
Why an Undemocratic Capitalism Has Brought Public Education to Its Knees:

A MANIFESTO



The public schools are being punished for the achievement gap, which they did not create and cannot close. Mr. Gibboney urges educators to rise up and fight to protect public education and democracy, which will both collapse if our society refuses to take the steps necessary to eliminate poverty.

BY RICHARD A. GIBBONEY

Freedom, if dangerous in the hands of the poor from ignorance . . . is . . . dangerous in the hands of the rich from influence.

— Thomas Paine,
“A Serious Letter to the
People of Pennsylvania,” 1778

It is wrong to say God made rich and poor. He made only male and female; and He gave them the earth for their inheritance.

— Thomas Paine

UNCHECKED capitalism is destroying our nation’s public schools, and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is the final nail in their coffin. Marching under the banner of “accountability,” right-wing, pro-business forces are willfully undermining the democratic right of all children to a free, high-quality education.

Rather than support policies designed to reduce poverty and its toxic effects on the ability of children to succeed in school, our lawmakers are pursuing the misbegotten path of penalizing schools in poverty-stricken cities and rural areas for their failure to work educational miracles. In so doing, they are eroding the

■ *RICHARD A. GIBBONEY is a former elementary teacher at the Andrew Jackson School in Ferndale, Michigan. He also is a former Pennsylvania deputy secretary of education for research and development and the former Vermont commissioner of education. He is the recipient of the Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.*

promise of our democracy.

Most children at the bottom of the economic ladder start their formal education years behind middle-class children in language development, social behavior, and general knowledge of the world. This self-evident fact, repeatedly confirmed in research studies, creates a learning gap of Grand Canyon proportions between the children of social privilege and those who grow up poor, who are disproportionately black and Hispanic.

No system of schools — public or private — has ever demonstrated that it can close this poverty-induced learning gap for most children. If policy makers know this — and they surely must — they ignore it. In fact, in the two decades preceding No Child Left Behind, a succession of presidents and Congresses gradually abandoned historically successful Great Society programs that had lifted many of the poor out of poverty. Today, more than one-quarter of American children live in poverty, more than in any other industrialized nation.¹

At the same time, those in the corporate elite and their political allies have ratcheted up the pressure on schools with a harsh accountability system that they have consistently shunned for themselves. Can you imagine applying to Enron and the Wall Street financial manipulators who brought us the credit and home foreclosure crises the same punitive standards we now apply to the schools?

With No Child Left Behind, Congress ratified an upside-down education reform strategy: improve learning by feeding children less and testing them more. For those schools most affected by the false standards of NCLB — largely the ones in our poorest neighborhoods — all creativity, intelligence, and imagination have been sucked out of teaching and learning. The premise of the law — holding schools accountable for test results without any guarantees that students have received expert instruction in safe, well-equipped schools — contravenes science, flouts morality, and makes no economic sense.

And in what I believe to be a historic and an unconscionable failure, our nation's educators have stood by and let all this happen. Instead of relying on the energizing principles of democracy — equity, opportunity, and fairness — to fight this law and the mindset it grows out of, educators have taken political and professional cover in technicalities.

Teacher unions and groups representing administrators and superintendents have protested No Child Left Behind only around the edges and primarily

from a narrow and self-interested intellectual point of view. They have not engaged in meaningful policy debates about the relationship of poverty to educational achievement, the essential role public education plays in our democracy, the huge disparity in wealth between the “haves” and the “have-nots,” or the role of schools in creating citizens/workers who can think. We educators cannot continue to act so thoughtlessly, or this nation will not survive as a democracy.

I am not saying, as knee-jerk critics of my viewpoint allege, that poor children cannot learn. Neither

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teachers nor policy makers should be allowed to hide behind this facile and insidious assumption. This Manifesto is not about the so-called soft bigotry of low expectations that denies poor children a path out of poverty.

Given all that we know from neuroscience about early brain development and the role of environment in nurturing aptitude, schools cannot be expected on their own to close the achievement gap between rich and poor. Yet teachers are pilloried and innocent children intellectually abused for failing to learn under the drill-for-skill, test-'em-often methods advocated by the Bush Administration, by both political parties, and by the biggest lobbying group in Washington, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.² The leadership of the nation and of public education seems not to understand that an undemocratic capitalism wants to destroy public education in favor of a system of private and for-profit schools paid for with taxpayer money.

