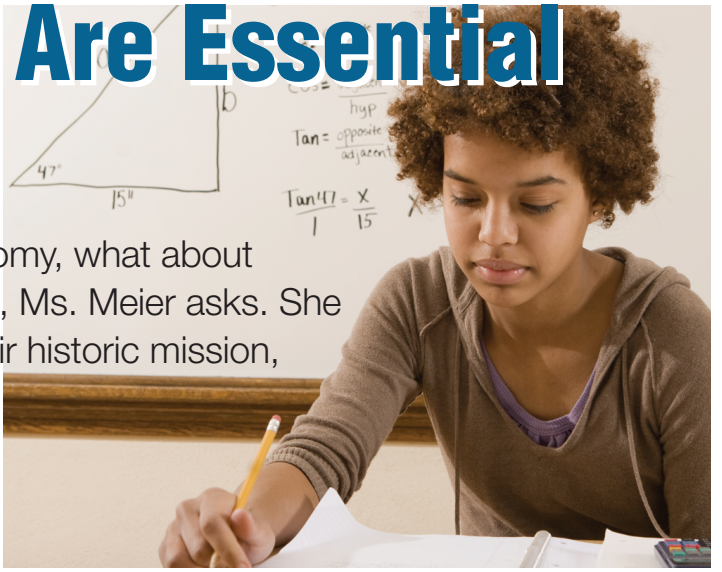
Strong Schools Are Essential For Democracy



If the test score gap is bad for the economy, what about the medical care gap or the income gap, Ms. Meier asks. She argues that schools should return to their historic mission, teaching the skills needed for a strong democracy.

By Deborah Meier

SOME believe that defense of public education is merely a "special interest issue." For a minority, it's a matter of principle that private, for-profit companies are better than public institutions regardless of results. The others would dispense with the public schools if any alternative could produce higher test scores or reduce the gap between the scores of whites and blacks. In fact, some critics of public education claim that reducing the test score gap is *the* civil rights issue of our time, as well as the cure for our economic ills. They claim that anything that distracts us from focusing on these two issues undermines both the poor and the rich simultaneously. It can be an irresistible argument — if you don't think about it.

While outright calls for privatization in the form of vouchers remain unpopular, privatization by any other name is widespread. Both not-for-profit and for-profit private organizations now operate publicly funded schools in many states. Even if there is no evidence that such privatization solves either the test score gap or the nation's economic woes, the critics of public schools tell us that it is always worth a try. In fact, they keep telling us that we should stop "wasting" tax dollars on public education and use that money for various privatization schemes. Thus, the line between public and private becomes harder and harder to find.

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Under these circumstances, it is a pleasure to read Richard Gibboney's manifesto on behalf of public schooling's traditional democratic mission. Starting with two quotes from the outrageous Thomas Paine and strewn with old-fashioned (not an insult) critiques of unchecked capitalism, his manifesto is loud, sometimes brash, occasionally inaccurate, and a delight to read.

Arthur C. Brooks, the new president of the decidedly right-wing American Enterprise Institute, notes that "despite the rise in government spending between 1972 and 2002 . . . the percentage of Americans who said they were happy . . . 30% . . . did not change." Ergo, he argues, government can "only make things worse if they tried . . . through taxation and public spending."[1] Brooks may not have noticed that it was precisely by means of government policy that the rich got richer and the poor got poorer in the past 20 years. Perhaps that increasing disparity in wealth accounts for why the rate of government spending to happiness has not changed. He doesn't ask about the happiness gap between rich and poor, but maybe that hasn't changed either. Would Brooks change his mind if it had?

But one thing is clear, government spending — local, state, or federal — is not how conservatives hope to improve education. "Throwing" money at the schools is a waste, especially when there's a "real" war to fight. Thus AEI scholars show a lack of concern over spending in Iraq, but they begrudge every penny spent in the war against ignorance.

Unfair? After all, many AEI scholars and supporters have been eager beavers for the No Child Left Behind Act, though they were far from eager when it was the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which

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they saw as just "throwing money." These scholars also do not seem disturbed at increased mayoral and state control of urban schools, which, in other cases, they would call the "state's heavy hand." They don't mind "big government" when it helps reinforce their biases in favor of the free marketplace and morality. In fact, they applaud policies that hope to change behavior through punishment. For example, conservatives favor grade-retention policies although they certainly show no evidence of improving even test scores, and there is ample evidence that these policies increase the dropout rate among the poor. But these policies, along with a host of zero-tolerance policies that have swept over schools, appeal to conservatives as proper punishment for failure.

POVERTY HANDICAPS CHILDREN

The handicaps poor children start with are not merely that they have, statistically, less of most things, but that they also have more of the wrong things. They are more restless, more independent, etc. They talk a lot but say the wrong things. Test scores can reflect race and class and can do so for even very young students. This is not the place to pursue this subject in detail, but testing is the best and surest way to create a system for maintaining gaps. It should be no surprise that we are seeing more tracking, perhaps most insidiously in the form of different schools for different kids, often under the name of choice. It's not possible that the inventors of these policies were unaware of this.

Gibboney is too hard on the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers. They have two faults. First, they probably reflect their membership's ambivalence and fearfulness. Second, they have been deserted by a weakened labor movement in general, and there now are fewer liberal allies, which makes it riskier to be militant. I think, like Gibboney, that unions should be bolder, but I'm sitting on the sidelines saying this. The teachers unions also might be wiped out if they try to be more militant.

But Gibboney is completely right that few educators, and even fewer noneducators, see any of these issues as serious policy questions. Only the claim that it is public schools that are undermining our economy gets any national exposure. As a result, even those who find the economic argument both morally and factually nonsense are sometimes grateful. Some attention might be better than none.

Even if the argument connecting student test scores and corporate profits were true, it is a weak argument for doing something right now. A rush to improve scores on the part of those at the bottom would take far more time than the naysayers claim we have. Changes in schooling take five to 15 years. During this time, our competitors will be raising their scores too. After all, many large American-based corporations and foundations, such as Microsoft, are subsidizing the school systems of our competitors.

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If inequality in test scores is bad for the economy (though it's not true for China, for example), what about inequality of medical care? Where does the corporate elite stand on that? Or inequality in housing? Or inequality in preschool child care, summer experiences for children, or prison sentencing? Or the inequality these critics do not mention, the inequality in income? Citizens in a more robust democracy would be asking such questions.

I'm ready to sign on to Gibboney's four recommendations. We need to do something about poverty. We need to do some deep thinking about the connection between democracy and schooling. We need public policy that strengthens, not weakens, unions. I don't know if there is a reason to expect "dynamite" in our cities, as Gibboney warns, but we certainly need a better urban policy.

Sometimes, I fear that the less said the better when it comes to school politics. But that's a short-sighted attitude that only speaks to how disabled the argument for democracy itself has become. Democracy has become one of those "process" issues that neither voters nor politicians want to take on, hoping that somehow our constitutional rights will hold up long enough without our reasoned and impassioned defense.

Strong schools upheld and honored by their own constituents in every community in America are one bulwark of democracy. The weaker schools become, the more dependent they are on mandates from above, such as test scores that shortchange what being well-educated means. When educating our kids for tomorrow falls beyond our shared responsibility, then democracy is already dead. Thanks, Richard Gibboney, for calling the alarm, even if we may not agree on what should be done next.

1. Patricia Cohen, "American Enterprise Institute Names a New President," *New York Times*, 15 July 2008, p. E2.