

FROM REBUILDING TO REIMAGINING

Daniel Douglas

FROM REBUILDING TO REIMAGINING: A CRITICAL RECONSIDERATION OF AN EDUCATION DECLARATION

There is no man who can make a society have, at a given moment, a system of education which is other than that which is implied in its structure.

—*Emile Durkheim, The Nature and Method of Pedagogy*

US public schools have been under attack by forces on both ‘sides’ of the American political system. Among others, these attacks have materialized as privatization in the form of charter schools, punitive use of standardized testing by state governments, and dismantling of the collective bargaining apparatus that supports the nation’s largest unionized profession. At the federal level, programs such as President Bush’s *No Child Left Behind*, and even more so President Obama’s *Race to the Top*, have accelerated the efficiency-driven, neoliberal transformations of schools that have been on the agenda at least since the administration of Ronald Reagan.

*An Education Declaration to Rebuild America*¹, perhaps written and certainly endorsed by some of the nation’s leading education policy advocates: American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, investigative journalist Jonathan Kozol and former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch — is a response to these attacks. The authors outline seven principles and a seven-point reform agenda which they claim represents a ‘vision for a 21st century education.’ The ‘manifesto,’ as the website truthdig.com calls it, has been praised by prominent bloggers at the Daily Kos, the Washington Post, Truthout, and the Huffington Post. A month after its publication in June 2013, over 25,000 people had signed on to register their support for the document’s proposals.

While it is laudable that there are concerned education advocates attempting to offer an alternative to the now hegemonic corporatized education

¹ The declaration first appeared at http://educationopportunitynetwork.org/education_announcement/

agenda, *An Education Declaration* offers little in the way of fresh ideas or real solutions. More precisely, it is limited by its confinement within the paradigm of schooling — the belief that the existing features of schooling are immutable and preferable to other potential arrangements — both in terms its identification of the problems and in its proposed solutions. Its approach is emblematic of what Herbert Marcuse calls ‘one-dimensional thinking.’ It allows reactionary forces to lead the dance, proposing only retrograde resistance without alternatives to existing authority structures and technoscientific reasoning.

The ‘Declaration,’ as it will be referred to from here on, is a two-pronged document. It contains seven principles and seven related recommendations. I begin by listing the principles:

- 1) All students have a right to learn;
- 2) Public education is a public good;
- 3) Investments in education must be equitable and sufficient;
- 4) Learning must be engaging and relevant;
- 5) Teachers are professionals;
- 6) Discipline policies should keep students in schools;
- and 7) National responsibility should complement local control.

These ‘sound byte’ principles are accompanied by calls to support the college or career aspirations of children, to spend more money on education (and do so equitably), and to oppose “private control, deregulation, and profiteering” and high-stakes testing. The seven policies offered to put these principles into practice are:

- 1) Early Education and Grade Level Reading;
- 2) Equitable Funding and Resources;
- 3) Student-Centered Supports;
- 4) Teaching Quality;
- 5) Better Assessments;
- 6) Effective Discipline;
- and 7) Meaningful Engagement.

In this essay, I want to first thematically address the principles and proposals to draw out their theoretical underpinnings and to make plain both the relative opacity and narrowness of the document. The goal of this critique is to suggest that the only route to meaningful change is to be spatially and temporally broad, considering the history of public schools, the broader social context in which they function, and alternative ways of reaching their stated goals. Successful social reform, if such is indeed possible, must be animated by a radical understanding of society.

I. JOHN DEWEY AND THE LEVELING FUNCTION
OF THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

The first two principles — ‘All students have a right to learn’ and ‘Public education is a public good’ — can be traced to John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*. There, he describes the ‘leveling’ function of the school environment in society:

...it is the office of the school environment to balance the various elements in the social environment, and to see to it that each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the limitations of the social group in which he was born, and to come into living contact with a broader environment (Dewey, 1916/2011: pg.16).

This concept of leveling has informed all subsequent statements of the need for equity in public schooling. For instance, historian Lawrence Cremin saw universal education as the one great hope for social equality. But read closely, Dewey is clear about schooling’s limited role as a special environment with relatively narrow functions, of which leveling is only one. The others are to create a graded curriculum with which to transmit the values and accumulated knowledge of a complex society, and to sift out and preserve the best elements of received culture. It should also be noted that in describing the functions of schooling, Dewey never once uses the word education — an omission which is explained by what follows.

