

**Article Summary:** The Center for Public Justice has been addressing issues of injustice in the US education system for many years. In this article, Christy Wauzzinski, an educator in Pittsburgh, discusses how her association with CPJ for nearly four decades has profoundly shaped her thinking, and that of a whole group of citizens in the Pittsburgh area, about the roots of injustice in education.

Wauzzinski describes how encounters with the work of CPJ and its founder James Skillen inspired some in this community of citizens to establish a number of faith-based schools and start several businesses, and prompted other civic engagement efforts like a well-researched voter's guide. She explores four main areas of injustice in our education system and calls Christian citizens to a careful and sustained engagement to bring about policy changes necessary to ensure diverse schools to meet diverse needs.

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**Article Title:**

### **Radical (to the Root) Justice in Education**

For over thirty-five years now, a group of Christian citizens in Pittsburgh have been communally discussing and practicing education and politics, with the Center for Public Justice supporting our journey along the way. Conferences in the mid-1970s and the high-energy conversations that followed them were fueled initially by Jim Skillen's speaking, writing, and late-night discussions. In the early decades of our work, CPJ encouraged and challenged us to work for justice, not only through political activity, but through a vision for structural activism enacted in all rooms of life—in organizations, neighborhoods, and schools.

Skillen, along with other thinkers, shared invaluable insights with us about being in the world yet not of it. This shaped our biblical worldview and gave us the courage to act from within it. As a result, a group of us started and have sustained an intentionally urban multiracial Christian school grounded in an integral curriculum.

By integral, we mean internally coherent in the way woven cloth is held together. We paid much attention to Colossians 1: 15-17. "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all

things, and in him all things hold together.” In our learning approach at school, we try to study creation, both nature and culture, in the whole integral way we encounter it.

In this cluster of years, four other Christian schools formed as well. The communities that started and supported the schools throughout western Pennsylvania also started businesses. This movement prompted other civic engagement efforts like a well-researched voter’s guide in Pittsburgh. Three of us enrolled in the Masters of Education degree program at University of Pittsburgh and intentionally took classes together. This was a rich time of communal Christian fellowship as we struggled to have a structural public witness in the university setting. CPJ’s publications provided us with grounded and compelling arguments for a view of justice in education that bolstered us through this time.

Fast forward to the present where the Community Institute for Education (CIE) has been a huge blessing here. This effort, led by Charity Wahrenberger, equips citizens to understand the hidden assumptions of our education policy and then to work to shape that policy to more just ends. It is a remarkably radical (to the root) challenge, what we would call “structural evangelism” whereby we offer a biblical perspective on the roots of the injustice in our education and work from there to make systemic changes. Because education policy decisions can be difficult to understand or access, CIE gave us tools to promote neighborhood discussions and give public witness to our interdependence and challenge the root assumptions of individualism in our culture.

As an educator, I have worked in both public and independent Christian schools in both rural and urban settings. My engagement with CPJ over the years has helped to shape my thinking about some of the main problems in our educational system that are rooted in particular assumptions that we can discuss and address in policy changes. As I see it, there are four major areas that are of particular concern in education that need our careful and sustained engagement as Christian citizens: economic and racial injustice, treatment of schools like businesses, religious injustice, and a philosophical vacuum concerning curriculum.

## **1. Economic and Racial Injustice**

The abiding economic and racial injustice of the American educational system is exactly the opposite of what has been expected of our public schools historically. The messianic view of education holds that all of our societal problems can be solved by public schooling. Education is expected to acculturate immigrant families, teach English, prepare people for our workforce, create social mobility and/or make people rich, monitor student physical and emotional health, provide students with two to three meals per day, and dissolve racism. The exaggeration here is only slight. More alarming is the root of these expectations. The Jeffersonian design of US government relied on an

educated populace. This true understanding expanded to a totally secular belief that with schools, a nation can pull itself up by its bootstraps, one student at a time.

This idea that common indoctrination via public schools can erase deep cultural differences and prejudices stemming from distortions of these differences is clearly not working. The evidence is indisputable that we can't merely racially integrate schools and thus teach ourselves out of our racism. The school where I currently work, Pittsburgh Urban Christian School (PUCS), has joined a national network of high performing/mixed to low income public, charter, and independent faith-based schools committed to sharing best practices. Part of the effort is to address racial and economic injustice within our educational practices. The particular perspective that PUCS brings to the issue is that these discussions have to be shared with families, neighborhood associations, religious groups, and businesses to discern together what justice looks like and how to achieve it.

## **2. Schools Treated Like Businesses**

One of the key principles stressed in the CIE workshops is the idea of differentiated spheres in our society, such as businesses, government, schools, churches, mosques, synagogues, unions, families, nonprofits, and neighborhood associations. These differentiated spheres have differentiated responsibilities. For example, schools are not businesses and should not be run by the government as if they were.

