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Abstract

Public education plays a vital role in the success of democracies. Yet just as these institutions contribute to the government, they are also shaped by the very administration they support. Influence from legislators, critical examinations of the testing process, and a comprehensive overlook of a given nation's government all characterize these institutions within a democracy, yet they inevitably vary across different countries. This paper underscores the importance of improving these systems, and compares the two histories of Czechia and the United States of America in relation to formative events in each nation's history. In the Czech Republic, the reforms made to public education following the Velvet revolution are analyzed. In the United States, reforms made to public education during and after the events of the Cold War are analyzed. The paper then suggests a tangible area of improvement for each country, and one in which both countries might better their institutions.

Purposes of a State-Funded Education

Public education is an institution that varies greatly across the globe. No system contains the same structure or curriculum, though patterns within these institutions certainly exist. In fact, the schooling system of democracies lends itself to several key trends. Cremin (1976) notes one such trend, explaining how changes in a curriculum are often made by legislators that are driven by political pressure. Sometimes this is manifested in the varied allocation of funding, or placing an emphasis on certain subjects. For example, Heslep (1989) notes that in 1959 the President's Science Advisory Committee significantly altered the curriculum of schools across the United States, placing an emphasis on moral value and learning of the sciences. This was done as a result of pressures from the Cold War, and a need across the nation for more focus on STEM-related fields during the height of the Space Race. Because of this pressure, average citizens can have a significant influence on the objectives and priorities of legislators, and therefore the subject matters and core values taught in these institutions.

Another feature of public education within democracies is a recurrent critical examination of the testing procedures employed by the state. How public education systems evaluate the student's growth throughout an academic year is frequently contested, reworked, and examined. Greger and Walterová (2007) observe that the Centre for the Evaluation of Educational Achievements, which previously had been an independent organization, was made responsible by the Czech government in 2006 for the preparation and reform of the final examination at the end of upper-secondary schooling. This organization has been working on this same test since 2001, and implemented a voluntary phase in which schools could opt to participate in, and suggest improvements to the department. This style of public trial and error is a staple of educational institutions in a democracy.

Finally, it is worth noting that democratic nations also prioritize teaching the function and values of their own government. According to Heslep (1989), public education within this form of government often possess a flexible curriculum. which protects the key principles of its democracy, some common examples of these state interests include “preparing the members of a democratic state to obey the laws of the land, to support the state in times of crisis, to vote wisely, and to serve competently in office” Still, the exact subjects taught to students can and should change with the times, and will inevitably look different across democracies that possess an individual culture.

So, given that public education occupies a similar set of standards across democratic governments, this paper aims to understand how the Czech Republic and the Unites States’ unique history has produced similar, yet distinct institutions. Based on a historical lens, this paper will also suggest key changes that could improve the effectiveness of schooling across both countries.

Czech Education since the Velvet Revolution

For the purposes of this research, it is necessary to contextualize the foundations of Czechia’s modern public education system. There were many changes in public policy regarding education, but perhaps none were as influential as those created following the Velvet revolution. From the founding of the First Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, scholars such as Mays et al. (1996) note that the Czech education system was one of the greatest schooling systems in the west, noting “During this period the education system was internationally recognized, the product of several decades of scholarly writings, reform-oriented perspectives, and solutions to educational problems” (pp. 4-5). These core values were implemented into their educational systems, along with the educational traditions found in European and American thought.

These principles changed during the forty years of communist rule; public schools altered their curriculum to reflect Marxist-Lennon ideologies instead. Šebková and Urbánek (1996) notes that within the new schooling institutions, state bodies would limit the number of students that could enroll in certain fields of study, and a primary determinate for who was eligible for schooling in higher education was limited to loyalty and standing within the Communist Party. As such, a mere 15-16% of students enrolled in the state-provided higher education systems. But because these forty years did not span more than a generation, many Czech families opted instead to not participate in public schooling, homeschooling their children in an effort to secure jobs with a greater salary. As stated by Mays et al. (1996), “What many did do, within the secrecy of their own homes, was to pass along to their children the cultural values and historical perspectives of the days of the First Republic” (p. 5).

Thus, as the Velvet Revolution concluded with the election of Vaclav Havel to presidency, a crucial initiative within the government was to once again restructure the public education system. In this way, unlike its counterpart democracies in the west, Czechia was forced to conduct a thorough examination of the core values in its curriculum. The resulting institution drew inspiration from the First Czechoslovak Republic, and carefully expunged the influences of the Soviet Union.