NCLB THREATENS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

No Child Left Behind has made public education itself fair game for profiteers, and this can only mean two things: corruption and higher costs. This law turns over huge chunks of public education to those whose overriding goal is to make money, not educate children. Note the questionable tutoring industry that has materialized to provide “supplemental services” without solid evidence to date that it has helped

poor children. And according to Jonathan Kozol, the test-prep and testing industry generated \$2.8 billion in 2005.³

But those whose jobs are most threatened by the destruction of the public education system — teachers and administrators — have been unwilling to grasp the import of these developments. Their reaction confirms my thesis that our democracy is “tied and bound.” Educators, too, are intellectual captives of the radical, undemocratic capitalism that has taken over our nation.

UNIONS ABANDON THE FIGHT

The best that the National Education Association has mustered in response to NCLB is the shrill complaint that Congress has declined to “fully fund” this disastrous law. The feeble response of the NEA is a sorry comedown for an organization that was once a vigorous defender of public education.

In *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools*, education historian Jonathan Zimmerman outlines how the radical Right in the 1940s and 1950s attacked public schools on several fronts: communism, internationalism (the United Nations), and “sexual depravity” (which it linked to race). Back then, however, these fearmongers had to face down an NEA that knew how to beat them at their own game.

In 1941, to counteract assaults on social studies textbooks, the NEA established the National Commission for the Defense of Democracy Through Education. In 1949, it teamed with the Rockefeller Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation to form the National Citizens Commission for the Public Schools, a body that included such distinguished citizens as Roy Larsen, president of Time, Inc. Both commissions used multimedia and advertisements to counter right-wing attacks.⁴

This advocacy touched me personally. When I was a teacher in a progressive school system in Ferndale, Michigan, during the height of Sen. Joseph McCarthy’s Red-baiting, our staff was attacked by Allen Zoll. I remember his name as if it were yesterday. Zoll, the leader of a national right-wing organization with fascist connections, was an anti-Semite and a hater of public schools. His innuendo-ridden pamphlet was cleverly titled *How Red Is the Little Red School House?* The NEA was not timid then about using forceful public relations strategies to lash back at Zoll on behalf of both our district and public education in general.

But times have changed. Today, the NEA is quiet and is not engaged in defending public education di-

rectly through citizen involvement and headline-grabbing commissions, as it once did. Its blind acceptance of NCLB is akin to an innocent man’s complaint on the way to the gallows that the hangman bought too cheap a rope.

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, also buys into what I call the child- and teacher-destructive essence of NCLB. In the October 2007 edition of her advertorial “What Matters Most,” in the *New York Times*, Weingarten calls for changes to the test-based accountability system, not for its elimination. Like her colleagues at NEA, she prefers to ignore the role poverty plays in low student achievement and shows that she implicitly believes New York City schools can close the achievement gap between socially privileged students and those who are less privileged. This is nonsense.

Weingarten prefers to ignore data indicating that children in some of our most poverty-burdened schools post achievement test scores on a par with those of some Third World countries. In 2003, students in Washington, D.C., for instance, scored lower than those in 36 nations in mathematics, and 26 nations outscored Mississippi students in science.

But when one looks at average state scores in the 14 states where there is no massive urban poverty, we find that only one nation, Singapore, scored above those states in science.⁵ Even if they teach test-prep and retest, NCLB-style, 35 hours a week, teachers and schools by themselves cannot reverse the crushing effects of poverty and unstable families on educational potential.

TABLE 1.
Eighth-Grade TIMSS Science and Math Scores by Degree of Poverty School Attended

Poverty Level	Score	
	Science	Math
Wealthy Communities	571	547
High-Poverty Communities	461	444
U.S. Average	527	504
International Average	473	466

Source: Data from Third International Mathematics and Science Study, 2003. Adapted from David C. Berliner, “Our Impoverished View of Educational Reform,” *Teachers College Record*, August 2005, Table 2, p. 17.

Notice in Table 1 that both science and mathematics have a similar pattern: students in wealthy communities score about 100 points higher than students in high-poverty communities. Our socially privileged

students are also nearly 100 points above the international average. This does not look like a failing school system to me. There is a huge political and democratic failure, however, in our toleration of poverty, but those among the elite don't want to talk about it. It's a safer "wealth protector" to deflect public attention to our "failing" public schools and to ignore the poor.

School superintendents are also misguided. As for school administrators, they are busy gaming the system by manipulating test-score results and subgroup sizes to make their schools look better rather than condemning NCLB itself as an attack on the oldest, most democratic system of public education in the world. In January 2004, I sent to 225 randomly chosen Pennsylvania superintendents (out of 501) a five-page abstract of "No Child Left Behind: Reform or Trojan Horse?" — an unpublished paper I had written. A short handwritten note from me invited their reaction. I received but 10 responses. One interested superintendent invited me to a discussion on NCLB with about 20 of his colleagues. That was it.

