You've heard the many criticisms of America's public schools—the criticisms that so often focus on local school boards. I'm here to suggest a different perspective. Instead of being cast in the role of spoiler, our system of school governance should be considered a prime American export. And I say this as a result of the time I've recently spent in the former Soviet Union.

I'll admit at the outset: I didn't always think this way. Wherever I have worked abroad during the past decade, I have recommended that citizens be given vouchers for purchasing school services—from both private and public providers—and that governments promote other measures to maximize the choices parents have. In general, more choice means more efficiency; I still believe that.

But after working on the educational problems of Central and Eastern Europe and the Russian Federation, I no longer advocate such measures so quickly. My view has changed not because educational efficiency is no longer important. Rather, it has changed because I have discovered that the importance of educational efficiency has a limit.

In the case of Russia, I have been dealing with an ethnically heterogeneous, federal system that is much like our own, but falling apart. More than 100 ethnic groups now control Russia's schools. In the absence of traditional restraints, these groups might now be able—if they chose—to teach disrespect for the rights of their neighbors. If they did, their schools might contribute to Armageddon. Given that state of affairs, I have been forced to learn that some things in life—such as civil unrest and civil war—are more expensive than an inefficient and cumbersome public education system. And I've found myself asking some fundamental questions: What makes an education system essential for helping a nation build a consensus in support of democratic values and a democratic society? What is it about the U.S. education system that allows us to do those things well? Why do U.S. public officials ignore the unique strengths of our education system when deciding priorities for foreign assistance? And what can our education professionals, including school boards, do about that situation?

Stephan P. Heyneman is chief of the Human Resources and Social Policy Division in the Technical Department for the Europe, Central Asia, Middle East, and North Africa regions of the World Bank, 1818 H St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20433. The views and opinions expressed here are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the World Bank or any of its affiliated institutions.

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I'll offer some of the answers I've found for those questions.

Education and democratic values

First, consider the link between schooling and democratic values. In 1992, the new Russian parliament passed comprehensive education legislation that said the country's schools would emphasize "humanitarianism." What the Russians call humanitarianism, John Dewey in 1916 called "education and democracy." The term refers to students' personal and individual development, as opposed to blind obedience and discipline.

In theory, a school that teaches democratic values will produce responsible individuals who are capable of "thinking globally while acting locally." Since Dewey's time, a significant body of educational research on democratic values has concentrated upon whether schools in fact live up to this potential. Indeed, many researchers—from Seymour Martin Lipset with his emphasis on broadening outlooks, increasing tolerance, and political participation to Judith Torney-Purta and John Schwille with their work on school climate and civic behavior—have asked whether education can "cause" democracy. All have concluded that the answer is ambiguous: sometimes yes, sometimes no.

The research has failed to uncover what it is about the U.S. school system—or the school systems of other nations—that helps create a stable democracy. Unfortunately, that line of research, though it has looked for a connection in the wrong places. Scholars have examined what happens in the classroom and in the curriculum, both of which are important. But they have overlooked the process of how the decisions about classroom climate and curriculum content are made.

The unique feature of the U.S. system is that schools are locally controlled on the one hand and required to incorporate a heterogeneous set of values on the other. Still—and this is most often taken for granted by Americans—the U.S. education system continues to function. As one senior Russian official asked me once: "How does [the American education system] hold together?" In the United States, as in Russia, one can find educators who speak Moldovan or Russian. The Russian-speaking portion of Moldova is a state of revolt. But even those Russian-speaking teachers have little cause for revolt. That, I think, is the key issue, that it is because authorities in Russia claim Russian-speakers in the former Soviet Union as "honorary citizens" of Russia and attempt to maintain traditional textbooks and teacher training in Moldova. Moreover, Russia offers scholarships to Russian-speaking teachers in Moldova, and encourages Russian-speaking Moldovan citizens to take Russian university entrance examinations and apply for scholarships.

The idea is that those encouragement are not offered to citizens, but to Moldovans who speak Moldovan or Russian. The Russian-speaking portion of Moldova is a state of revolt. But even those Russian-speaking teachers have little cause for revolt. That, I think, is the key issue, that it is because authorities in Russia claim Russian-speakers in the former Soviet Union as "honorary citizens" of Russia and attempt to maintain traditional textbooks and teacher training in Moldova. Moreover, Russia offers scholarships to Russian-speaking teachers in Moldova, and encourages Russian-speaking Moldovan citizens to take Russian university entrance examinations and apply for scholarships.

Today these peoples have gained both voice and authority. Among their first conquests is to teach their children, through the formal curriculum, about the oppression to which they were subjected. Far more extreme, many have been testing limits for individuals such as Stalin or groups such as Russians, Romanian, or Poles. That development holds great potential for ethnic conflict.

The Russian Federation is currently composed of 80 different regions (analogous to our 50 states). About half of these regions have sizable enough minorities to kindle controversy over what language should be used in instruction and curriculum. Over the past three years, the number of languages taught in Russian schools has doubled. In 1987, students could be educated through Grade 10 in four languages other than Russian (Georgian, Bashkir, Armenian, and Tatar). Five years later, Russian citizens could be educated through compulsory education in nine languages (Add Burji, Udmurt, Chech, and Lak). Today, an additional 87 languages now constitute part of the curriculum in one way or another.

In some instances, non-Russian languages are used in schools where Russian-speakers themselves are the minority, which puts a different spin on questions of protecting "minority" rights. And how are the basic tenets of the society, such as loyalty and good citizenship, to be guaranteed if curriculum focuses on inter-ethnicities and languages is devoted to local communities and schools, as the Russian legislation of 1992 guarantees?