Dewey believed that schooling is a necessary part of a complex society, but he worried that school — with its emphasis on conveying knowledge through language and not through collective practice — may be insufficient to transmit the ‘interests’ or dispositions required for education. For Dewey, there is a distinction to be made between education and training. Training for Dewey is the creation of associations and habits of action, which includes academic actions such as reading and mathematics. But the complete process of education further entails that the actor is made to feel herself as a ‘sharer or partner’ in the activity and its success. This more subtle element of education is limited by the nature of schooling, which relies primarily on language for the transmission of ideas, and not on sustained and meaningful practice.

To further clarify his uncertainty about the potency of schooling for fulfilling its social function is his argument that the social medium itself is educative. In the affirmative, he offers the example of a family of musicians who offer

to their children not only the chance to develop musical capacities, but also the impetus to do so, lest they be unable to share in the life of the group. In the negative, Dewey offers the example of 'a tawdry, unarranged, and over-decorated environment (which) works for the deterioration of taste, just as meager and barren surroundings starve the desire for beauty.' Against such odds he writes 'conscious teaching can hardly do more than convey second-hand information as to what others think.'

Another call by the declaration's authors for equal funding for all public schools has been told and retold by one of its signatories, Jonathan Kozol. His best-selling books; *Death at an Early Age*, *Savage Inequalities*, and *The Shame of the Nation* graphically describe the paltry state of the nation's poorest schools. Kozol is correct in noting that the inequality of school facilities is intimately connected to the way schools are funded — usually through property taxes in the surrounding communities. This creates a regressive schooling system where whatever benefits schooling affords to students go disproportionately to those who need them least. But this observation made in isolation implies that merely equalizing the resources of neighborhood schools will assuage the various manifestations of inequality. If we take seriously Dewey's honest, if hopeful understanding of schooling, it is simply not enough to call for equal or adequate funding of schools public, private or otherwise.

Ultimately, schooling is viewed as a special environment which is supplemental to, but not a substitute for, the broader social environment in which it exists. Thus, any full conception of education and its potential needs to move beyond school walls and consider what Stanley Aronowitz calls other sites of learning, including the neighborhood as well as the media and popular culture (cf. *Against Schooling*, Chapter 2). The problem is that progressive educators and advocates since Dewey have narrowed his theories to fit within the confines of school walls. The result is a philosophy of training rather than one of education. The latter would involve enriching not merely school content, but the total social lives of students. Keeping the schools we have under public control, even if equitably funded, without addressing the context in which they exist is insufficient to ensuring their continued service of the public good.

II. RELEVANT LEARNING AND THE PROGRESSIVE MISINTERPRETATION OF PAOLO FREIRE

The declaration calls for learning to be both engaging and relevant. This call is contrasted with the narrowing of the curriculum by the imposition of mandatory high-stakes testing for both students and teachers.² Within this principle, the authors clarify by saying that learning ought to be connected to ‘real world problems’ and ‘students’ own life experiences;’ such terms refer to mainstream educational theory’s appropriation of Paolo Freire’s classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Freire’s intention in advancing what the progressives call a student-centered pedagogy was intimately connected with his understanding of oppression and the political and social revolution which liberation requires. Accordingly, the first chapter in his classic study is devoted to understanding the ways in which oppression operates both at the political level and within the minds of the oppressors and the oppressed. He sees pedagogy as revolutionary in that it “makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for liberation.”

More broadly, any honest reading of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* will immediately conclude that the book is as much if not more so about social revolution than education, as it is traditionally viewed. While Freire’s work as an educator among illiterate peasants in Brazil may appeal to the righteous anger of liberal reformers and correctly lead to analogies to their own students, his intention in cooperating with the peasants toward their own literacy was so that they could radically change their lives — through what Freire terms rehumanization. He is direct in stating his intentions:

Once more, I wish to emphasize that there is no dichotomy between dialogue and revolutionary action. There is not one stage for dialogue and another for revolution. On the contrary dialogue is the essence of revolutionary action.
(Freire, p. 134)

² While this regime certainly represents an extreme form of repression in the classroom, it is a difference of degree and not of type from what has prevailed in American public schools for much if not all of their history.

