

The State *and* Civil Society in Rejuvenating Public Schools

Sarah M. Stitzlein

University of Cincinnati

Quentin Wheeler-Bell is correct when he says that we should proceed with caution when we turn to civil society to rejuvenate public schools. I think his primary interlocutor, Kathleen Knight Abowitz, would also agree. We certainly need to account for struggles within civil society itself, heralded long ago by Robert Putnam,¹ and, as seems quite important to Wheeler-Bell, we need to attend to how increasing our focus on civil society might jeopardize the role of the state in public schooling. But he goes much too far in his claim that Knight Abowitz rejects the role of the state and replaces it entirely with civil society. Not only does he not provide evidence to support this claim in his article, I could not find evidence of it in her book, one I have reviewed for *Educational Theory* and used extensively in the writing of my own most recent book.²

The closest thing I could find in her writing is that she uses, to an extent, a post-statist conception of governance when talking about educational leaders and their role in leading the formation of public will through deliberation in civil society and within schools. Despite that, she still relies upon the state elsewhere in the book and appreciates its role in education, but it is not the central focus of her argument. Instead, she hones in on how we might form and employ publics to shore up our schools. She turns to alternative ways to generate public support outside of the state and to think of schools as more than just state- or government-run. As I wrote in that *Educational Theory* review, for Knight Abowitz, “deliberative democracy fosters viewing schools as in a process of governance rather than government-run, thereby adding to her enhanced notion of public schools as more than just government run.”³

If we look closely at her text, we see that she is trying to provide a more deeply democratic form of participation with and governance of schools that the state alone has not been able to achieve. And while she locates public work on behalf of schools largely in the civil sphere, she ties it to the political legitimation of the state and its institution of schooling when she fleshes out her claim that: “Public schools are at their most public . . . when they are morally and politically legitimate.”⁴ There, she ties the criteria of legitimacy to the values of liberal democracy and fulfilling the aims of the public. It’s not that the state should be eclipsed by civil society, but rather that the public work performed in civil spaces can help affirm the legitimacy of the state and one of its key institutions, public schools. Contra Wheeler-Bell’s claims, Knight Abowitz does not shy away from the legitimacy crisis of the state; rather, she emphasizes how public work in the civil sphere aligned with public schools can build legitimacy of the schools and, by extension, the state, encouraging buy-in and support from the public through such legitimating work.

Knight Abowitz’s key goal is to strengthen the connections between people, as publics, and their public schools. She is not trying to decrease the power of the state,

but rather increase the power of the people. As she does so, she begins to explore some of the ways in which we might reshape institutional arrangements and public practices to democratize public schools, an aim that Wheeler-Bell also supports as he highlights the struggles of some educational communities. While provocative, I believe that he is wrong to assert that the legitimacy crisis and calls for privatization are limited only to urban communities of color, and that he is also wrong to assert that Knight Abowitz overlooks this. There certainly is evidence that some of the wealthiest citizens make these calls elsewhere, including in our home state of Ohio. The Chairman of the House Education Committee, despite coming from one of the wealthiest and highest performing suburban districts in the state, persistently calls for privatization and market initiatives even in his own district, arguing that public schools are a form of socialism that citizens believe is bogged down by a bureaucratic state and should end.⁵ I believe that Knight Abowitz also sees the legitimacy crisis as extending beyond only those urban communities of color. Nonetheless, Wheeler-Bell helpfully draws our attention to the exclusionary practices that have limited full and effective public participation in these communities and prevented these schools from being democratic or public. He helps us to identify important aspects of institutional arrangements and practices that need to be ameliorated in order to democratize our schools. He is pushing Knight Abowitz, myself, and others who write in this area to appraise the inclusive practices necessary within what Knight Abowitz calls “publics for public schools” and within the governance of those schools. And he helps us see how that history of struggle has contributed to higher levels of support for alternative schools among some urban communities of color. These are certainly worthy contributions to the conversation.

His discussion of alternative schools usefully responds to the history of exclusion of urban people of color and limitations on their expression of voice, preference, and sharing of experiences within education governance and practice. Perhaps Knight Abowitz’s former work on charter schools and counterpublics might align here with his discussion of alternative schools and the opportunities for foregrounding marginalized voices.⁶ But his turn instead to alternative schools leads us astray from Knight Abowitz’s focus on democratizing traditional public schools, a focus that I believe should not be too quickly shirked in celebration of alternative schools — a move which might also jeopardize the role of the state. Nonetheless, such a turn does offer us helpful insight into one specific element of public participation in need of improvement as we seek to democratize our schools. Such improvement might actually engage in some of the public work that Knight Abowitz calls for in ways that are more just and inclusive, while also adding further responsibilities for the educational leaders that she describes who help to facilitate democratization. And, in light of Wheeler-Bell’s point about the role of the state in ensuring equal opportunity, these improvement efforts might also carve out a more influential role for the state in pursuing such democratization. Finally, Wheeler-Bell’s discussion of alternative schools begs the question of why, in view of alarming evidence that some alternative schools popular in urban communities of color — especially charter schools run by Educational Management Organizations — fail to create the strong

connections to local parents and the space for their participation and deliberation that he desires. In fact, some alternative schools conduct their practices behind largely closed doors, shielding decision-making processes, financial data, and other points of public debate from open conversation and citizen input. Such schools further disempower parents in those communities.⁷

One of the most beneficial elements of Wheeler-Bell's paper is that it draws our attention to the state, not in a way that perpetuates the status quo of state-run schools, but rather one that critiques the state and envisions more democratic and just arrangements between the state, civil society, and schools. It is imperative that we engage in good analysis of the role of the state amidst neoliberal pressures and dramatically changing school governance structures. In the face of hasty calls to get rid of the state — which is seen almost entirely as a bureaucratic and inefficient obstacle to personal freedom — perhaps we might need to reassert the important role of the state, while carving out new roles for it, such as those of collective-action problem solving and mediating conflicts between disagreeing citizens, as he begins to do in this article. He is right to put his focus here and I look forward to seeing more of this in his future work and those of others in the Philosophy of Education Society.

1. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

2. Sarah Stitzlein, *American Public Education and the Responsibility of its Citizens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

3. Sarah M. Stitzlein, "Review of Kathleen Knight Abowitz's *Publics for Public Schools*," *Educational Theory* 66, no. 3 (2016): 405-412.

4. Kathleen Knight Abowitz, *Publics for Public Schools* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Press, 2014), 14.

5. Jim Siegel, "Local State Rep Who Called Public Schools 'Socialism' to Chair Education Committee," *The Columbus Dispatch* (October 23, 2015), http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/national_world/2015/10/22/andrew-brenner-education-chair.html.

6. Kathleen Knight Abowitz, "Qualifying My Faith in the Common School Ideal: A Normative Framework for Shaping 21st Century Schooling," *Educational Theory* 60, no. 6 (2010): 683-702 (part of an invited symposium on charter schooling); Kathleen Knight Abowitz, "Charter Schooling and Social Justice," *Educational Theory* 51, no. 2 (2001): 151-170.

7. I describe these in detail in Sarah M. Stitzlein, *American Public Education and the Responsibility of its Citizens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). Also, Sigal Ben-Porath has revealed the potentially damaging impacts of these schools on the citizenship skills and abilities of the children in such communities in "Deferring Virtue: The New Management of Students and the Civic Role of Schools," *Theory and Research in Education* 11, no. 2 (2013): 111-128.