Even Phi Delta Kappa has succumbed. In 2006, its advocacy committee endorsed reauthorizing the law with amendments designed to "make it better." I hate to say it, but I think that, within the education profession today, numbers (i.e., test scores) are revered while ideas are suspect. The leadership of the teacher unions and the education professoriate are lost in a deceptively appealing array of disciplinary techniques typically devoid of democratic, theoretical, and historical content and, therefore, without practical democratic effect.

The superintendents and the PDK advocacy committee are examples of one reason why societies fail, according to Jared Diamond in his brilliant book, *Collapse*. That is, the leadership fails to identify a threat to society even though the cultural knowledge at the time is sufficient to recognize the threat. What the superintendents and PDK failed to see is that education is an idea game, not a technique game.⁶

DEWEY ABANDONED

As the practitioners and professors wander in this disciplinary thicket, they abandon the humanistic and generous philosophy of John Dewey. Dewey saw

the sharing of ordinary experiences and interests as something to value; he described democracy as *life lived* (not just talked about) in a *community* "of varied and shared interests." Dewey feared, however, that without an intelligent vigilance, the few would take over from the many, the rich would dominate the poor, and the common good would be replaced by plutocratic corporate private interest.

Sadly, Dewey's fears are being realized. I can only conclude that educators have been seduced by the viewpoint that considers only the economic value of

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schooling as a training ground for workers and not the centrality of public education to the survival of democracy. In the endless parade of education "reforms," a focus on technical skills has replaced the pursuit of ideas, democratic ideals, and civic courage. My 1994 book, *The Stone Trumpet*, analyzed 34 reforms put forth by governments, foundations, researchers, and educators between 1960 and 1990. Only six fully cultivated democratic and intellectual values.⁷

By treating NCLB only as a technical and political problem rather than as a grave threat to democracy and to public education, our anti-intellectual unions and timid leaders undermine democracy itself. You may think that I am overstating the case. But all U.S. presidents, beginning with Ronald Reagan, along with a succession of Congresses, have favored the interests of corporations over the democratic and economic concerns of citizens. This pro-business bias has been hostile not just to public education, but to other social goods, including progressive tax policies and universal health care.

Structural changes in the economy — summarized in the term "globalization" — have opened new investment opportunities and sources of profit for such companies as Wal-Mart and have induced new stresses for their employees who work for "low pay and elusive benefits," as Robert Reich puts it.⁸ Other economists such as John K. Galbraith, Paul Krugman, and Joseph Stiglitz acknowledge this fact as well.

Reich says that by 2007 corporations and wealthy individuals owned both the Democratic and Repub-

lican parties and the U.S. Congress. He outlines the threat to democracy posed by a voracious capitalism (although I don't think he discusses sufficiently the threat to our basic institutions, including public basic and higher education). While real wages for most workers have barely grown since the mid-1970s, executive compensation has soared to obscene levels, even for corporate leaders who have run their companies into the ground and brought disaster to our economy.

As a result of the administrations of the first President Bush and of President Clinton (who directed one of the most pro-business Democratic administrations ever), and in response to the destructive policies of the current President Bush, the undemocratic capitalist fox has been steadily devouring the public chickens. Medicare, Social Security, and any chance for widespread, publicly supported early childhood education have all been imperiled.

DEMOCRACY IN JEOPARDY

Next to go will be democracy itself. Think about it: What democratic civilization has ever thrived on the curious notion that its proper goal is making widgets for 50 cents and selling them for 100 cents *regardless of the human, environmental, and social cost*? Can such thinking ever lead to justice and domestic tranquility?

This obsession with profit-at-any-social-cost is inherent to capitalist philosophy. But most Americans are ill informed in this area or refuse to believe that the ax will ever fall on them.

Economist Duncan Foley, in *Adam's Fallacy: A Guide to Economic Theology*, explains how capitalism is good at doing some things well, like money accumulation for capital investment. On the other hand, he says, capitalism creates income inequality, tolerates poverty, and is hostile to the physical and democratic environment — including public schools. Foley speaks directly to my vision of “democracy tied and bound.” He writes: “[Capitalism] creates new sources of wealth *and ways of life by destroying existing sources of wealth and community*” (emphasis added).⁹

Do not lightly pass over the italicized words in the preceding paragraph. You have just read the most socially radical words in the economic lexicon. Blue collar workers in Ohio and Pennsylvania may not know the words “[capitalism] destroys existing sources of wealth and community,” but they feel the slashes an

abstract economic idea can inflict.

