WOULD SCHOOL CHOICE UNDERMINE our society’s shared culture? For most of those who spend time thinking about the matter, this is a critical, even decisive, issue. Critics of choice warn that it will exacerbate segregation along racial and class lines, as students and families will tend to favor homogeneity over diversity in their choice of schools. They also fear the prospect of public funds’ going to support religious schools, especially those of the more fundamentalist or orthodox sects. The specter of this alone is enough to invalidate school choice in the eyes of many opponents. There is also always the worst-case scenario—schools run by witches or the Ku Klux Klan. To a critic, choice can only lead to the balkanization of American society.

Defenders of school choice say that choice, in one form or another, is already so commonplace that its extension to poor children is unlikely to harm our common culture. Many parents already choose to live in the relatively homogeneous suburbs; to maneuver their children into special programs in regular public schools; or to enroll their children in private schools. Besides, the defenders claim, an expansion of choice programs will strengthen the bonds of community by enabling families with similar values to select for their children a school that mirrors their own aspirations. To a defender, choice is a buttress against balkanization, a mechanism to sustain and invigorate civil society.

In reality, the effects of choice will depend on how policymakers define it. Any allocation of public funds would be determined by a public body, making it inconceivable for any hateful or weird organizations to participate in a publicly funded choice program. Nevertheless, the exchange of claim and counterclaim seems destined to continue as long as the debate over school choice remains on the plane of theory and speculation. Perhaps only an extended and carefully evaluated experiment will allow us to see which argument is correct.

However, at least one of the debate’s reigning assumptions seems ripe for questioning: the idea that today’s public schools actually teach a “common culture,” a set of values and ideals that makes us uniquely American. Perhaps the current debate poses false alternatives, between public schools that teach the common culture and a choice system in which schools ignore and even disparage the common culture.

The American common school is supposed to offer the same experiences, the same curriculum, and the same opportunities to all students. At its founding, the common school was charged with teaching future Americans citizens a common language, a code of conduct, shared values, and common ideals. This ideal of the American common school, much prized in the abstract, runs directly counter to the idea of choice, which would tolerate and encourage schools that prize differences.

The Golden Age?
Most Americans who attended public schools in the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s recall that their schools were devoted to teaching shared American values. As a member of that generation, I can attest that the public schools did teach a common culture. In retrospect, much of that common culture was admirable, but much of it now seems embarrassingly naive in its simple patriotism and its celebration of the status quo. I think my experiences in the public schools of Houston, Texas, from 1944 to 1956, were fairly typical. Every classroom had an American flag, and every day opened with the Pledge of Allegiance and a prayer or Bible reading. Our teachers took every opportunity to communicate pride in our heritage as Americans and Texans. Assembly exercises began with patriotic affirmations (and usually with prayers, too), as did athletic events and every other school-related activity.

We studied American history, Texas history, and world history. Our world history course was devoted to a quick overview of western Europe, with nary a nod to any other civilization. My family did not find this troubling. As the daugh-
The pressure against teaching a common culture became especially intense in the 1980s and 1990s, with the rise of multiculturalism and bilingual education. The very idea of assimilation—once seen as the organizing principle of American public education—became suspect. How was a common culture even possible if the public schools were charged with celebrating every culture that might be represented in the student body (but certainly not celebrating our common American culture)? Immigrant students who enrolled in American public schools, especially in polyglot cities, were more likely to learn about their native culture than about the ideas and values of their newly adopted land.

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We are a very long way from the common culture that McGuffey spread, and even from the common culture that was taught in the public schools in the 1950s. Teachers no longer feel that it is incumbent on them to instill patriotism or to celebrate the accomplishments of the American nation. In one sense, this is a good thing—the version of the common culture that my generation experienced was far too simplistic and in its own way dishonest; we did not get the full story of American history, warts and all. We did not learn anything about the significant contributions of blacks to American culture. We were set up for disillusionment.

Anti-assimilation

Nonetheless, we've gone from one extreme to the other. Instead of a simplistic patriotism, we have in our public schools an adversarial culture, a treatment of American history that emphasizes the nation's warts and failings and diminishes its genuine accomplishments. In English classes, there is no literary canon, there is no tradition within which students can situate new authors and new works. Groups like the National Council of the Social Studies periodically express hostility to history as a field of study, worrying that it is by nature conservative, even jingoistic, despite the fact that many, perhaps most, influential historians in our universities identify themselves with liberalism and radicalism. Such an influential organization as the National Council of Teachers of English rejects the idea of a reading list that might recommend certain novels or poems over others, this apparently being an act of literary tyranny from which our teachers and students should be protected. There is no canon, no common readings that all Americans can discuss and debate. Consequently, standardized state and national tests of English exclude any reference to literature, because the students have not read the same books, poems, and stories.

