

Creating Community Engagement: A Plan for Accountability in the Post NCLB Era

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The post-NCLB era has begun. While no one is quite sure what shape it will take, and to what degree vestiges of testolotry¹ will linger within it, it is certain that substantive changes are ahead. In this essay we make an attempt to build a case for: 1) a much wider accounting of how to measure the performance of America's schools, one that includes an analysis of improvement in the political and economic life of the nation, and 2) a specific reform initiative that directly targets that kind of improvement in the day-to-day work of schools.

After many years in professional education, we have come to the conclusion that we cannot look—we no longer have the luxury of looking—for solutions to exclusively educational problems, or, for that matter, exclusively economic problems, which are ubiquitous at this moment, or exclusively political problems. We premise the arguments within this essay on our firm belief that renewal in any of these realms in the context of the twenty-first century means concerted action across the spectrum of modern institutions that defend the status quo. In this essay, we offer suggestions on how to change the status quo and increase people's investment in our collective future.

Why McCain and Obama Both Called for Change

There are some who are not entirely discontent with the status quo, but given the fact that our economy is teetering on a precipice and pension savings are in a free fall, we must recognize that there are serious problems to address. But let us also consider the problems that are currently NOT in the headlines. Over the past 30 years, as New Deal policies were dismantled and the nation's wealth moved upward to the top strata of income earners, the physical infrastructure of this country has been seriously neglected—proving once again that Adam Smith's "invisible hand" is no more accurate than it is scientific. In fact the MIT economist, Herman Daly, quipped that Smith got the wrong appendage. When people are free to pursue their own interests without the burden of engaging in common pursuits, it's not an invisible hand that appears, but an invisible foot that kicks the common good to pieces. We saw that invisible foot take down a Minneapolis bridge during rush hour last year. It has been kicking away at our water transport system, leading many experts to worry about the spread of diseases we normally associate with third world countries, cholera, dysentery and the like. The food supply is increasingly tainted and suspect, as we have allowed industrial methods of production to usurp what we at one time called farming. In the last three years we have had poisoned tomatoes, peppers, spinach, onions, and peanut butter work their way into grocery stores across the country, to say nothing about increasing concerns connected to confinement-based production practices in the meat industry.

As mysterious diseases baffle physicians and antibiotic-resistant bacteria spreads, the shame of being the only modern democracy to deny health care to millions of its citizens has become an increasingly heavy burden. While we ceaselessly debate the pros and cons of abortion, thousands of living, breathing, *working* Americans needlessly die each year for want of a colonoscopy or mammogram for which they cannot pay. America's infant mortality rate is twice as high as it is in Sweden or the Netherlands, or even Singapore. The death rate by hand gun in this country soars many thousands higher annually than any other nation on Earth.

Amazingly, we consider the above issues minor problems in comparison to some of the broader concerns we are currently facing. The embrace and orchestration of what has come to be called “globalization,” for example, has exacerbated the demise of the middle ranks of income earners everywhere. CEOs openly chastise workers who refuse to take pay-cuts telling them they are now in a global labor market, meaning they are now competing with workers throughout the third world. The divide between the rich and the poor in the United States today makes the worst excesses of the Feudal Era seem modest. The top two percent of Americans possess more wealth than they could ever spend in a lifetime and yet, by the time loopholes are fully utilized, they are taxed at a much lower rate than middle class wage-earners. Warren Buffet has publicly announced that he will give \$1 million to any CEO who can demonstrate that he or she is in a higher tax bracket than his or her secretary. He has had no takers. Of course, the print and broadcast media in this country are owned and controlled by members of this elite two percent. As President Obama bravely proposed a small tax increase on the wealthy, the media has resisted revealing how much federal revenue would be generated as a result of this modest increase—let alone what would be generated by returning to pre-Ronald Reagan rates.