But you will not find Foley's ideas in the incessant stock market reports and business commentary on TV, on radio, or in print. In these media, capitalism is implicitly characterized as a gift-giving Santa Claus, world without end. Few if any of the high social costs of unfettered capitalism get in the way of the 24/7 Good News.

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At the same time, I've come to understand that the captivity of democracy by market forces is not the result of a corporate conspiracy. On the contrary, corporations are doing what they are “wired” to do: work fiercely for competitive advantage regardless of social or environmental considerations. Reich points out that “Wal-Mart executives are only doing what they are supposed to do: Make money for their investors and give customers low prices. Like players in any game, [Wal-Mart] executives are doing *whatever is necessary to win*” (emphasis added).¹⁰

We have gotten into the mess we're in today because the guardians of democracy — the leaders of our government and public institutions — have not been equally zealous in pursuing democratic goals. Instead, they have let themselves be seduced by the worst of capitalism's lures.

CAPITALISM NOT SOCIALLY NEUTRAL

Capitalism is never socially neutral; its effects ripple deep and broad. Take the development of the automobile and its radical effects on community life as a provocative example of technology's powerful influence on daily life in our democracy. In the short term, the auto industry made its creators and manufacturers rich and created a whole new market. But cars also made the suburbs possible, drained talent and money from cities, and stimulated massive highway building, which helped to create today's sprawl. At the same time, the automobile industry offered high-paid, if routinized, work that helped build the middle class after 1950. Today, automobiles contribute to global climate change, to our dependence on oil, and, it has been argued, to our ongoing engagement in Iraq.

Anyone who acts as if capitalism is socially neutral is not looking at the real world. The beast feeds itself by using its raw power to prosper. Our failure to hang onto our democratic ideals has permitted the social good brought on by innovation to morph into orgies of overindulgence by the privileged few.

And you know how this will always pan out. While families with incomes in the top 20% own about 90% of the nation's wealth, 80% of American households live on less than 10% of that wealth. It is clear that poor and working-class families are not receiving their fair share of the wealth they have helped to create by being good citizens, by working, and by raising their children.

From 1983 to 1998, the household gain in wealth for the bottom 80% of U.S. households — that is, most of us — was a mere 9%. For the next 19% of households, the figure was more than four times as much, 38%. What about the top 1%, you ask? Their wealth increased by a whopping 53%.¹¹ Such data make plain why schools alone, since school achievement is tied so closely to social class, will never be able to close the rich/poor, white/minority achievement gaps. But if we look at the net worth of white and black families in America, we can see in simple numbers the huge disparity of wealth that reduces the achievement of poor minority and white youth in public schools, because school achievement is related to social class and class is related to wealth. Median net worth in 2004 for black families was less than \$12,000; for white families, about \$118,000.¹² These figures are less than democracy demands. Even the white family figure is low because it would pay for about three one-week hospital stays for a serious illness.

NCLB UNDERMINES PUBLIC TRUST IN SCHOOLS

Facts about inequality haven't stopped the corporate elite that brought about this huge imbalance in wealth from blaming the public schools for the very low achievement of poverty's children. In *No Child Left Behind*, the full power of the federal government was mustered to implement a law that undermines the public's trust in education, needlessly requires the involvement of private corporations in the work of public schools, and imposes unscientific standards, punitive sanctions, and impossible deadlines for "results." All of this virtually ensures the failure of most schools with high proportions of poor and minority students, while harassing teachers and students with needless and expensive testing.

For many critics, teachers have become the villains in the wealthy elite's panic over educational accomplishment and foreign competition. But teachers don't cause financial meltdowns, home foreclosures, climate change, or hurricanes. And they don't invade countries or outsource jobs. Teachers don't cause mind-numbing conditions of poverty that limit children's ability to learn. However, teachers are the ones asked to cope with the poisonous effects of poverty. Why? Because most of society doesn't give a damn.

With our nation's demographics rapidly changing — black and Hispanic students now make up 42% of public school enrollment¹³ — and the historically per-

Many psychological and sociological studies are useful, but they have not created a robust theory of education.

sistent correlation between minority status, poverty, and low achievement, one can imagine the results for public schools when the media give their usual shallow treatment to the predictably low achievement of these blameless children. More and more public schools will be dishonestly labeled "failures," and our democracy will be weakened and further imperiled.

Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson begs us to understand and acknowledge our own history, recounting the "familial ethnocide" inflicted on African Americans by Southern slaveholders. In most cases, the post-slavery descendants of slaves have yet to recover fully from this assault on the black family. The result, Patterson writes, has been a lack of parental support and discipline, the absence of fathers from the lives of 70% of black children born to single mothers, and the recourse of young people to gangs as parental substitutes. "By whatever means . . . lower class Afro-Americans have got to recommit themselves. . . to stable [families] . . . and to raising their children," he writes.¹⁴

This bit of social science research reveals the false premises of NCLB and the absurdity of educators who did not apply the data of their ordinary school experience to understanding the law's hypocrisy. Until our supercapitalistic democracy recognizes the rights of the poor and moves to correct this shameful legacy, children, disproportionately black and increasingly Hispanic, will be needlessly denied the privileges of middle-class family membership, which motivates them to learn and to do well in school. Un-

less more families are helped to grow into the working and middle classes over several generations, their children will continue to achieve at Third World levels in New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Washington, D.C. And no fast-talking superintendent of schools — or even a CEO of schools — will make any difference for most children in poverty-stricken families.

In this presidential election year, only former Sen. John Edwards spoke directly to the issues of poverty and class. Overlooking such an elephant in the living room is a measure of political neglect beyond reason. One would hope that our political leaders would act as if they understood that extreme inequality of wealth and child poverty are detrimental to a vital democracy.

TWO FACES OF POVERTY

Before I go into my recommendations, let me try to put two faces on the seemingly unreal problem of child poverty and the unbelievable amount of learning and positive attitudes that socially privileged children acquire at home and bring to school. First, take my young friend Gabriella. Gabriella lives along Philadelphia's Main Line, a 30-mile stretch of affluent suburbs running along the old "main line" of the Pennsylvania Railroad.

To know Gabriella is to know how a rich and informal home learning environment can lead to phenomenal language and cultural learning by age 10. Her parents believe that the "cultivation of the mind and feelings is the best life and the best preparation

for life" (interview with Gabriella's mother). Gabriella started improvising songs and dances with her mother when she was just 2, attended a high-quality preschool, has 300 books in her home, reads or is read to every night, has traveled to Italy and Hong Kong, regularly visits museums, and has attended Broadway shows. When she studied the Colonial period in school, Gabriella dressed herself and her dolls in Colonial clothes, and her parents helped her get library books on Colonial crafts and cooking. Her love of learning was fostered at home; her well-endowed school system can now build on her already solid knowledge and drive to learn.

Then consider Anthony, a young man I don't know personally, who lives in Newark, New Jersey. Anthony was abandoned as a toddler by his crack-addicted parents and grew up in a succession of unhappy foster homes. He was finally taken in by a hospital housekeeper who was a distant relative. But Anthony ran away when he thought he was being asked to do too many chores and now lives with an aunt. Once, he had a penchant for shoplifting, and he still tends to settle any disputes with his fist, a habit he is gradually breaking under the mentorship of Newark's mayor, Cory Booker, who took Anthony and two other boys under his wing.

Under No Child Left Behind, the same tests are administered to Gabriella and Anthony, and the same results expected. Their family lives and their school lives are in stark contrast. Gabriella's family is nurturing, and her school intellectually enriching. Anthony's family is dysfunctional, and his school overburdened.

Does this make any sense? No wonder our democracy is tied and bound.

THE DOXOLOGY

The sun stands low on the democratic horizon. Where are the leaders we need? Who or what will break the eerie silence? With more than three million teachers and education professors, with two powerful unions, with enormous potential to raise many millions for a nationwide fight in the media against an adversary we've known since the 1950s, why have we chosen to play dead?

Isn't fighting for public education and democracy the worthiest of causes? How can you not join an army where no one is killed and everyone wins? Our enemies fight a ruthless fight, and if they win, everyone loses. Lies unchallenged are lies believed. Just ask John Kerry.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. ADDRESS THE PROBLEMS OF POVERTY AND CAPITALISM

If we as a society ever muster the courage to enact the two recommendations I am about to offer for dealing with the problems created by poverty, we are certain to close the achievement gap between socially privileged students, who are mostly white, and less socially privileged students, regardless of their ethnicity or color.

- *Long term.* Begin a systematic plan to bring at least half of the families living in poverty into the middle class in a generation. That is, by 2033. Bring the other half of families into the middle class by 2058.

- *Short term.* Establish excellent public prekindergarten programs for all 3- and 4-year-olds.

