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RECEIVED 30 April 2025

ACCEPTED 23 June 2025

PUBLISHED 09 July 2025

## CITATION

Berner A (2025) Examining “privatization” and  
protecting equal rights.  
*Front. Educ.* 10:1621331.  
doi: 10.3389/feduc.2025.1621331

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# Examining “privatization” and protecting equal rights

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This opinion piece examines, and resists, the term “privatization” in characterizing non-state participation in national and provincial school systems. First, since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, modern governments have often relied on civil society to deliver public education, and on private industry to create the “goods” that make public education possible (from textbooks and chalkboards to wireless networks and data systems). Second, the presence of non-state actors in education can work either for or against equality of access and equality of excellence. It depends on (1) the fairness of the enabling processes; (2) transparent accountability systems; (3) equity-oriented regulations, especially around admissions policies; and (4) full funding by governments, with support calibrated to students’ specific and variable needs. Third, “privatization” derives from U.S.-centric debates that depend on unhelpful binaries. We need better ways to describe the participation of non-state actors that reflect historical realities and universal rather than particularist concerns.

## KEYWORDS

educational pluralism, civil society, non-state actors, privatization, human rights doctrine

## Introduction

This opinion piece addresses two separate but related issues: how should we think about the role of non-state actors in education? And how do we ensure that *all* educational actors protect human dignity and the rights of cultural minorities?

It is important to address *simultaneously* both the role of non-state actors and the rights of cultural, religious, linguistic, and ethnic minorities in education. Schooling is an inherently ethical enterprise; it is impossible to choose a curriculum, write a disciplinary code, or set academic standards, without drawing on moral frameworks, even if they are tacit rather than explicit. Because a state system can impose—often unintentionally—ideological conformity to majoritarian ethos, it is important for states to fund different types of schools by design (Eacott, 2023).<sup>1</sup> Having a rich mosaic of funded schools that reflect a variety of parental values thus fulfills the human rights doctrines expressed in the Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations General Assembly, 1948), the Convention against Discrimination (General Conference of UNESCO, 1960), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Office of the High Commissioner, 1976a), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (Office of the High Commissioner, 1976b). Indeed, these questions and their correlates were the subject of a Right to Education dialogue hosted by UNESCO, the University of Geneva, and the Swiss Commission for UNESCO, in June 2024 (Swiss Commission for UNESCO, 2024). At the same time, the same documents also insist on the responsibility of States

1 One scholar wrote of the need to “recogniz[e] the contested purpose(s) of education and therefore the importance of choice to be embedded within systems.”

to set academic standards to which all schools must conform (General Conference of UNESCO, 1960).

## The role of non-state actors in education

The presence of non-state actors in education systems should not be cause for alarm, *per se*. Why not? Because most of the world's school systems have long considered non-state actors (especially civil society) institutions to be valuable partners in delivering public education.

When modern governments decide to raise taxes for national or provincial education, they immediately face the question of how to structure its delivery. There are essentially three ways to structure delivery: uniform ("common schools"), individualist, and pluralist.

The common school model assigns funding, regulating, and delivering education exclusively to the State. Approximately 20% of education systems in the world rely on a common school model, including Mexico, Uruguay, and Portugal (UNESCO, 2021).

A libertarian approach—sometimes championed but seldom practiced—would have the State give parents a sum of money to apply to their child's education, while providing little if any oversight with respect to quality.<sup>2</sup> In the United States, Arizona's Empowerment Scholarship Accounts program, with its combination of numerous vendors from which parents can choose and its lack of academic testing requirements, approximates the libertarian ideal (EdChoice, 2025). The lack of oversight evidenced in Arizona, however, is a relative rarity among such programs in the United States and indeed around the world.

Finally, a pluralist approach envisions a State that funds and regulates a wide variety of schools but does not necessarily operate them directly. Pluralism de-couples these functions. For instance, the Netherlands's government funds and regulates 36 different kinds of schools, while actually operating only 30% of them (Dijkstra et al., 2004; Government of the Netherlands, 2021; Zoonjens and Glenn, 2012). Singapore's central government funds and regulates education, but civil society organizations deliver the education (The and Chia, 2012). Canada's province of Alberta enables students to choose from between state-funded Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Islamic, Inuit, and even home schooling, while asking all students to take the common, subject-based assessments (von Heyking, 2019). Educational pluralism is expanding in Africa, South and Central America, and East Asia. According to a recent UNESCO report, some 80% of the world's school systems rely on a pluralist approach for the delivery of education (UNESCO).