But the progressive reading of *Pedagogy* — perhaps in bad faith³ — avoids both the context and larger aims of Freire’s philosophical project and focuses narrowly on his notions of ‘dialogue’ and ‘problem-posing education.’ But dialogue is, for Freire, always primarily oriented toward liberation from oppression; it is not simply back-and-forth talking between teachers and students. It is not mere conversation, but a literal merging of the roles of student and teacher, which animates the notion of dialogic cultural action. The only problem which Freire’s approach seeks to pose to “students-teachers” is that of their oppression. While this may happen by reference to sub-themes that are specific to those participating, there is no other goal than critical reflection upon the conditions of oppression.

Making students’ life experiences the subject of discussion without orienting toward revolution elevates a tactic of Freire’s pedagogy to the level of an educational strategy. The detached notion of a student-centered approach simply cannot tread water against the hostile schooling environment and broader realities that students in public schools face. Only such a simplistic reading of Freire’s work would seek to maintain the authority relations and curriculum of schooling as they are, with or without the admittedly dreadful influence of high-stakes testing. Further, attempts to use his method without its broader intentions appear dubious to students whose lives would benefit from them.⁴ Without its revolutionary context, Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* becomes merely a **lecture for the oppressed**.

III. TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM AND THE STANCE OF THE TEACHERS UNIONS

The principle that teachers are professionals seems to be directly drawn from the slogan of the AFT; as mentioned above, one of the key signatories to the declaration is that union’s president, Randi Weingarten. If this principle is to be taken seriously, it is necessary to be clear about what professionalism would mean in the context of teaching. Without this clarity, the only implication is that teachers ought to have better ‘working conditions.’ Further, it seems as if

³ The concept of bad faith, for Jean-Paul Sartre, is a conscious self-deception about what one is doing. Here I mean that a progressive educator, fully cognizant of the true meaning of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, chooses to confine herself to the socially circumscribed role of classroom teacher.

⁴ In reading Chapter 3 of Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities*, we can clearly see that students in the nation’s poorest schools recognize that their school situations are simply another aspect of the extent to which they’ve been disregarded by society. Freire’s method, when energized by its revolutionary aim of transforming everyday life, not merely using it as a discussion topic, would certainly increase engagement among students. Thus Freire’s ultimate point: that the revolutionary leader is identical with the educator.

the Education Declaration contradicts itself on this point — as the principle is betrayed by the proposed policies.

Sociologists have defined a profession as an occupation characterized by controlled access to positions, a specified complex body of expertise, and autonomy over its practice. Further implied by these traits are an internally generated training and apprenticeship, and internally enforced codes of ethics and standards of practice. Professions, simply put, are internally regulated occupations, and are so because of the complex and irreducible nature of their work. By this definition, the professional status of teaching at the primary and secondary levels has often been disputed.⁵

While it is certainly true that the myriad corporate education reforms being enacted across the country are affronts to teacher professionalism however defined, the calls by the declaration for ‘Teacher Quality’ and ‘Better Assessments’ only seek to water down those very same policies. To seek to recruit, train and retain ‘well-prepared educators’ implies that they have not been so in the past and that hierarchical reforms constitute an acceptable solution. The call for better assessments is similarly top-down and cedes the terrain of assessment, which properly belongs to professionals, to state policy makers. The response of a profession to a crisis in practitioner quality is to self-evaluate and devise solutions within its own training programs. Thus, if teachers and their unions believe fully their own professional status, they should oppose external assessment of any kind.

But another point in the declaration directly undermines any claim to professional status. Neatly tucked into the proposal for equitable resources is a call for ‘better data systems and technology.’ To this point should be added two recent pieces to which the AFT president has affixed her name. In 2011, Weingarten penned the foreword to a book called *Value-Added Assessment: What every Educator needs to know*. Value-Added assessment is the latest and most technologically sophisticated use of student test scores to determine so-called teacher effectiveness. This technique directly links students’ test data to their teachers and has thus been used in some states to influence tenure, compensation, and dismissal decisions. Weingarten states