On another note, one of the political precepts we revere in this country is the separation of church and state. There are many good reasons why this policy makes sense, but we have largely forgotten the most important motive of those seventeenth century philosophers who first called for this reform. In the days before newspapers, radios, and television, news of the world was delivered at the pulpit. In the established churches of feudal Europe, kings could dictate what would be discussed in Sunday sermons. As well, they censored the publication of any pamphlets or books that might bring new ideas to the people. Separating church and state was a way to end such censorship. Perhaps the best example of this came in England of the 1640s—Archbishop of Canterbury William Laud, head of the Church of England, and Charles the first, head of the state of England, were both executed. In that void, radical political philosophy flourished. Thomas Hobbes, Gerrard Winstanley, and

James Harrington, and probably many others whose work has been lost to history, all created blueprints for a non-feudal England and dedicated them to Oliver Cromwell.

To create the same space, the same kind of intellectual freedom in the twenty-first century, we are going to need to effect the separation of corporation and state. Again, there are many reasons why such a policy makes sense, but none more important than breaking the monopoly over what information is shared with the people, the monopoly over what people therefore think about and discuss.

High on that list is what Americans should think about the world's energy resources. One consistent 2008 campaign sound-byte held that if we would just let the oil companies drill off-shore, ("Drill baby drill!"), we would have plenty of oil for the future. Not only was this claim false, it was demonstrably beneficial to the financial interests of the oil companies. Like it or not, a globalized system of production and distribution is totally dependent on the remaining deposits of the Paleolithic sunlight we call fossil fuels. On the fact that we will run out of gas and oil, there is no disagreement; it is a biophysical inevitability. The only disagreement is over when this will happen. Lest you think this is hyperbole, we point to a recent study that demonstrates that if the fossil fuel consumption rates of India and China continue at their current pace, by 2030 these two nations alone will need an additional planet Earth.² Some insightful scholars believe that our recent policy of distributing the nation's wealth upward, our recent policy related to war in Iraq and possibly even an imminent war with Iran, are all merely manifestations of the recognition among the power elite that we will run out and as we do, dwindling stores will become increasingly expensive.

If this fact does not suffice to at least open one's mind to the possibility that the status quo might be problematic, there are further concerns connected to the dependence of the global economy on our shrinking stores of fossil fuels. An obvious one is that it immediately raises equity concerns. If the United States, approximately 5 percent of the world's people, continues to utilize close to 50 percent of the world's remaining fossil fuels, it is nearly certain that we will generate increasing levels of international antipathy, a circumstance

that could possibly result in open warfare or the covert warfare we call terrorism.

On top of this, a global economy is a gas-guzzling economy. We can produce Mattell toys in China because the low labor cost, even when added to the higher distribution cost, allows Mattell to maximize its profits. That ratio will become increasingly problematic as the distribution costs rise. But we must consider the following complication. It is not clear at this point if our embrace of this gas-guzzling economy might be heating the Earth's atmosphere to the point where production versus distribution cost ratios will become the least of our concerns. Even the casual observer is aware of the fact that we have entered an era of superstorms. Tornadoes in January were virtually unheard of before the last five or six years and hurricanes have increased in intensity. Biologists tell us that at least 75 percent of all migrating species have significantly altered their migration patterns. Additionally, many non-migrating species, the polar bear most spectacularly, are experiencing tremendous hardships related to weather changes. The potential for large-scale disruption is huge as coastal flooding, in a nation where a vast majority of the population lives along the coast, is increasingly seen as a likely future scenario.

These concerns underscore the dangers of an unsustainable status quo. It is why both John McCain and Barack Obama campaigned on the promise to produce change. The truth is, however, that the status quo will change, inevitably, either through deliberate, thoughtful, planning or through panic-driven exigency. And the record of human history in times of extreme duress is not a good one. It is then that people are most likely to forego democratic traditions and embrace the tyrant who best feigns benevolence, or who most persuasively identifies a scapegoat. Thoughtful planning seems like a better option. And, this planning has to go across the board. We cannot work at political reform without simultaneously working on economic and educational renewal. It is doubtful that such a tactic could ultimately be successful, and we simply no longer have time for piecemeal approaches.

Political Thought for the Twenty-first Century

We are convinced that in order to restore and reinvigorate democracy we must execute a final and definitive separation of corporation and state. Corporate campaign giving, for example, has been defended by our Supreme Court as an act of free speech, a pretty dubious ruling to say the least, but a ruling that puts our elected representatives directly at the service of corporate agendas. Let us illustrate how this plays out in practice. Most Americans are unaware of the fact that Congress passed legislation permitting the use of gas in meat packages such that red meat will stay red longer and not turn brown as quickly. Here's an instance where Congress passed a law directly benefitting corporate agribusinesses by condoning the intentional deception of American citizens.