This objective was achieved in a couple of ways. A primary focus was returning to the methodologies that characterized the First Czechoslovak Republic; As such the Czech Republic increased interactions with Western education institutions. Funding was accepted from organization like MENT, The British Council, and the Peace Corps. There were also significantly more opportunities for exchange programs, international conferences, and professional development seminars for teachers (Mays et al., 1996). Another change came from

The Act of the Czech national council on the state administration of Education and school-based management, which decentralized the school system and transferred power from the Ministry of Education to teachers and principals. They now had more responsibility for the curriculum, class structure, and school expenditures. And with the framework established in Act 132, municipalities obtained the power to create education commissions, which serve a purpose closely related to school boards in America. On top of this, legislation was created to alter the way schools received funding from the state; as families selected which school to enroll their child in, money was then distributed based on student population, which created a competitive environment that prompted schools to differentiate themselves with unique programs or excellent academic track records.

Not only did the process of state-funding change, but more money was given to schools in general. To start, government expenditures on public education nearly tripled from 21.10 to 61.70 billion Czech korunas in the following five years after 1989's conclusion to the communist rule (Šebková 1996). The peak of public expenditure was in 1995, when education comprised almost 6% of The Czech Republic's GDP. This peak dropped off significantly in following years, and the expenditures still have yet to reach the country's targeted goal of 6%, though the sharp decline can be heavily attributed to the exchange rate crisis during the May of 1997.

The Education system has undergone significant and various changes since the Velvet Revolution. After the authoritative policies of communist rule, elected officials and experts in the field were eager to revitalize the education system, and reclaim the pride and world-renowned standards of the First Czechoslovak Republic. Schools were rebuilt with the objective of increasing job prospects and fixing the damage to the economy that the Soviets imposed, and power was redistributed to the local communities of people in order to make a flexible

curriculum that preserved Czech sensibilities. And unlike during Soviet Rule, the people of the Czech Republic created an accessible schooling experience by increasing government expenditures and eliminating tuition costs. This conflict with anti-democratic ideologies also marks the history of the public education system in the United States of America, though in a pointedly different way.

Unites States Education since the Cold War

As the Velvet Revolution came to an end in 1989, so too did the Berlin Wall. In many ways, this stood as an end to tensions created between the USA and USSR during the Cold War. But regardless of the fall, the impacts of what that wall stood for left a palpable impact on the United States public education system. The Cold War obligated elected officials to overhaul many government-funded institutions, and the public education system was no exception. Though the 10th Amendment of the U.S. constitution had historically left power over public education to the states, during this international conflict, the federal government significantly altered the curriculum as a defensive measure. Following the Soviet launch of the Sputnik, Congress passed the *National Defensive Education Act* in 1958, which emphasized the importance of science and technical fields. Elementary and secondary schools were given federal funding as incentives to change their curriculum, to develop a stronger understanding of STEM-related fields, and of foreign languages (<https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/fed/role.html>).

This act proved to be a groundbreaking juncture for the trajectory of education within the United States. Congress had previously faced many difficulties in passing legislation around education. Though at the time there was a universal acknowledgment for the need to alter the education systems for the U.S., disagreements about how, as well as limited constitutional power, left Congress unable to implement any meaningful policies. But according to Pineo

(2018), pressures from the Cold War marked “the first major catalyst that drove the United States government to make significant changes in education policy” (p. 8). Because of this pressure, United States shifted their attention to re-working the previously overlooked division of government. The Eisenhower administration and Congress initiated a chain of legislative reforms to the public education system that lasted for nearly three decades, setting a new precedent for Federal powers over public schools and investing the public in the success of these new developments.

After the *National Defensive Education Act*, Congress, worked with the Johnson administration to pass the *Elementary and Secondary Education Bill* in 1965. This bill was enacted so that education would be more accessible for the public. The law bought over 30 million books for schools in need- many of which were able to create their first libraries from the purchases. It also increased funding for schools with a student population of more than 40% in the “low income” classification. Beyond that, the bill was a huge step in equity for students with disabilities, extending mandatory provisions to handicapped children. The need for educational reform established by the Eisenhower administration carried over into the passing of this Bill as well, with a staggering 263 to 153 vote in favor of the bill from the House of Representatives, and a vote of 73 to 18 in favor from the Senate. Lyndon B. Johnson (1965), during his remarks during the passing of the bill, noted that “It represents a major new commitment of the Federal Government to quality and equality in the schooling we offer our young people”. Johnson’s quote would continue to govern the ideologies behind educational policy for years to come. In order to repel the threat of the Soviet Union, a battle which would impact not just one generation, but many, every citizen in the Unites States needed to be able to reach their full potential. To bring about the next great scientists, mathematicians, and diplomats of their time, the United

States could no longer afford to neglect funding to schools, particularly those in impoverished areas.