⁵ Historically, medicine, law and the clergy were the only occupations regarded as professions. As Amitai Etzioni points out, part of the reason for teaching’s contested status as a profession is the feminization of the occupation. Today, we can still observe a difference in status between college (and even high school) teaching – which have higher concentrations of men – and early childhood and elementary school teaching. Another part of the reason is that much of the teachers’ work environment and work process are determined from without, by forces such as state boards of education.

that “we cannot expect any measures of teacher quality to be perfect” but that we must “begin using every tool at our disposal *immediately* to address our educational problems.” She makes a similar point in a 2013 article in the AFT published *American Educator* in a piece she co-authored with the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation’s education director Vicki Phillips. There Weingarten endorses the Foundation’s *Measures of Effective Teaching* study which places test-based assessments at the core of teacher evaluation.⁶

Given the central role that technology plays in modern workplaces, workers are only engaged in authentic struggles for control when they seek final discretion over the implementation and organization of technological changes to the work process. In his essay *Clock-time and Work Discipline*, E.P. Thompson makes the point that workers in the 19th century ceased to struggle against clock-time and instead chose to struggle over working hours, a struggle located within the framework of clock-time. Similarly, the authors of this declaration have ceased the struggle over assessment and wish simply to adapt to the landscape which they see as *fait accompli*. To fight about the role of assessments rather than their imposition altogether, is to negotiate the terms of heteronomy. It seems clear that they, while declaring teachers to be professional in name, believe at best in a semi-professional vision of public education.

IV. ON SCHOOLS AND PRISON

The declaration provides both a principle and a policy recommendation which address the issue of discipline at school. Both items stress the need to keep students in school and away from the criminal justice system. While it is indisputable that these two massive social institutions veer dangerously close together in the 21st century, we ought not to forget that they’ve been intimate and perhaps interchangeable since the early history of schooling.

“But for those who, blind to their own interests, choose the school of vicious associates only, the State has yet to provide a compulsory school, a substitute for the prison, — it may be for the gallows.”(1847 Common School Commission — Quoted in Katz “The Irony of Early School Reform” pg. 187).

⁶ It is worthy of note that Diane Ravitch, another declaration signatory, has named the Gates Foundation as a leading member of a ‘Billionaire Boys’ Club’ of unaccountable corporate philanthropists pushing a test-based and privatizing educational reform agenda.

Michael B. Katz, in his work on early school reform in the United States, offers two chapters which show that in the 19th century, common schools were only one item on a menu of options which reformers considered to address the crisis created by both the factory system and by new waves of immigrants. Early proponents of the common school described its key features as instilling restraint in students through a combination of intellectual, moral and physical education. But common schools were not the only remedy considered by 19th century reformers.

Also on the menu were reform schools which were prisons in nearly every sense save for the name. These schools were populated by children who were deemed threats to society for crimes such as “stubbornness,” and being “idle and disorderly.” But the outcomes of the reform school were to be nearly identical to those of the common school — “respect for authority, self-control, self-discipline, self-reliance and self-respect.” Although Massachusetts’ experiment with a state-run reform school failed for a number of reasons which Katz documents, the critical point here is that juvenile prisons were considered right alongside schools as a solution to real and perceived social ills which reformers at that time understood as stemming from the change to an industrial mode of production.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault examines the emergence of the prison as an institution in the 18th and 19th centuries, and again demonstrating the early affinity of the prison and the school. Foucault’s ideal prison object is the penal colony at Mettray, which was specifically for children and adolescents and which included long days of compulsory schooling for younger inmates. Mettray operated in the same time period as the reform schools described by Katz, and indeed the Mettray model was similar to those advocated by New England reformers.⁷

Reform schools — both public and private — were the nation’s first foray into compulsory education. While reform schools were overtly conceived as ‘light prisons,’ the prison atmosphere persists today. Public school students must arrive at school earlier, go longer without breaks, and be more passive than

⁷ In Katz’s account, the term ‘reform school’ was a semantic distinction made by the Massachusetts committee originally charged in 1846 with creating a manual labor school for the state. The school is compared with the New York House of Refuge, which is described as the first juvenile prison in the United States. Similar to Mettray, the New York House of Refuge was located on Randall’s island off of Manhattan. The Massachusetts State Reform School was located on 1,000 acres of farmland — land which was maintained by the students; this school continued to operate until 1970 as the Lyman School for Boys.

their parents would at most workplaces. The importance of orderly transitions between activities and locations, and the strict timing of the day more closely resemble the prison than the office. Factor in after-school programs and required homework that most students receive — especially around testing time —, and students often work 12-hour shifts or longer. Economists Sam Bowles and Herbert Gintis coined the term the ‘correspondence principle’ to refer to the routines of schooling which closely mirror factory discipline. They argue that while little cognitive development takes place in schools, the norms of hierarchy and competition are reliably transmitted by the school environment — and that these are the characteristics which are desired by the labor market.