An episode of the Oprah Winfrey show offers us another example of corporate power. Oprah had a former Montana cattleman as a guest, an individual who relayed all of the dirty secrets related to beef production in this country, including the fact that only 1 percent of all cattle butchered is tested for mad cow disease, prompting Oprah to claim that she would never again eat a hamburger. The beef industry immediately took Oprah and her guest to court—and lost. Undaunted, agribusinesses thereafter successfully lobbied in 21 states to pass what have come to be called “food disparagement laws” making it illegal to say bad things about America’s food production and distribution system.

Given the enormous power of corporations to create and execute a self-interested political agenda, the twenty-first century is likely to experience ever more far-reaching proposals for political reform. Today there are ideas of considerable substance out there, ideas worthy of consideration and debate. For instance, there is a growing number of Americans calling for a constitutional convention to re-do America’s political system, getting rid of anachronisms like the electoral college, lifetime terms on an unelected Supreme Court, and vast representation discrepancies in the US Senate.³ There’s even considerable sentiment contending that the system is beyond fixing and that secession is the only viable option. In fact, 13 percent of Vermonters today support this option. Though that percent-

age may seem small, keep in mind that historians estimate that in 1776 only 25 percent of colonials were in favor of seceding from England. Of course, corporate media will not report on such things lest the popularity of these ideas grow.

These movements are interesting and provocative. Clearly the secession of a state might catalyze public sentiment to get behind a constitutional convention. A problem with these movements is that any potential success seems considerably far off, and there might not be time to wait. A better solution is to act on our growing understanding of the intimate connection between the well-being of democracy and the well-being of human community. Robert Putnam made this connection explicit in his longitudinal study of the political life of Italy titled *Making Democracy Work*. He then turned to another impactful scholarly project, chronicling the demise of community in America and the concurrent and simultaneous withering of American democracy.

Far from an aggregation of self-interested individuals, a democracy is composed of communities that have similar and differing interests from other communities. The vitality of democracy is therefore contingent on the degree to which citizens play an active role in the life of their communities, an active role premised on sound argument, an evidential base, active listening, and genuine effort at compromise—or what John Goodlad refers to as the “democratic arts.” But on every front, across all demographic classifications including socio-economic status, gender, race, religion, ethnicity, et cetera, Americans have become increasingly less engaged in the life of their communities. [Not just a little less engaged, but dramatically less so.] Putnam fastidiously documented this trend in his award-winning book, *Bowling Alone*. The significance of the title is that while more Americans are bowling now than ever before, far fewer Americans are bowling in community leagues. We are doing less of everything together, meaning the welfare or well-being of the place that is shared with neighbors is increasingly left to distant authorities who lack intimate knowledge of local circumstances and who are in any case obligated to carry out the corporate agenda of those who put them office. In short, the lack of civic engagement

translates directly into the demise of democracy. As communities have diminished, the political life of millions has been reduced to coming out to vote once every two years, and nearly half of those eligible to so do not even bother.

This is a fundamental political problem facing the United States in the twenty-first century. In order to re-build democracy, in order to rebuild a government of, for, and by the people to replace the current one of, for, and by the corporations, we need to re-build a sense of community by stimulating civic participation.

Economic Thought in the Twenty-first Century

Let us turn to the topic of economics. The obvious question in this realm is what kind of production and distribution is least likely to further heat our atmosphere, least likely to create vast discrepancies between the poor and rich, least likely to collapse as fossil fuels disappear, least likely to trigger international antipathy, and most likely to re-generate a sense of community and reinvigorate democracy in the process? The answer is to move all the way from global production and distribution to local production and distribution. Jane Jacobs made this argument back in 1985 in her impressive book *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*. The title is actually a bit deceptive, for Jacobs claims that economies are best built *around* cities, that is, a local economy includes a city and its hinterland, the rural regions that surround it.