There is reason to believe we can reach all of these goals. Prekindergarten programs were part of Prime Minister Tony Blair's 1999 pledge "to end child poverty forever." By 2006, 700,000 kids — 17% — were lifted out of poverty and found themselves within shouting range of Blair's short-term goal.¹⁵

Known as Sure Start, Britain's program looks a bit like a 1960s community action program in the U.S. But the British one is community action on steroids. The school becomes a center in which all social services combine to help the poor, working parents, and children of the middle class. A reporter for the *Guardian* describes the school/social centers this way:

Every child from birth finds here everything necessary to thrive, especially for those who never see a book at home or learn to count, and barely talk. Here speech therapists, social workers, [home] health visitors, and high-calibre nursery teachers help all children reach primary school ready to learn. Here working mothers are guaranteed affordable child care, in a place where parents of all [social] classes create a hub for the local community. That's the dream and in some places it's all there.¹⁶

An enemy with a clear and firmly held set of beliefs, however destructive and unjust, has to love having wimpy opponents like us. We wilt at a frown. What, for God's sake, are we so afraid of? With leadership like this, World War II would have been a walkover for the Axis. Why do we line the darkening streets, silent before the march of the economic authoritarians?

Today, the voices of protest are weak and scattered. In the ordinariness of defeat, this day appears as any

The U.S. has tackled major social problems before. In 1935, Congress created Social Security. At the time, older people were the largest poverty group in America. In about 65 years — slow and steady — 90% of this group had climbed out of poverty. Today, children are the biggest poverty group in America.

Nobel prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, in *The Roaring Nineties*, argues that the nation can afford to address poverty directly. "We could, if we wished," he writes, "end domestic poverty and malnutrition. We could, if we wished, ensure that everyone had a basic modicum of health care. . . . The United States chooses not to provide these basic services, because it chooses not to tax itself."¹⁷

Implementing my recommendations — moving poverty families to the working class and middle class in two generations and establishing excellent early childhood programs for all social classes — will truly leave no child behind. If we act on these two recommendations, the achievement level of public school students will slowly rise. Moreover, our national obsession with premature quantitative evaluations of new programs — a major error that Britain avoids — kills potentially successful programs before they can show their *social/democratic* worth.

2. DEVELOP A COMPREHENSIVE AND DEMOCRATIC THEORY OF EDUCATION

We have lost our *idea* of the democratic purpose of public education, and that has infected our practice and policy making. NCLB is my evidence. We badly need to restore a comprehensive theory to undergird our policies. I believe John Dewey's theory of education is our best choice.

Dewey's theory of education is the only extant theory that is both *comprehensive and democratic*. It is

other in a century of days, and the ordinariness of this day mutes any instinct to cry out at the loss.

Why the silence? No one told the people. Sixty years of successful attacks have left public educators so addled that our leaders accept the corrupting ideas and values of those who would destroy us. We have adopted their false language of accountability, standards, profit, privatization, competition, and numbers. We then suffer the punitive and harsh demands of NCLB, the weapon designed to destroy us, inch by test score inch.

compatible with scientific inquiry, the humanistic values of the democratic ethic, and the cultivation of the mind. Dewey's theory is humanistic, generous in spirit, yet suffused with the tough-mindedness of science.

The best source of a sound theory is philosophy, understood within the context of history and clearly linked to fundamental issues of practice. I believe that the history of educational research shows that no collection of theoretically unmoored research studies — often built on a false sense of precision through quantification — has ever led to a testable, comprehensive, democratic theory of education.

Psychological and sociological studies have not led to a comprehensive theory compatible with democratic and intellectual values. Many of these studies are useful, but they have not created a robust theory of education.

Broad social theories, such as Marxism, have not led to a comprehensive, democratic theory of education, though they have generated much writing on the subject.

Education is not primarily about technique. It's not about teaching technique, managerial technique, or research technique. These activities have value only insofar as they serve the essential purpose of education, which is the cultivation of democratic values and the cultivation of the mind. Absent the horizon-to-horizon reach of a comprehensive, democratic theory, technique wanders in a forest of incoherent empirical facts, no matter how many millions of dollars in grant money schools of education devour to raise their prestige ratings.

Today, these ancillary "fields" of teaching technique, managerial technique, and research technique dominate education in the universities. The democratic and

intellectual ends of education are tragically ignored. How much — even in crude dollars — is this lack of a comprehensive theory costing us in lost brain power among the poor? Millions? Billions? More?

Schools of education should be teaching Deweyan theory, with the social sciences, humanities, and education serving as springboards for richer questions to explore and as critical frames for the theory itself. Let's scrap fragmented research programs in favor of pursuing theoretical and practical coherence.

I believe that too many public school leaders revert to technique rather than to ideas when they face a practical problem. This is the story of the profession's gutless, incoherent response to 60 years of planned attacks on all major social programs, including public basic and higher education. This cannot continue if we are to preserve our democracy.

