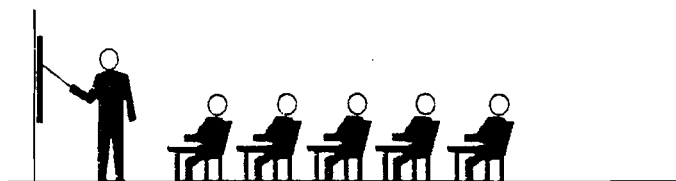
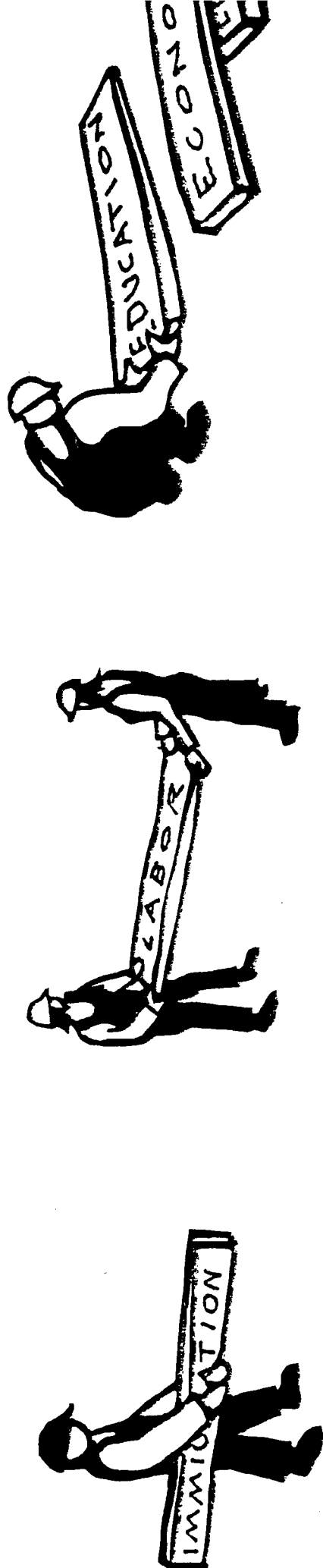


An alternative Democratic platform



EDUCATION

By Deborah Meier

Today's Democratic Party knows that education is the key to opportunity," says the Democratic platform. And so it is, but opportunity to what? To "prosper" in "the new global economy," says the platform. "Cutting education as we move into the 21st century would be like cutting defense spending at the height of the cold war." Given this statement of the problem, the wan, half-baked solutions—more vocational programs with names like "School-to-Work"; getting "every classroom wired to the Information Super-highway"—aren't surprising. A real progressive program, which saw our children not as little MX missiles and Polaris subs aimed at Germany and Japan but as future citizens, would look quite different.

The platform should spell out more clearly what is at stake. The purpose of education should be building democracy and strengthening the nation as a whole, not just individual economic advancement. We need to remember Thomas Jefferson's words: "I know no safety depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves: And if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to educate their discretion." It's a tall order for a complex modern society, but it's within our powers. To shrink from that responsibility is to risk undermining our democracy.

If we want all citizens to be capable of exercising high levels of judgment—as voters, jurors, community activists, neighbors and productive members of the workforce—then we need a public education system that addresses the circumstances and needs of today's children. The system we designed a century or more ago for a small, largely male and white elite won't do any longer. In so far as it ever served us well, it presupposed that most citizens would be educated largely outside of formal schooling—in small town meetings, union halls, political clubs, churches, neighborhood organizations and formal as well as informal apprenticeships. That's where most people learned the arts and crafts of civics and character education, picked up the know-how as well as knowledge to participate in public life, and learned the skills needed to be productive workers. But in the last century, the American student body has increased a hundredfold, while the American education system has crowded out all alternative forms of education and training. And we're surprised that kids are in trouble?