Now this may sound like a tall order, a more difficult proposition even than successfully getting 37 states to call for a constitutional convention, but in actuality, people have more ability to affect economic change than political change. We vote once every two years or so; we produce and consume nearly everyday. Recognizing this, Wendell Berry has devoted his life to living and consuming in a way that makes no man hostage to his comfort. We can all choose to consume in such a way. John Ruskin identified it back in the nineteenth century when he admonished his countrymen to “In all buying, consider, first, what condition of existence you cause the producers of what you buy.”⁴

The best way to know what condition of existence you cause the producers of what you buy is to buy as local as possible. To maximize what is available locally, communities must adopt an economic strategy called “import substitution,” a process Jacobs describes at considerable length. Communities need to take stock of what is imported that could just as easily be produced locally—and then come together to find ways to make that local production happen. This is the wellspring of economic vitality. And when corporate giants attempt to undersell local operations, community allegiance can forestall such attempts. As well, communities can create policies that make it difficult for corporate giants to compete against local production.

Having identified what we take to be the fundamental political reform required for life in the twenty-first century, the re-invigoration of citizen engagement necessary to effect the separation of corporation and state; and the fundamental economic reform required for life in the twenty-first century, ethical consumption and the promotion of local production and distribution via import substitution; we turn next to the educational arena and the kind of post NCLB renewal that will work across all three of the major spheres animating the human condition.

Educational Thought for the Twenty-first Century

Before turning our attention to the educational arena, we would like to provide a quick historical review. One of the Enlightenment spokespersons trying to help Europe chart out a path to a non-feudal world was a Frenchman by the name of Charles de Secondat Montesquieu. Montesquieu is actually America’s unsung philosophical hero—for he was the intellectual source of one of our dear political doctrines, one that is on par with the separation of church and state: the separation of power via checks and balances. Our constitutional authors, Madison and Hamilton in particular, saw great wisdom in this idea even though they rejected most of the rest of what Montesquieu had to say regarding the establishment of republics. For instance, Montesquieu claimed that they needed to be kept small and that they needed to cultivate frugality and virtue among the pop-

ulation, hardly useful prescriptions for the commercialist republic Hamilton and Madison envisioned. Further, Montesquieu believed that if a republic was to succeed at all, it required a system of schools capable of delivering what he called, “the full power of education.”

Hamilton and Madison were silent on the question of education—which is one reason it took another 50 years after the constitution was ratified to institute systems of free schools. In fact, in the large corpus of Hamilton’s writings, the only mention of youth has to do with the use that can be made of them, “at a tender age,” in the nation’s growing factories. Despite the undemocratic measures deliberately weaved into our constitution, the infamous electoral college, the property qualifications for voting, the enormous representative-represented ratio, the nonelected positions on the Supreme Court, the infamous three-fifths clause, etc., despite all of that and in defense of Hamilton and Madison, they had little idea that what they created could become so conducive to politics dominated by party allegiances, and merely two political parties at that; or so conducive to an interlock between corporations and the apparatus of statehood. The shortcomings inherent in these developments have unfolded and intensified over time. It is now long past time that they were corrected.

But how do we make this happen? It is our contention that a big part of the answer has to do with the educational endeavor. It seems that Montesquieu was correct; a successful republic *does* require a school system capable of delivering the “full power of education.” Standardizing what is taught to everyone everywhere and considering the effort accomplished or not on the basis of a test score is about as far away from what Montesquieu described as a republic can get. When you toss in the still prevalent lingering effects of social Darwinism, that an education ought to match an individual’s evolutionary endowment of intellect, and that it ought to further match the evident and probable occupational destiny of each child, you have an educational system that bears no resemblance to one designed to deliver the full power of education, one designed to create and maintain the vitality of a republic. That is what is needed in the post NCLB era: Public schools focused on delivering the full power

of education. What must happen is something analogous to what must also happen in the political arena: catalyzing civic engagement of the sort that will effect the separation of corporation and state; and in the economic arena, ethical consumption flanked by local production and distribution via import substitution. Thus, it comes out something like this: curricular and instructional liberation for teachers monitored by, and negotiated with, a school's surrounding public.