Such an approach has even impacted more recent educational policies within the United States, far after the conclusion of the Cold War. The *No Child Left Behind* Act of 2001 stands as an extension to its predecessor. It requires public schools to hire “highly qualified teachers,” which are broadly defined as passing examinations in core subject and teaching ability, and having a bachelor’s degree in their respective field of instruction. The Federal government also put a special focus on funding for certain groups of students, but unlike the sole focus on handicapped students of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, this legislation also extended funding and resources to English-language learning students, and impoverished students.

But perhaps the most influential piece of this legislation was mandatory testing for all students. The *NCLB* allowed more data to be collected on the effectiveness of teaching by the Department of Education, and provided a flexible but assertive guideline for states to self-assess the results of their curriculum. States that failed to meet the Adequate Yearly Progress were penalized; schools were forced to allow students to transfer to other public schools within their district, were required to provide free tuition, and potentially even forced under state intervention and shut down. Though historic legislative measures in the Czech Republic and the United States lack significant data to evaluate their effectiveness, a study by Dee & Jacob (2011) found that at the very least, “the new school accountability systems brought about by NCLB generated large and broad gains in the math achievement of fourth graders and, to a somewhat lesser extent, eighth graders” (p. 442). One of the Soviet’s greatest criticisms of education in democracy was that it preserved class structures and prevented upward social mobility, but with these acts, the United States was able to symbolically challenge this argument against public education.

How to Proceed

From a historical lens, both the democracies of the Czech Republic and the United States of America significantly altered their educational institutions as a result of Communist influence. The United States' reforms can be understood to serve as a nation-wide effort to empower citizens, so that they may contribute to the defense of both their country, and to democracy. On the other hand, Czechia's reforms can be understood as a journey to build a newer, greater national identity against the disorder caused by outside powers. With this context, legislators and citizens alike will have a more comprehensive understanding around creating educational policies in the future. I hope that these new policies assist both nations' governments in ensuring continued success for their public education.

Though there are many ways to improve schools in the Czech Republic, one critical change that could be made to secondary education is the state-mandated school-leaving examinations. Given a democracy's aptitude for a dynamic testing system, it not too much of a stretch to rework the aforementioned final examination. According to Löwenhöfferová (2018), "students from schools that introduce mathematics from the 6th grade pass the demanding baccalaureate examination in mathematics with better results than those students who begin studying math right from entering elementary school". This contradiction in the time spent learning, versus the proficiency gained, demonstrates that there is a critical disconnect in the lesson plans of the mathematics field, at the very least. There are other, less quantifiable deficiencies in the education system. According to Czaban (2020), many students report feeling frustrated that the test, which as the name implies must be passed in order to move on to a career or tertiary education, is the only exam of the academic year. Having multiple tests distributed throughout the lesson plans would take some of the pressure off, and help prevent students from

cramming a year's worth of the curriculum at the last minute. One might look to the quarter system found in most public schools through the United States as a possible solution, which break down the academic year for high schoolers into four major tests: two midterms, and two finals. Regardless of the end product's methodology, though the Czech examination process may have been well-constructed during its long development time, there is still much room for improvement.

In the United States, it is important to re-establish a more localized curriculum. Although the largest agent of change, the federal government, has managed to introduce legislation and enforce court cases as a means to alter public education, there is little advancement in terms of the family unit's impact on such matters. The monolithic curriculum generated by the federal government could be improved by allowing school districts to make changes necessary at the local level, allowing for modifications necessary to the specific community that the school system services. Sometimes, small groups of the population aren't able to create the political pressure required to create hyper-specific policies for a given school district. According to Ornstein & Miller (1976) there is a severe lack of power for the school boards of America, and a severe lack of communication between school boards and teachers. By enacting legislation that also promotes power for more concentrated structures of education, the federal government would mitigate this problem and develop curriculum that better prepares the youth. One might look to the Czech Republic, which delegates most of the educational decision making to the municipalities that these schools are a part of. However, this bridge is gapped, it is an acute but achievable problem to address.

However, the biggest conclusion to draw from this research is that both democracies should not let outside pressures be the proverbial "wake-up call" to reform public education

within their country. In both cases, these reforms were created as a direct response to anti-democratic influences. However, for a public education to flourish in a democracy, these sorts of reforms should continuously be a priority of the state. Creating learned citizens that may steer the directions of their countries with knowledge and precision is vital to the country's success, regardless of international influence. As demonstrated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the sovereignty of modern nation-states is not guaranteed. The international order is in a time of unrest, and being informed is important now more than ever. By these terms, public education doesn't just serve to help a democracy validate a national identity or battle foreign ideals, it serves to help a democracy *succeed*.

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