Given this history, what are we to make of a demand to keep children in school in order to keep them out of prison? Here again, it is the confining of the proposals within school walls which limits the Education Declaration. We should be rightly horrified at stories of elementary school children being taken away in handcuffs for relatively minor infractions. But this phenomenon ought to be clearly connected to aggressive policing and draconian penal codes which threaten the viability of working class black and Latino communities. These policies, in school and out, form a matrix which seeks to maintain an historical pattern of subjugation. Critical criminologist Jock Young describes the dual process of cultural inclusion and structural exclusion as “social bulimia.” Education is promoted as the path to success; yet, for poor students of color, schools resemble prisons and even success in school does not shield them from police brutality. The six-year-old who is taken from school in handcuffs is likely to be stopped and frisked at or before age fourteen.

Indeed, this constitutes the heart of Michelle Alexander’s important work, *The New Jim Crow*. There, she describes how mass incarceration (of which the ‘school-to-prison pipeline’ is one part) recreates a racialized system of social control which originated with slavery and post-Reconstruction Jim Crow laws.

The arguments advanced in *The New Jim Crow* suggest a systemic explanation for policies of mass incarceration. This approach more easily aligns with what Katz’s ‘progressive’ reformers saw as the reasons for compulsory schooling. Schools were seen as a way to control and incorporate into the bottom of an economic hierarchy a restive working class made up largely of immigrants. The difference then was that the resemblance of schools to prisons needed not be too greatly veiled. Today, mass incarceration seeks to create a permanent underclass in the form of what Alexander calls a ‘racial caste.’ What links school policy in the 19th century to prison policy in the 21st century is the

need to unevenly incorporate, control, and if necessary expel a significant fraction of the society. This reality stands against any attempt at reform which sees only the school as its object.

V. LOCAL CONTROL, DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION, AND THE QUESTION OF SPACE AND TIME

At various points in the declaration's text, there are references to local control, the domain of states and school districts, and national responsibility. Ultimately, the declaration commits to the idea that 'national responsibility should complement local control.' There are also calls for democratic responsiveness and meaningful engagement of students, parents and communities in the administration of schooling.

While it is clear that the authors are not calling for a nationalized school system, the word 'local' is too ambiguous to discern what level of community is charged with administering schools. At a time when state-level administration cannot maintain even the most rudimentary of democratic institutions such as voting rights, and that municipalities are becoming the victims of undemocratic impositions — as is the case with the city of Detroit — a clear definition of what local means is of pivotal importance. If a city is the definition of local, are New York City's "mayoral control," Chicago's school closures, and Philadelphia's 2013 public school budget⁸ the models the declaration wishes to see emulated? While it is doubtful that this is what is meant by local control, the absence of any clear model of community and parent participation leaves the proposal open to any interpretation.

But beyond semantic ambiguity, the call for democratic participation and meaningful engagement evades the larger problem of necessary time. Parents of the public school children with whom the declaration concerns itself are working longer hours for less pay than at any time since the Great Depression. Teacher compensation has also failed to keep pace with inflation, and existing accountability measures keep many flush with work well after the school day finishes, to say nothing of those which may accompany the full roll-out of Race to the Top. These constraints are further exacerbated by increasing housing, healthcare, and transportation costs which cause

⁸ On Chicago: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/15/chicago-charter-schools_n_3757911.html
On Philadelphia: http://www.salon.com/2013/08/19/indescribably_insane%E2%80%9D_philadelphias_public_school_nightmare/

many parents and teachers to take on additional employment if they can secure it. Nowhere in the declaration are these circumstances addressed. Parents and teachers are expected to invent out of thin air the time needed to be democratic participants in their local schools. Thus the demand for democratic participation is mute for all but the most privileged members of the public schools' clientele.