For the sake of argument we're going to ignore the current prescriptive policy milieu and pretend that school districts have once again been given considerable latitude to decide educational matters locally. The next step, then, would be to encourage school boards to recognize and act on the wisdom behind a return to local control. That wisdom, in our estimation, can be described this way: the academic progress of a child is a matter best decided at the level closest to the child—that is, at the level of the local school. We cannot and should not expect politicians at the state or national level to make pedagogical decisions that will benefit all children, because all children do not learn in the same way. Learning is almost completely dependent on local context, cultural circumstances, as well as the personal ill- or well-being of each student on any given day. As well, learning is something highly dependent upon the quality of the relationship between student and teacher. Given this, we can lay out what a local school board might do to maximize the likelihood that all students will learn at a high level, that all students will receive the full power of education.

To start, they need to turn the matter of learning over to the professionals who work in each school. The gift of curricular and instructional freedom often results in reinvigorated professional lives—teachers who utilize the local context to build relevance into student engagement with traditional school subjects. Liberated teachers will be far more likely to utilize their pedagogical imaginations to create lessons that will motivate students, stretch them, and maximize what they come to understand about school subjects and the utility of those subjects.

The primary task of school administrators will be figure out ways to emulate school systems in other nations, like Japan, where teacher-student contact hours are limited, say, to four hours per day, in order to increase teacher-to-teacher contact hours so that rich curricular and instructional discussions might take place. This kind of deep-level conversation would add immeasurably to the quality of student-teacher interaction (and is the very rationale for Theodore Sizer's dictum "less is more."). Additionally, each school would be free to select curricular materials or make their own. Each teacher would be free to choose an instructional approach that seems to best match his or her strengths and the needs of the children in his or her charge.

But what about accountability? Here is where the essence of the reform we are proposing interjects. Each school should convene a ten member Board of Assessors chosen by lot for a two-year term from the vicinity surrounding the school. Generally speaking, the selection process should be analogous to the one used to select jurors for legal trials, only in this instance, teachers would be charged with the task of selecting the board from those chosen by lot. A process could be created that would allow citizens to decline to serve on the Board of Assessors if there are good reasons to do so. Once established, this board would take over the curricular and instructional monitoring duties of the elected school board, leaving them free to deal with personnel, infrastructure, and budget issues.

The responsibility of the Board would be to engage in discussions with teachers about their curricular and instructional choices, to decide how well these choices articulate across grades and subjects, and to become intimately involved in the assessment of student learning. Annually, the Board of Assessors should make a report to the State Department of Education relaying their level of satisfaction with the progress made at the school. In this way, the matter of accountability is given substance; a school's community will be allowed to decide how well their school is doing, rather than a distant testing agency where the employees have never met the local students on whom they pass statistical judgments.

Connecting Political, Economic, and Educational Reform

We believe that political, economic, and educational thinking in this country are *necessarily* joined at the hip. Change strategies, therefore, need to take this circumstance into account. That is why we have argued that we need to catalyze civic engagement in the interest of effecting the separation of corporation and state. The Board of Assessors that we are proposing would bring roughly one million Americans into a crucial kind of civic engagement, thus contributing to positive growth in terms of re-building a sense of community in and around the school, and thus contributing to the promotion of democracy in America.

With curricular and instructional freedom, teachers will be able to craft lessons that capitalize on the relevance of the local context, the local neighborhood, including how the neighborhood and the school's neighbors have been treated by past and current policy decisions. In other words, schools can become an invaluable laboratory for policy surveillance, an invaluable agent in the promotion of import substitution and ethical consumption. Through learning in the traditional school subjects, students can do the research required for community members who wish know the condition they create among the producers of what they buy.

In this reform, we utilize the "project method" and elements of what has come to be called "place-based pedagogy." Some might argue that the majority of the nation's teachers would be unfamiliar with these approaches. Although this seems unlikely to us, it is plausible that some would be. But we believe, nevertheless, that the act of curricular and instructional liberation itself will move teachers in this direction on their own devices, and that their development could be augmented with help from the nation's schools and colleges of education. Higher education, generally, could play a major role, especially in terms of assisting local Boards of Assessors to do their jobs well. This would be a valuable sort of professorial service that could come from professors across a range of disciplines.

