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## In defence of public schooling

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# **Comment: In defence of public schooling**

James Campbell

I WAS recently reading back copies of the old United States Congressional Record for the US Senate -- I admit a rather esoteric habit. In the 107th US Congress for April 18, 2002, I came across a reference to Mark Twain. Like many of my readers, when I come across a reference to Twain I immediately take note and a sense of anticipation increases as I reflect to myself that any reference to such a great author rarely disappoints.

In the Congressional Record, Senator John Russell Carnahan of Missouri finishes off a speech in defence of public education quoting Twain. Carnahan quoted Twain as follows: "When I was a boy on the Mississippi, there was a proposition in a township there to discontinue public schools because they were too expensive. An old farmer spoke up and said: 'If they stopped the schools they would not save anything, because every time a school was closed a jail had to be built.'"

I found the quote unforgettable, partly because of the simplicity of the prose, partly because I felt that it recognised a fundamental and important contribution that public education makes to society. The quote reminded me that an educated society is one where opportunity and hope characterise our lives.

Without the chance of education, we lose hope and we lose our belief that society can offer us something more than simply a bitter and brutal struggle for profit and advantage.

In other words, education civilises us. Education helps us to realise not simply our intellectual abilities, but of equal importance, education provides us with a moral framework within which our abilities are realised.

Education in the proper sense of the term helps us to realise our dignity and self-respect. Education helps us to overcome captivity in our thinking and resist what Syed Hussein Alatas criticised as the "captive mind" mentality.

Properly understood and experienced, education can help us to foster creativity and hope for a better future.

Challenging captivity of the mind and asserting the possibility that people can realise a life of self-respect and dignity is the fundamental mission of the public school, which seeks to fulfil a purpose that is dedicated to principles of inclusion and advancement for all.

Defending the public school is motivated by a desire to include all citizens in the promise and aspirations of our society.

Upholding the mission of public education is in essence an effort in sustaining the belief that all our children have capacities and capabilities, which, if properly cultivated and nurtured, can be realised.

In this sense our commitment to public education and public schooling is part of a broader pledge to the idea that all fellow citizens and their children deserve a chance and something many of us take for granted: dignity.

If we agree with these propositions than it follows that, the problem of education and its practical manifestation in schooling for children becomes a concern for all.

We cannot and should not see the education of children merely as a private good enjoyed by those who have the capacity or the financial abilities to realise it. Rather, as responsible citizens, we must be concerned with the education and schooling opportunities of all societies' children. In this sense, education is a public concern.

We appreciate the significance for everyone, indeed the centrality for all of us of the right to education for all.

Public education is in essence a public obligation. If we accept that, we have a duty and obligation as citizens to ensure that our young deserve a chance to receive the best education possible then we are also accepting our responsibility as a society to uphold and support public schooling.

Our commitment to education as a public good and not merely as a private benefit confers upon us an obligation to make sure public schooling is not merely a safety net for the less advantaged or a place where those without resources end up.

Rather we have an obligation to insist that public schools are of the highest quality.

I started this opinion with a quote from the US Congressional Record from a rather obscure senator who himself quoted from one of America's greatest literary figures. The reason I did so is because reading the Congressional Record reminded me of the importance of elected representatives upholding and defending public education, and of the vital support that critical intellectuals have provided to the argument for public schooling and its social mission.

The salient point seems to be whether we refer to congressional debates in the US or those within Malaysia over the place of examinations, the place of 1Malaysia in schools or the importance of high performance schools, we confront a similar issue.

We are faced with the importance of public schooling to a decent and fair society, and the centrality of education for the common good.

That we should all recognise that schooling is of concern to all, and that the quality of public schools is an obligation for everyone is a commonly shared point.

This collective duty pooled across national cultures and traditions provides us with a reminder that we share a common humanity and a common obligation.

Supporting public schooling and ensuring a quality education for all remind us that some issues transcend the boundaries we have between us and remind us of bigger things than our own individual interests.

The writer is a Lecturer in Education in Australia and author of *Understanding Reform and the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) Agenda: Discussion and Critique* released by USM Press, 2010. Email him at [jamesca@deakin.edu.au](mailto:jamesca@deakin.edu.au)