 Glenn, *Contrasting Models*, 131.

40 United Nations Economic and Social Council, Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, "General Comment No. 13," 3.

41 R. v. Jones, 1986 CanLII 32 (SCC), [1986] 2 SCR 284, https://canlii.ca/t/1ftqk; McReynolds, James Clark, and Supreme Court of the United States, *U.S. Reports: Pierce v. Society of Sisters, 268 U.S. 510*, 1924, https://www.loc.gov/item/usrep268510/.

42 K. Brien and B.L. Stelmach, "Legal and Cultural Contexts of Parent-Teacher Interactions: School Councils in Canada," *International Journal About Parents in Education* 3, no. 1 (2009): 3–4, https://doi.org/10.54195/ijpe.18157.

Civil Society

Civil-society organizations can hold schools accountable for the extent to which these schools are fulfilling a stated purpose and vision for education. These organizations also enable representation and negotiation between government and schools, toward public accountability measures.[43] In Canada, independent school associations engage in this process to varying degrees. One particularly robust example is the Federation of Independent School Associations, in British Columbia, which represents a coalition of school associations and engages as a key stakeholder in government policy formation.[44]

Government

What is the nature of the authority that government properly exerts in education? For what should the state hold schools and education systems accountable? Every jurisdiction that adopts a pluralist approach to education negotiates these questions differently, and studies that compare jurisdictions can provide insight into the accountability mechanisms and approaches that promote pluralism while also maintaining a high level of public trust.

Cross-national research has shown that school systems with higher student achievement on PISA—an international test of fifteen-year-olds in mathematics, reading, and science—are those with high student morale, a positive disciplinary climate, and government accountability for academic outcomes through such measures as national exit exams.[45] The same research also finds that school systems that allow and promote the availability of and access to non-government schooling options see higher student performance. It seems reasonable, therefore, for government to hold pluralist education systems accountable for student outcomes, through mechanisms such as national exit exams, or the tracking of graduate outcomes, and to set standards for indicators of school quality, such as through compliance with health and safety standards, fiscal transparency, and standards for teacher training or school improvement plans.

Ashley Berner examines the ways in which curricular standards can be used to respect and serve the autonomy of schools in a pluralist system as well as create and engage robust, healthy civic conversation. Both aims can be realized, she argues, when the distinction between indoctrination and exposure is understood and when classrooms exhibit a hospitable climate through the intentional engagement with a variety of viewpoints and perspectives on an issue.[46]

43 Glenn describes how this process works in the Dutch education system in Glenn, *Contrasting Models*, 202–3.

44 V. Cunningham, *Justice Achieved: The Political Struggle of Independent Schools in British Columbia* (Federation of Independent School Associations in British Columbia, 2002), 271–77.

45 Woessmann et al., *School Accountability*, 109–10.

46 Berner, *Educational Pluralism and Democracy*, 45–61.

Conclusion

Education policy has long been fraught with tension when the conversation focuses on school choice or privatization. In North America, this conversation is frequently polarized, or worse, weaponized. It is time, as Ashley Berner remarks, for "a new conversation about education."[47] If we ground this new conversation in a commitment to educational pluralism and put the flourishing and formation of the human person at the centre, a balance can be found between the individual and communitarian aims of education. We will also be able to recognize that all education is inherently moral, that is, based on some particular vision of the good life.

Educational pluralism seeks to accommodate a broad spectrum of beliefs about how best to provide this core institution of democratic society that is the education of children. It marries availability of very different options with broad access to them, and requires a commitment to negotiated, public accountability within distinct institutional spheres, working together in the common pursuit of quality education for each student and family.

47 Berner, *Educational Pluralism and Democracy*, 1.

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