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In the late 1990s I visited a public elementary school in New York City where the student body included children from dozens of different countries. The principal assembled members of his staff to demonstrate to visitors how fastidiously the
school was attending to the multicultural education of the children, carefully acknowledging distinctive ethnic foods, customs, and clothing. After the presentation, I asked the principal when during the school day did the students learn about becoming Americans. At first, he did not respond. Later, in the hallway, when no one else could overhear him, he told me that children "picked up" what they needed to know about being an American by osmosis.

Bilingual education represents a similar rejection of the assimilative role of the American public schools. This probably explains why overwhelming majorities of the public—including immigrant parents—regularly oppose it in opinion surveys. Nonetheless, bilingual education has passionate advocates. They have resisted any efforts to diminish it, maintaining that non-English-speaking children have a right to learn in their native tongue. Advocates of bilingual education tend to support the practice of "cultural maintenance," whereby children are shielded from the influence of the common culture in public schools, thus preserving their native cultures. To the extent that they have succeeded, they have left the public schools without a unifying mission. They deny the public schools the right or power to teach a common culture.

In New York, where bilingual education is well established, the courts rejected a legal challenge by poor parents to the state's power to assign their children to bilingual classes. Children are assigned to bilingual classes if they score poorly on the English test or if someone in their home does not speak English. As if to emphasize its strong commitment to bilingualism, the state of New York now offers its Regents examinations for high school graduation in Chinese, Spanish, Russian, Korean, and even Haitian Creole. (The students must also pass the "English language arts" Regents exam.) How much such students will be able to attend an American university if they cannot handle subjects like science and mathematics in English has never been explained.

The same antiassimilative, multicultural pressures have led to the establishment of Afrocentric programs in some inner-city public schools. Three years ago, a friend in the textbook industry took me to visit several schools in Brooklyn that were using a certain reading program. In one of these schools, where the population was nearly 100 percent African-American, I was struck by the omnipresence of teaching about Africa. Every classroom that I entered, every lesson I observed, every hall display, every library exhibit, was Africa-centered. When I pointed this out to my friend, she replied that she sees this so often that she doesn't even notice it anymore. No one in this school was teaching a common American culture.

In some public schools today, there is no American flag, there is no Pledge of Allegiance, there are no patriotic or traditional songs. Children do not learn to sing "The Star Spangled Banner," "America the Beautiful," and "My Country 'Tis of Thee." Their history lessons stress the negative issues in American history, the wrongs committed by the nation's leaders, the victimized minorities and women who were denied equal treatment. They do not learn about the historic struggles to achieve democratic institutions. Their literature lessons either are taken from textbooks, which shun the classics, or favor stories about teenagers.

As I survey the scene in American public education today, I find myself longing for schools that are willing to teach a better version of the common culture than the one I was taught. Those people who arrive here from other nations usually intend to become Americans. It is the job of the public schools to help them achieve their dream. Part of achieving this dream involves learning the English language, which is the language necessary for success in higher education and in public life. The American story—warts and all, but not warts alone—is a great story, and it should be told. It is a story of many people from many different backgrounds, races, religions, and starting points learning to live together and creating something new in the world. Children should be introduced to great and inspiring literature, not to the scraps compiled in commercial textbooks or the political doggerel of our times.

In short, the public schools should teach a common culture. However, because of the political and social trends of the past generation, they are not doing so. The burden of multiculturalism has virtually eliminated any aspiration to teach a common culture in many, if not most, public schools. The mantra of public education, it sometimes seems, is "celebrate diversity." Is it possible to teach a common culture while celebrating diversity?

In the current education system, with the public schools committed to multiculturalism, bilingualism, and other forms of particularism, it is difficult to argue that parents should not be able to choose schools that meet their cultural needs. How can one argue that the public schools should meet the special cultural needs of some groups but not of all groups? I find myself open to arguments for choice precisely because I believe in the historical mission of public education. The idea of school choice would be far less compelling if public education were to reclaim its role as the agency responsible for transmitting the best of American culture.

Diane Ravitch is a visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution and the author of Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms (Simon & Schuster, 2000).