VI. THE 'HIDDEN' CURRICULUM?

“According to the modern craze, especially in pedagogy, one is not so much to be instructed in the content of philosophy as to learn how to philosophize without any content. That amounts to saying that one is to travel endlessly without getting to know along the way any cities, rivers, countries, men, etc... The unfortunate urge to educate the individual in thinking for himself and being self-productive has cast a shadow over truth. As if, when I learn what substance, cause, or anything is, I myself were not thinking. As if I did not myself produce these determinations in my own thought but rather tossed them in my head as pebbles.”

— *Hegel to Niethammer, 1812*⁹

Perhaps the most glaring absence in the text of the declaration is any serious consideration of what teachers should be teaching or what students should be learning. The only modest allusion to the outcomes of schooling is that students ought to be provided with access to Kindergarten and Pre-K so that they are able to “read at grade level,” another phrase which fits all too well with the current outcomes-driven mantra. Other segments of the document refer to “expanded and deeper learning time” and “deeper learning approaches.” Close reading of these parts of the declaration certainly suggests that there should be more schooling — longer school days and more years of mandatory schooling — but in the case of education, we cannot assume that quantity is quality. The authors are certainly trying to contrast their proposals with what we know are the shallow techniques of ‘teaching to the test’ tacitly encouraged by data-driven assessments. Unfortunately, readers and signatories are left to contemplate just what deeper learning might involve.

⁹ Accessed at <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/letters/1812-10-23.htm>.

What is the reason for such a notable omission on the part of the Declaration? Certainly, the authors, who have much to say about the nature of schooling, are not silent due to ignorance or lack of perspective on its content. Further, they are certainly aware that other industrialized countries — whose students routinely outperform their United States counterparts on international benchmarks — all have some uniform curriculum standards. Finally, given that the declaration stands for some version of professionalism, it cannot be idle to compare the work teachers do to that of doctors who are at least nominally required to adhere to detailed standards of what constitutes sound medicine.

The idea of a single national curriculum is a third rail in US politics, likely due to certain topics of ideological significance such as the slavery, the Civil War, and evolution. Politically contentious decisions on what constitutes the final word on issues of science and history would have to be made in the process of establishing national standards. Further, for many on the right of US politics, any federal directive on education threatens their sacrosanct notion of state's rights. For those on the ostensible left, standards are feared because they are usually followed by more testing.

Thus, the only agreed upon topics — basic literacy and mathematics — have become the de facto curriculum of which the SAT and ACT are the benchmark examinations. Even the Common Core Standards, which were touted as a unifying document and could have been a bright spot against the otherwise reactionary program of President Obama's Race to the Top, are so vague that they list hardly any actual documents which students need to read. The bulk of the document refers to opaque concepts like 'critical thinking' and 'deep analysis.' Such skills cannot be grasped in the abstract; there is only 'critical thinking about _____,' and if you don't fill in the blank, then predictable results will follow. So far, 45 states (and the AFT) have signed on to the Common Core Standards; the danger is that this will be seen as a success on the curriculum issue.

What is lost by not being clear on curriculum? Much. A lack of consensus on what constitutes a complete education leaves an opening for textbook publishers and test-makers to set the agenda without serious input from educators. An unclear sense of what is to be taught can prevent educators from honing their craft, and instead leave them at sea in the ebbs and flows of test changes. What is to be gained? A move for curriculum clarity would in fact be a move for teacher autonomy — assessments could be aligned with standards, but that alignment could be performed by the teacher. Quality would also cease to be an amorphous concept subject to the whims of

politically interested economists and the pseudo-science of psychometrics. But it seems as if political expediency outweighs strength of vision for the Declaration. Afraid of being on any side of the national standards question, the declaration avoids this significant issue in favor of safer territory.