Horace Mann won public support for universal public education on the promise that schools could be the means to larger cultural aims, such as equipping immigrants to work in factories. Students sitting in organized rows and moving to bells did not evolve from pioneer one-room school houses. Those schools, sometimes called "blab schools," looked more like organized chaos. Modern schools were intentionally designed to serve business. In an age of failing schools, the current expression of this is the high-stakes testing model for school system accountability which adopts an approach to evaluation from business.

In a factory, success is checked by quality control. Someone stands at the end of the assembly line and checks the product with an easy-to-use tool. Standardized tests are that easy-to-use tool that is essentially inadequate to check the quality of a school. Nurture is not an assembly-line process. Schools need justice (cultural room) to be schools--institutions of education that have their own organizing principals. Schools have developed in culture to assist parents in the whole life nurture of their children. They are most effective when they operate on their own understanding of what this means for their students, and that can't be evaluated by a machine scored test. I am encouraged to see that the high stakes testing emphasis is currently being significantly modified in several states.

### **3. Religious Injustice**

I taught in a government-funded school for ten years, and now I work in a non-government school. That is important phrasing because private school has connotations of being non-public. Our school is very public in its intent to serve the needs of our community--we just are not publically funded. In his book, *Disestablishment a Second Time*, Skillen and others gave me powerful tools for articulating a radically (to the root) just view of public education. My eyes were opened to the implicit values of publicly funded schools that pretend to be religiously neutral and to not promote a particular worldview.

I believe that if a non-government school is truly willing to serve the public, it should be able to be publicly funded. True pluralism in the public funding for schools of varying worldviews is a justice issue; it's not a matter of private schools trying to get a share of taxes. In our neighborhood, PUCS stands as a signpost for both racial reconciliation and community involvement. We promote community partnerships that give students from poverty motivating exposure to professions with which they now have no experience and, as a result, can't "see" themselves as a future medical, legal, or computer professional. Christian, Muslim, Jewish or other schools with pedagogical approaches explicitly rooted in an articulated worldview that serve the public in these ways deserve public funding.

### **4. Philosophical Vacuum Concerning Curriculum**

The myth of religious neutrality in education, when secularism is actually the religion, has significant consequences for education. Curriculum philosophies and therefore instructional design emerge from a set of assumptions about the nature of the child, the purpose of education, the role of the family, and many other considerations.

Traditional curriculum approaches (sometimes called "Back to Basics") tend to view the child as a brain to be filled with knowledge and to be trained to reason. Progressive curriculum approaches (sometimes called "child centered") tend to view the child as a personality to which we should tailor the curriculum and instructional methodology. Secular assumptions all tend to think of education as under the authority of professional experts (teachers and administrators). A public justice approach would view education as part of the overall nurture of children and therefore under the authority of parents.

In a culture where scientific pragmatism (our trust that all cultural problems can be solved by gathering data and finding a process "that works") is the accepted norm, the pendulum has historically swung, and continues to swing, between "back to the basics" and "progressive" education are endless. When one or the other is in vogue, it's only a matter of time before it falls out of favor because it didn't get quick results or hasn't solved our social problems. If public policy for education allowed for different

assumptions about families and children and the purpose of education to inform our curriculum philosophies and instructional design, we could perhaps see a change in curriculum to accommodate these differing worldviews.

### **Working Together for Diverse Schools**

The current educational leadership in our federal government is promoting an agenda that would curtail the scope and diffuse the power of the federal role in the public educational system. While this effort could result in vouchers for private schools that would help parents afford the best education they can find, I think it is born from the assumption that education is essentially an individual and private matter.

In contrast, at my current school, we call ourselves an “independent” school because we believe we have a role in the public square of education and in the public square of the city of Pittsburgh and Borough of Wilkinsburg. The CIE workshops helped me understand that schools need to work with businesses, labor unions, families, churches, other organizations, and other schools to nurture children for the entire multi-faceted public good. School is a community effort, not a service purchased by individual parents. The current thinking at the national level is more along the lines of individual purchase. It’s partially driven by the assumption that the public system is so big and broken that it can’t be fixed. This leads to an “each one for him/herself and those few we can help” mindset that is not biblical or just. It leaves our poor urban and rural school children bereft of adequate learning environments.

While it is tempting to join the voucher push because it would help faith-based schools, a truly biblical understanding of justice requires us to patiently pursue a more thoughtful position and advocate for policy that upholds the common good as much as we advocate for religious justice for our own schools. Justice in education will not come from a “survival of the fittest” contest of schools. It will come about by working together to make all schools healthy, and in that process, give room for diverse schools to meet diverse needs.

While living outside of Pittsburgh, first in the Northwest and then in the Midwest, my husband and I had opportunities to teach Sunday School in the local church, both individually and together. We were often struck by two views of politics within the church: Either parishioners were committed to leave citizenship behind when it came to their faith or they embraced a civil religion that attached biblical faith to conservative politics. CPJ publications, Jim Skillen’s talks, and the awareness of CPJ’s policy work gave us encouragement and insight to teach a different approach outside of liberal and conservative assumptions. We had the tools to argue that Scripture provides a basis for a culturally engaged Christian approach that can be civilly worked out. We need this approach in our education policy today.