As those issues suggest, Russia has an education problem. But the problem is larger than Russia. It extends to the entire "Eastern" region, an area so vast and so important geographically that it constitutes a major problem for the West.

Western models of citizenship

The post-Communist democracies can't simply look at how the West solves similar problems, because each Western democracy offers a different model for teaching citizenship rights and responsibilities. Which is best?

Germany, for example, considers people to be citizens if they can prove they are German. That's true for those who have German in their background even though for generations they might have lived in Romania, Poland, or Russia. Because German background consists of parentage and language, that view of citizenship constitutes an invitation for those of German background who live in other countries to apply for permission to migrate back to Germany to escape poverty.

But Germany's definition of citizenship might be painful to some within the German-speaking Turkish population who live and work in Germany. Their prospects for gaining German citizenship are slim, similar to the prospects for Ko-
With such differing Western models of citizenship, it is not surprising that the new democracies are confused about which way to turn. The debate is furious. But in my experience the intellectual leaders who favor moderation and heterogeneity tend to be the educators. One senior officer in the Russian Ministry of Education told me: "We have decided not to teach children to be good Russians, but to be good citizens of Russia." This distinction is subtle, but crucial. It implies—contrary to extremist voices—that the official view will be to encourage respect, equality, and opportunity for all language groups, religions, and races.

**Made in America**

But how can that view prevail in Russia, where schools, which now are financed locally, are spread across 11 time zones and 89 different regional authorities? How can universal respect be taught when curriculum emphases are decided locally? How is this respect for the rights of others to be encouraged, when more than 100 different language groups and a half-dozen religions and races all potentially demand their own curriculum perspectives? How are duty, obligation, and loyalty to be taught, when those principles have been corrupted and politicized for so many generations?

One answer to these questions emerges from a recent visit to the United States by 12 Russian regional education directors. They came from Chuvash (a New Jersey-sized region); Saratov (twice the size of Massachusetts); and Altai and Kras (regions that are the size of New York and Pennsylvania combined).

Among the U.S. educators the Russian officials met were officials of the Council of Chief State School Officers, the American Association of School Administrators, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the National School Boards Association. The Russians were full of questions: How are you financed? How are you elected? How do you influence legislation? Who pays your salary? Who appoints you? Do you communicate with your staf? With political parties? Teachers, parents, university scholars, the press?

Their questions reflected the urgency of their crisis—and a recognition that U.S. educators face similar challenges. They are faced with a massive transfer of educational responsibility to the local level, yet they have no institutional structures in place to manage it.

Just as significant, they understood that U.S. schools are managing similar problems effectively. The Russians realized that our solutions and structures are not uniform. Among the chief state school officers, for example, 25 percent are elected, 50 percent are appointed by the state governor, and 50 percent are appointed by state school boards.

"But why?" they wanted to know. What is a state board? What is the difference between a state board and a local school board? How do these boards function? Who appoints them? Do U.S. school districts actually constitute legitimate government? Can they raise taxes or borrow money? Are they governed by popular vote? As these questions surfaced, it became clear how important those governance structures are to our schools.

The United States could do more to extend its experience to post-Communist countries. The Russian visitors, who were guests of the U.S. government under the auspices of the Freedom Support Act, constitute one of the few instances in which Freedom Support resources have been directed to the education sector. Those funds are more often directed to other purposes—such as defense conversion, privatization, market economics, business management—related to the private sector. Unfortunately, Russia has no traditional private sector. Or rather, Russia has thousands (perhaps hundreds of thousands) of private enterprises and perhaps millions of entrepreneurs who could benefit from contacts in other countries. But they no longer report to public administrators, and further privatization efforts increase their organizational dispersion. This is good for a private economy, but it is cumbersome for foreign assistance.

But Russia does have an organized education sector, which makes it easier to target for outside assistance than other sectors of Russian society. The country has 89 regional education directors, 89 chairpersons of new (regional) parliamentary committees on education, 255 university rectors, and small numbers of officials representing associations of school principals and teachers.

The education leadership of Russia, then, constitutes about 800 individuals. Reaching 10 percent or even 20 percent of them is a manageable proposition yet could exert significant leverage. These education leaders represent the interests and problems of 33.6 million students (from preschool age to doctoral candidates), approximately 54 million parents, and 5.7 million teachers—which adds up to about 60 percent of the population of the Russian Federation.

Why education is not considered a priority for U.S. foreign aid is understandable. The reason has to do with the perception that the process by which education generates a civic society is ambiguous. And judging from research, that perception is correct. An excellent curriculum applied in a democratic classroom is no guarantee of democratic behavior. But that's not the point.

Here is the point: A society that is unable to reach a democratic consensus on educational objectives has little chance of being a stable democracy. Good educational governance does not constitute a civic society, but it is sine qua non of a civic society. To test this point, try living in a society where public schools teach lessons contradictory to good citizenship.

A senior British official once told me, "The biggest mistake we made in Northern Ireland was to allow separate Catholic and Protestant school systems." His concern then, and mine now, was that in some circumstances public schools accomplish the opposite of what they intend. Instead of contributing to a national sense of obligation and responsibility, they worsen existing divisions and antagonisms by teaching contradictory interpretations of history. Rather than ensuring that citizens respect one another by teaching them a common set of principles, the public education system can reinforce the tendency for groups to isolate themselves. That tendency, implicitly, gives official sanction to civic disrespect and, in extreme cases, can lay the intellectual foundations for civil war.

That the U.S. public schools have the ability to manage the centripetal forces of culture and ethnicity is one of their proudest successes—even if it makes no difference in the mathematics and science test scores of the nation's students. In many education matters, the United States has a great deal to learn from educators in other countries. But we should remember that educators elsewhere are just as interested in learning about the governance successes of American education.