We have a little experience with this stemming from Chicago's experiment with Local School Councils—the elected members of which were required to participate in 18 hours of training initially

provided by three Chicago-area higher education institutions, but later taken over by the Chicago school district itself. While there are many positive developments stemming from this 1988 reform effort, we believe that immersing the councils in personnel decisions has taken time, energy, and focus away from what the councils might otherwise more profitably do. Further, the fact that council members have been elected has meant that they have not been the kind of democratic catalyst they might have been if the selection process was by lot.

A democratically selected Board of Assessors, whose focus is on curriculum and instruction, might very well orchestrate occasional public hearings, but the vast majority of the issues and concerns that generate antipathy and disruption at school board meetings would be left to the elected board. Part of the training colleges and universities would offer newly selected Assessor Board members would be how to communicate its role to the general public.

Still, “democracy is messy.” Within this reform measure there is potential for conflict between the nonelected Board of Assessors and the elected School Board, or between the assessors and teachers, or between the assessors and administrators. The American system of education has not prepared citizens well for the kind of “give and take” conversations that the assessors would need to embrace. Colleges can be a huge help by providing assistance toward that end.

Most of the assistance from institutions of higher education would entail helping the Board members build a new vision for schools—helping them see the potential for connecting school work to the vitality of the community that the school serves, helping them understand the pivotal role of context, of relevance, to human learning. We have no intention of prescribing what a local school might do, but it is easy to envision a school that chooses to require a well-crafted piece of local legislation from each grade-level class, or a school that requires each grade-level class to adopt a neighborhood building for a complete restoration. Schools might identify a range of areas within which students must wield traditional school subjects in the interest of community betterment—aesthetics, health care, housing, historical preservation, oral history, community mu-

sic and theater, local poetry, the identification of economic niches working catalytically toward import substitution, state and federal policy analysis, research related to the production of goods and services consumed locally, opinion surveys, cash-flow surveys, environmental monitoring and testing and so on. A school's Board of Assessors would need to elicit from teachers how students will benefit academically from such projects and how what is learned will serve as a foundation for future learning. Additionally, they would need to serve as witnesses to student academic growth.

Teachers who have both the time and the incentive to be creative and to work together can find an infinite number of ways to embed curriculum into local circumstances, local conditions, such that the traditional school subjects are taught within a context, the relevance of which would be abundantly evident—dramatically increasing the likelihood that school subjects will be well learned. The great shortcoming of what is now all the rage, standards-based education, is that it de-contextualizes curriculum so that its use is unknown, or at best, assumed to exist somewhere far off in every student's future. This is why John Dewey chastised American education, claiming it put children on a "waiting list" and kept them there until they were released by adulthood. The net effect of what we are currently doing in the name of education all across this country is very much like assigning the study of Spanish without the opportunity to use it, five years later it is forgotten. Any piece of the curriculum, devoid of an opportunity to wield it, suffers the same fate as unutilized Spanish instruction. The time-tested colloquialism is accurate, "use it or lose it."

The best intentions surrounding learning standards fly in the face of what we know about how humans learn. But even if this were not the case, there would still be ample reason to liberate teachers such that they might embed lessons in the context of the immediate community, ample reason if there is general agreement about the ends of education, general agreement that economic productivity does not solely define the human condition, that is, that one's occupation is not the only means by which a life may be rendered rich or poor. A republic requires a school system that delivers "the full power of

education.” Such a system, of necessity, will utilize the immediate community to balance economic *and political* enculturation. And, to our great good fortune, reinvigorated communities mean a reinvigorated democracy.

¹As far as we are aware, this term was coined by Banesh Hoffman in his 1962 classic *The Tyranny of Testing* (New York: Crowell-Collier).

²David Villano, “A Future of Less,” *Miller-McClure*, August 15, 2008. See also, David Cheong, “China, India Growth Force Climate Change Action,” International Energy Agency, November 8, 2007.

³See Sanford Levinson’s *Our Undemocratic Constitution: Where the Constitution Goes Wrong and How We the People Can Correct It*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁴John Ruskin, *Unto This Last*, (New York, Penguin Books, 1987) 227.

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