VII. GOING BEYOND SCHOOLING: RADICAL PROPOSITIONS

The *Education Declaration* suffers from two primary, related weaknesses. First, it takes as eternal the existing structures of public schooling. By confining its proposals within the bounds of schooling, and without considering alternative models or fundamental assumptions, the declaration can at best hope to slow the pace of the corporate race to the bottom. Second, the declaration's proposals don't consider the need for reform in other realms of social life which accompany and buttress schools and education. Because of this, its proposals would be weak even if all were adopted without amendment. Paolo Freire is instructive in regards to these narrow conceptions:

One of the characteristics of oppressive cultural action which is almost never perceived by the dedicated but naïve professionals who are involved is the emphasis on a *focalized view* of problems rather than seeing them as dimensions of a *totality*. (Freire, pg. 141)

Schooling is perhaps the most powerful ideological force in American society, and the supposed link between schooling and social and economic progress remains, and even grows stronger, in times of crisis. What is clear after a serious treatment of *The Education Declaration* is that many policymakers and scholars of education have been unable to look beyond long-held assumptions even as they acknowledge that the stakes for public education have perhaps never been higher.

Public education, according to Henry Giroux, is part of a larger matrix of public values which are threatened by an accelerating neoliberal agenda.¹⁰ Any attempt to halt or reverse this process needs to first grasp the totality of the process which is evidenced by the changes in schools. Rebuilding America — if that is indeed a worthy goal — cannot be achieved merely

¹⁰ Giroux makes this point in his 2011 book *Education and the Crisis of Public Values*. Konstantinos Tsoukalas' piece, *The Deregulation of Morals: The Ultimate Phase of Globalization* analyzes the phenomenon of moral disembeddedness and the instability it creates. The latter offers a theoretical perspective which bears on Giroux's analysis of American public education.

by restoring schooling to some real or imagined standard of the past. Nor can it be rebuilt simply by changing schooling. But public schools do offer certain key features which have real democratic and empowering potential. It is these features which face the greatest threat, and which must be the subject of meaningful attention. Schools are large tracts of public land. Schools are the recipients of large amounts of state and federal funding; they are also potential sites of community engagement and solidarity. Schools are finally spaces of meaningful personal interaction. The Declaration is right to suggest that privatization would be a huge loss, but its proposals reflect only the narrowest understanding of what is at stake.

In response to the limitations of the declaration, I offer here some proposals which attempt to see schools as part of a total system of public values, and which seek to address the forces which threaten them.

1 Treat the issue of public schools as an issue of public space.

Leslie Fenwick, the dean of the Howard University school of Education makes the timely point that school reform in many states is transferring public space into private hands.¹¹ This explains the increasing turn toward charter schools and online education and is a more useful way of understanding school closures. We as a citizenry need to be much more concerned about the future of the commons than with the future of the existing regime of schooling. Communities should resist any attempt to close schools or to sell the land they occupy. School buildings are public resources which can and have been used well beyond the narrow purpose of schooling. These spaces must be retained in public hands.

2 Issues of democratic control are issues of socially necessary time.

Taking democratic control seriously would mean, among other things, fighting for mandatory time off for parents and teachers to participate in school governance. To this end, citizens ought to demand monthly or weekly leave time paid for at a fixed rate by the state or by employers — whichever rate is higher — to cover the necessary time

¹¹ Valerie Strauss, an education blogger for *The Washington Post*, has Dean Fenwick's commentary on her blog, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/05/28/ed-school-dean-urban-school-reform-is-really-about-land-development-not-kids/>.

needed for democratic participation and local control over schools and education. This is not without precedent; citizens are called out of work to do civic duties every day with the jury duty system. Without the time and resources necessary to participate, community control is unlikely to be more than a slogan.

3 Reforming school discipline requires confronting the policing system. The militarization of school discipline reflects broader changes in law enforcement practice and criminal justice. In 2009, there were over 17,000 police officers stationed inside schools.¹² This police presence has been linked to an increase in arrests for incidents that would have been handled within the schools, especially among black and Latino students and those with learning disabilities. That schools' use of suspensions and arrests has escalated comes as little surprise when considered against the backdrop of New York City's controversial 'Stop and Frisk' program and the virtual police shutdown of Boston in pursuit of a 19-year old bombing suspect. The reform of school discipline has to be considered as one aspect of a larger push for more sensible police and security practices.