It goes without saying that the definition of "public education" differs between these three types. "Public education" in China means state-delivered schooling. "Public education" in Belgium, Poland, and Israel means a myriad of state-funded schools with ethos that differ from one another in meaningful ways, designed and operated by the voluntary sector.

Given the historic role—and the near ubiquity—of a pluralist approach, it does not make sense to characterize non-state participation in schooling as "privatization," or to reduce

governments' options to a binary "public vs. private." We need better ways to describe the participation of non-state actors that reflect historical realities and universal rather than particularist [e.g., the United States (Ravitch, 2013, 2020)] concerns.

## Ensuring equal access to excellence

At the same time, the presence of non-state actors in education can work either for or against equal access to excellence. "Excellence" in this opinion piece refers to access to a comprehensive curriculum that includes the major fields of K-12 learning, including global history, world geography, major bodies of literature, comparative religion and ethics, rigorous mathematics, and the major branches of science. There is a rich body of research confirming that, when a comprehensive curriculum (sometimes known as "the liberal arts") is required for all young people, achievement gaps between low- and high-income students narrow (Ravitch, 2001; Hirsch, 2016; Wexler, 2019; Willingham, 2006). Excellence and equity are thus properly intertwined (Bernier, 2024).

Policymakers must ensure that any school that participates in the educational ecosystem complies with the critical goals of fairness, accessibility, academic quality, and transparency.

Some critical principles of design that work toward equity-oriented outcomes include:

- *Full funding of education by governments, with additional funding matched to students' specific and variable needs.* There should be weighted funding that prioritizes non-native-language speakers, students with special needs, and children from low-income families (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022).<sup>3</sup>
- *Practical support for first-generation parents.* Families come to their children's education with unequal social networks and unequal information (Goyette and Lareau, 2014; Jochim, 2019). Governments can bridge these gaps by providing individualized guidance to families as they navigate the process (Bishop, 2010).
- *Transparent accountability systems.* No school system, and no single type of school, is immune to abuse (Huffman, 2015; Elder, 2015; Schwartz, 2023).<sup>4</sup> The question is whether there are mechanisms in place to identify and remedy problems, rapidly. Although routine site visits are expensive, they can play an important role in ensuring academic quality, inclusive school cultures, and sound fiscal health.<sup>5</sup>
- *High standards for all students.* Research indicates that access to rigorous, knowledge-building instruction creates opportunity and closes achievement gaps between wealthy and low-income students (Willingham, 2006; Hirsch, 2006;

<sup>3</sup> Many systems follow this principle already. See, for instance, Australia's weighted funding model.

<sup>4</sup> For examples of failure, malfeasance, and abuse across the United States' district, private, charter, and homeschool sectors, see Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy (2019).

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of inspections, their cost, and their impact, see Bernier (2017).

<sup>2</sup> For a systematic summary of libertarian arguments, see Currie-Knight (2019).

Bryk et al., 1993; Chenoweth, 2007).<sup>6</sup> It is therefore a matter of urgent concern that many young people from low-income backgrounds, even in wealthy countries, receive below-grade-level instruction on a regular basis (TNTP, 2018). Turning around low-performing systems that under-serve the most vulnerable populations is not easy, but it is critical from the standpoint of the right to education.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

This opinion piece has claimed educational pluralism, or a system of schooling that funds a variety of schools and that holds all of them to high academic standards, can be an effective approach to fulfilling core human rights claims. Specifically, in enabling non-state actors to deliver schools that offer distinctive ethos while also adhering to a shared academic framework, States can fulfill both the rights of ethnic and cultural minorities to ensure that their children are educated in conformity with their own convictions, and also the simultaneous requirement that all schools conform to state-established educational standards. Both aspects of educational pluralism are critical. They are not mutually exclusive, nor does the presence of non-state actors reflect the State's abrogation of responsibility—or "privatization."

The task of educating the next generation, and doing so equitably, constitutes one of the fundamental responsibilities of modern governments. It also requires engaging with the social and economic factors outside the classroom that burden first-generation families disproportionately. Inadequate transportation systems, uneven access to the Internet, and poorly resourced public health care affect educational opportunities, too. Furthermore, the task is never finished; even stable school systems can be shaken by pandemics, wars, and natural disasters.

<sup>6</sup> For a few examples, see Wexler (2019).

<sup>7</sup> For examples of the variety of starting points and effective means for subverting low performance, see Mourshed et al. (2010).

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The sheer complexity of honoring the fundamental right to education suggests that not only governments, but also non-governmental organizations and local communities have a role to play. This offers an opportunity to create generous spaces in which families, civil society organizations, and governments solve educational problems together rather than in isolation.

## Author contributions

AB: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## Generative AI statement

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