We've placed on the agenda expectations for our children and schools without providing either the moral or

financial resources to carry them out. We want schools to pass on "cultural literacy," but we allow our culture to be demeaned everywhere in the media. Instead of designing education so that everyone, including families and neighbors, are part of the process, we've largely abandoned our children—rich and poor—to the care of overburdened school teachers. We kick kids out of our school buildings at 3 o'clock, but today's economy requires their families work longer hours and thus leave them with no safe place to go.

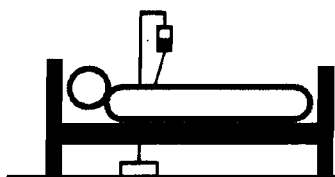
As a result, our schools are growing meaner—especially at the bottom end, but we'll all feel it soon enough. We need a 21st-century redesign of schooling, one that encourages young people, their families and their schools to develop relationships of respect and trust. We need incentives for schools to be custom-designed, not mass produced. They need to be:

- small enough for everyone to know each other well and take responsibility for the work they do together;
- sufficiently self-governing so that important decisions are made close to where the action takes place;
- places of choice for families;
- accountable in ways that don't stifle ingenuity and community, but expose people to external standards and external public review.

Smallness doesn't require abandoning existing school buildings—just using them differently. Nor does self-governance require a single standard model for site-based decision-making. Public school choice can create greater equity, greater diversity and greater unity—if we use it for that end. And if accountability is to be fair and rigorous, we need to provide all our children with relatively equal resources. Money won't change a thing, but change requires money.

We can redesign public schools so that the capacity of all our children to engage in thoughtful and demanding intellectual tasks is not bypassed. Exercising power responsibly, being respectful of one's neighbor's ideas, and competent to hear and make sense of complex matters are learnable skills. ◀

Deborah Meier is the author of *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem* (Beacon Press, 1996).



HEALTH CARE

By John Canham-Clyne

Although both major parties keep promising to highlight their "differences" during the campaign, you would be hard-pressed to find any variation in the health-care planks of their platforms. The Republican platform states: "The

goal of the Republican Party is to maintain the quality of America's health care while making health care and health insurance more accessible and more affordable." The Democrats slug back with "The Democratic Party is committed to ensuring that Americans have access to affordable, high-quality health care."

Note the missing "all" before "Americans," a retreat from the 1992 Democratic platform's commitment to universal coverage. The 1996 platform papers over many things. It makes no mention of the more than 40 million Americans who have no insurance, nor the tens of millions more whose health care coverage is badly eroding. It fails to note the astonishingly rapid consolidation of the health care market into an oligopoly, nor the billions of dollars wasted by private insurance companies on administration and profit. Nor does the platform weigh in on the phenomenon infuriating millions of consumers across the nation who supposedly have good coverage: the denial of medical care and other abuses by huge for-profit managed-care corporations seeking to fatten their bottom lines.

A party committed to human decency, fiscal restraint and the promotion of the general welfare needs to acknowledge that every person has the right to the best health care that society can afford. That can best be achieved through a single-payer health care system. Our experiment with for-profit medicine generally, and for-profit health insurance in particular, has been a social and economic disaster. We spend more money on health care than any other industrialized nation, yet receive fewer services for it. Millions of Americans suffer terribly and die prematurely because they can't afford routine medical care that can and should be available to everyone.

The single payer system could be built on the successful foundation of Medicare. Legislation should be passed that would fully fund Medicare, expand its benefits to close gaps in coverage—especially for prescription drugs and long-term care—and extend the program to all Americans. In that way, everyone would be guaranteed comprehensive preventive, primary, emergency and long-term health care from the doctor, nurse, midwife, therapist, hospital, clinic, nursing home or other health care provider of their choice. Those who prefer to receive care in managed-care networks could do so; such networks, however, would be organized on a not-for-profit basis and would not be allowed to impose financial penalties on members who sought care outside the network. Similarly, private hospitals should not be organized on a for-profit basis.

Of course, good health requires more than financing access to care. Providers and consumers of health care need information to make appropriate choices. So a party seeking improvement in the national health should be committed to significantly increasing funding for the Agency for Health Care Policy Research, which sets practice guidelines based on research that analyzes how well different treatments actually work. It should also try to improve the quality of reporting to the National Practitioner Databank—which