Even Barack Obama gets an amnesia attack when education is the topic. In his great Philadelphia speech on race, he speaks against trivial distractions that obstruct serious political discourse and says, "Not this time. This time we want to talk about the crumbling schools that are stealing the future of black children and white children and Asian children and Hispanic children and Native American children. This time we want to reject the cynicism that tells us that these kids can't learn."

One would never know from Mr. Obama's statement that between 1820 and 1920 the children of more than 30 million Poles, Italians, Jews, and Germans learned English and democratic values in American public schools.¹⁸ No expensive private school would dare tarnish its reputation by educating the ethnically blemished. Mr. Obama's education advisers are doing America harm by not educating him on the critical role public schools play in the democrati-

The "achievement gap" between the privileged and the poor will endure until the elite discard their damning "bigotry of low *social* expectations," expectations that have imprisoned generations in poverty and closed the door to their entry to the middle class.

Another decade of attacks in a procorporate federal administration of whatever party, and public education will be two heartbeats from death. The poor and the working class will suffer grievously.

Democracy is a verb, not a noun for a dead category.

1. *Democracy at Risk: The Need for a New Federal Policy in Education* (Washington, D.C.: Forum for Education and Democracy, April 2008), p. iii.

2. Robert B. Reich, *Supercapitalism: The Transformation of Business, Democracy, and Everyday Life* (New York: Borzoi Books, 2007), pp. 134-35.

3. Jonathan Kozol, "The Big Enchilada," *Harper's Magazine*, August 2007.

4. Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 88-90, 97-98.

5. David Berliner, "If the Underlying Premise for No Child Left Behind

zation of immigrants to this day.

No private system of schools enrolls millions of poor children who speak little English. When will our governors, presidents, legislators — and public school teachers themselves — understand that the humble public school is one of the greatest democratic inventions in the world.

Henry Steele Commager, a great American historian, quotes Mary Antin, who arrived in America as a child. “Education was free,” Antin writes, “the one thing [my father] was able to promise us . . . surer, safer than bread and shelter . . . the freedom of the schools of Boston! No application to make, no questions asked, no examinations, rulings, exclusions; no machinations, no fees. The door stood open to everyone of us.”¹⁹

Not one idea in Mr. Obama’s statement can with-

stand the academic scrutiny of mainstream social scientists or informed educators. Mr. Obama’s statement might sound good to his education advisors who think that “multiculturalism” is a comprehensive education theory rather than a slogan (which fits nicely, by the way, under the more substantive category of democracy).

Mr. Obama’s unfortunate statement is strong evidence of the effectiveness of 60 years of propaganda against public basic and higher education and the interests of the poor and working class. When a liberal presidential candidate mouths the attack ideas of the radical Right against public education, is this not reasonable proof that our “strategy” of being the quiet mice in this society has killed our voice even within the councils of the Democratic Party? Who speaks with political power and conviction for public education across the decades? No one.

3. DEFEND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Teacher unions and organizations of professional educators — at both the national and state levels — must mount a vigorous and clear-headed campaign to defend a great American institution against the false charge that public schools are failing, leveled by those I refer to as the Mystic Monks of the Market. This charge is blatant propaganda pushed by the economic elite to discredit public investment that helps ordinary citizens. And teacher unions and the profession in general let it pass like any other casual remark. This is not prudent behavior.

The charge is nonsense, but it is clearly hurtful. The threat of school privatization hangs heavy in our political air like smog in Beijing. We already have Edison Schools and charter schools, some run by profit-making companies that take multimillion-dollar bites out of city education budgets.

Consider this possibility: imagine Wal-Mart or a billion-dollar hedge fund running a huge network of selective, undemocratic schools in America. Today,

Is False, How Can That Act Solve Our Problems” paper presented to the Iowa Academy of Education, Des Moines, 2004, pp. 7, 9.

6. Jared M. Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Viking, 2005).

7. Richard A. Gibboney, “Reforms’s Green Fields,” in idem, *The Stone Trumpet: A Story of Practical School Reform, 1960-1990* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1994), p. 75.

8. Reich, p. 12.

9. Duncan K. Foley, *Adam’s Fallacy: A Guide to Economic Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 224.

10. Reich, p. 12.

11. Edward N. Wolff, *Top Heavy: A Study of Increasing Inequality of Wealth in the United States* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 2002),

Figure 3.4, p. 14.

12. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Forty Acres and a Gap in Wealth,” Op-ed, *New York Times*, 18 November 2007, p. 14.

13. “U.S. Data Show Rapid Minority Growth,” *New York Times*, 1 June 2007, p. A-21.

14. Orlando Patterson, *The Ordeal of Integration: Progress and Resentment in America’s “Racial” Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Civitas/Counterpoint, 1998), p. 186-87.