4 Sufficient and equitable funding are issues of national priorities. Lest we forget, zero funding for everyone would be equal. Those concerned with educational equality need to address other policies which impact educational funding in general. One glaring national priority issue is the vast budgets of the departments of Defense and Homeland Security. In 2010, Military spending exceeded Education spending by a ratio of 7 to 1. The Congressional Budget Office reports that defense accounted for 20 percent of national spending in 2012, while education accounted for less than three percent. Bearing in mind that most education spending takes place at the state and not the federal level, these figures still represent a question of national priorities. Thus it is important to consider not only

¹² Given the recent school shootings, particularly in Newtown Connecticut, this figure is likely to rise.

equality of funding, but also to decide where funds ought to be taken from to deal with the question of sufficiency.

5 Professional Status must be earned and re-earned. C. Wright Mills was correct in asserting that teachers are the 'economic proletarians of the professions;' he did not do so idly. Professionalism is a double-edged sword which implies both autonomy and continuous maintenance of that independence. This is especially true for teachers given the occupation's contentious history. Teachers, as other professionals today, need to struggle in the mode of radical workers. Without intense struggle, the category of profession in its sociological sense will be relegated to the dustbin as these occupations will continue to lurch toward the service sector. What are the specific battlegrounds for teachers? In terms of technology and assessments, which I discuss below, this means settling for no less than final say over the implementation of both.

6 Lead on curriculum. Professional teachers ought to be decision-makers when it comes to school content. Curriculum is a politically contentious issue, and rightly so; what we call an education is nothing short of what we define as human culture. Curriculum will either be defined explicitly or tacitly, but it will surely be defined; to be agnostic or apathetic on the question is to accept the latter course, and is unacceptable. Thus, whether curriculum is to be 'local' or national, it ought to be specific. Teachers' Unions — or perhaps another collective formation of concerned educators — can and should take seriously this aspect of professionalism and fight for control over curriculum — not doing so surrenders the terrain to test-makers and textbook publishers. As one reason unions may want to put effort into curriculum, defining a body of knowledge would clarify what it means to be a qualified teacher and has the potential to protect teacher autonomy to a greater degree than would any contract.

Although it is well beyond the scope of this essay to outline a curriculum for public education and further that it would be presumptuous to do so without the debate

alluded to above, what is both possible and necessary is to establish some principles that ought to guide discussions of curriculum toward texts, not abstract benchmarks. To borrow the aphorism ‘first know thyself:’ students need literature to understand their own subjectivity; schools would do well to have lists of appropriate ‘classic’ works of fiction for all stages of primary education. Second, educated citizens ought to know the world — this requires detailed programs in history, science (including mathematics), philosophy, and the arts. These programs ought to make use of the best of accumulated scholarship in its original form, not through the sieves of ‘grade level’ textbooks. Finally, a truly progressive education needs to instill a sense of the possibility and indeed the necessity of social change. Thus, the curriculum should continually stress the historicity of both ideas and social formations, especially the process by which once-dominant ideas were overturned.

7 Challenge the technological imperative. The transmission of human culture is both an immensely important and complex task. To place faith in machinery or algorithms to either constitute or evaluate education is to deny its importance and ignore its complexity. As it stands today, technological ‘upgrades’ in schools at all levels appear as speculative booms which provide lucrative contracts for private industry without any clear sense of if or how the changes will benefit the education process. Further, investments in high-tech novelties are rarely weighed against comparable investment in low-tech expansion like additional staff or improved facilities. When it comes to technology, the only question asked is whether we can. We must ask whether we should.

In the case of evaluation, the quantification of teacher ability into a function of the growth of student test scores coats with an aura of objectivity a process of questionable validity and imprecision even on its own terms. Simply because it is “hard data” analyzed by sophisticated computer-driven processes, it stands as objective fact opposed to the soft, ‘subjective’ evidence of peer evaluation. Further, outcomes-based assessment of this

sort is a windfall for testing and private research firms, a fact which remains practically unacknowledged in limited debates over evaluation policy. To assess education in a way that matters, we need to look beyond the seductive claims of scientific truth in numeric form which has in become something of a secular article of faith.

While it is futile and counterproductive to imagine that computing technology will be absent from schooling, it is necessary for the true stakeholders in education; parents, teachers and communities, to take a hard line which matches the zealous techno-scientism of a Bill Gates or an Arne Duncan. To their unqualified support of the march toward technology and so-called education science, we must get beyond the value-free discourse of scientific dogma and ask an old political question — “who benefits?”

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