15. David L. Kirp, *The Sandbox Investment: The Preschool Movement and Kids-First Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 228-31.

16. Ibid., pp. 231-33.

17. Joseph E. Stiglitz, *The Roaring Nineties* (New York: Norton,

teachers are among the few middle-class toilers with decent jobs. When the Wal-Marters arrive, this private, cost-cutting money machine will have you, the teacher, working for \$12 an hour with no benefits, a single-year contract, and no union representation.

It is imperative that the teacher unions initially organize an aggressive \$50-million national and regional media campaign to tell the public and politicians the *democratic* success story of public education. The crudeness of that invidious media phrase, “our failing public schools,” should be the first target of any such bold PR campaign.

If half the teachers in America contributed \$20 each, a total war chest of more than \$30 million would be available. Perhaps the Rockefeller or Carnegie foundations or Warren Buffett would throw in an additional \$50 million. All it would take to get the ball rolling is a little out-of-the-box leadership.

You can be sure that the enemies of public education would not have sleepwalked through 60 years of ill-founded attacks. They would have fought like starving bears. Let’s give public education the kind of warm and nurturing environment that the single-minded capitalists give themselves. Now *there* is a reform idea!

4. DEFUSE THE SOCIAL DYNAMITE IN OUR LARGE CITIES

In 1961 a conservative scientist and university president warned Americans of a danger more threatening to democracy than Iraq was when we invaded: “Social dynamite is building up in our . . . cities in the form of unemployed out-of-school youth, especially in the Negro slums. We need accurate and frank information [on this condition] neighborhood by neighborhood.”

A page later James B. Conant speaks directly to this democratic failure when he says that he has “sought to create a sense of anxious thoughts” in the minds of good citizens who live in the suburbs but who work

in the cities. Conant imparts this thought: “To improve the work of slum schools requires an improvement in the lives of families who inhabit the slums. . . but without a drastic change in the employment prospects for urban Negro youth, relatively little can be accomplished. . . we need to know the facts, and when these facts indicate a dangerous social situation the American people should be prepared to take prompt action before it is too late.”²⁰

The school achievement of minority students, Conant says with uncommon sense, and their ability to work can come *only from the improvement of their family* and, I would add, their community lives. If, in 1961, we had started a two-generation “education for democratic citizenship” program to bring most of our poor families into the working and middle class, it is possible that by today, 50% to 70% of the children from formerly poor families would be achieving at or beyond grade level in our public schools, as middle-class children have always achieved in public schools. We chose instead to do nothing *significant* about family poverty and high minority dropout rates. By ignoring the morality of the democratic ethic, we chose to create an army of more than one million alienated youth annually, youth who are tenuously attached to school, work, family, and community.²¹

Is it sensible domestic or national security policy to dump one million undereducated and unemployed youth on the cold streets of our cities and towns every year? Does this human dumping accord with the morality of the democratic ethic?

A few years after Conant’s warning about “social dynamite building in our cities,” Los Angeles and Detroit were in flames. Must we wait for a second rebellion in these times of acute economic, political, and international stress — times that may mark the unraveling of American supremacy — before we discover the moral and social power of the democratic ethic, a power abused by both political parties since the 1980s? **K**

2003), p. 317.

18. Robert L. Church and Michael W. Sedlak, *Education in the United States: An Interpretive History* (New York: Free Press, 1976).

19. Henry Steele Commager, “Our Schools Have Kept Us Free,” *Life*, 16 October 1950, pp. 46-47.

20. James Bryant Conant, *Slums and Suburbs: A Commentary on Schools in Metropolitan Areas* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), pp. 146-47.

21. Christopher B. Swanson, *Cities in Crisis: A Special Analytic Report on High School Graduation* (Bethesda, Md.: Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2008), Section 1.

My point of view in this Manifesto has been informed by John Dewey’s philosophy, particularly his classic *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).

Democracy and Education is a book whose democratic spirit honors both intelligence and ordinary human experience. I regret that its power as a theory of education has been lost to generations of educators who have not the patience to deal with its brilliant ideas and its complex (if sometimes turgid) academic style.

In the spirit of practice and Dewey’s respect for “ordinary experience,” I want to list four books that speak more directly to the creative demands of “doing” progressive teaching than the Manifesto offered: Richard A. Gibboney with Clark Webb, *What Every Great Teacher Knows* (Brandon, Vt.: Holistic Education Press, 1998); Deborah Meier, *The Power of Their Ideas* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Nel Noddings, *When School Reform Goes Wrong* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007); and Laurel N. Tanner, *Dewey’s Laboratory School: Lessons for Today* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997). **K**

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408 N. Union St.
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