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THERE'S TIME (PHILA:
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THREE: A LESSON IN DEMOCRACY

In a conversation with a college of education colleague, I remarked that schools are putting a lot of emphasis on teaching democracy to their students. The comment was prompted by something I had just read, a goals statement published by a high school that led off by saying that the school sought to “develop an awareness and understanding of the roles, responsibilities, and rights of a citizen in a democratic society.” Earlier that day, the local newspaper had quoted the state education commissioner as saying that “Schools exist to encourage democracy.”

“Schools may say they are teaching democracy,” my colleague responded, “but they aren’t really doing it.” He knew I was about to head out to a school where I would be spending the afternoon, so he added: “When you’re out at that school today, if you ask those kids what democracy is, they won’t be able to tell you, and they won’t be able to tell you because they aren’t learning it. And they should be learning it, nothing is more important for schools to be getting across.”

“That’s putting it pretty strong,” I replied, as I put things in a briefcase in preparation for the trip to the school. “But I agree with you, it’s really important that kids learn about democracy. I need to look into what you say. Let’s get together and talk more about this. Catch you later.”

The school program I visited that day is one of several houses, as they are called, that make up a well-respected suburban middle school. This particular house is made up of one hundred seventh and eighth graders who are being taught by a team of four teachers representing different subject area specialties.

When I arrived, the students were busy working on projects, some in groups and some individually, with the teachers circulating and helping out where needed. I walked about a bit before stopping to look over the shoulder of a student sitting by herself typing something onto a computer screen. After a minute, she and I began to talk. I learned she was a seventh grader, that her name was Meredith, and that she was writing a report on modern dance. Dance was something she really loved, Meredith told me. She might want to be a dancer when she grew up, like the person she was writing the report about, a prominent woman dancer and choreographer.

“That’s great,” I said, and I told her about my own background as a member of a modern dance company and how much dance has meant to me. I mentioned that I had taken up dance as an adult and that I wished I had been introduced to dance when I was her age. Meredith said she had taken dance classes when

she was younger but wasn't now. I knew that part of her school curriculum was something called technical education and that it involved a variety of possibilities, including physical education and movement activities. "Are you getting to dance in school at all?" I asked. "What about in technical education?"

"No," Meredith answered. She'd really like to dance, but what happened was the teachers and students had listed some different things they could do in technical education on the blackboard, dance being one of them, and then the teachers let the students vote and it turned out that most of them wanted to construct miniature motorized amusement park rides in that time. So that was what Meredith was doing, making the rides. And really it is kind of fun, she told me, and she gets to do it with other kids, and she likes that.

As Meredith was telling me all this, it struck me how upbeat she was. She gave no indication that she felt there was anything unfair about being denied the opportunity to do something she loves to do and sees as possibly connected to her future. I didn't get the impression that Meredith thought that she ought to be able to dance while the other kids did something else, or that there was anything she could, or should, do about not being able to study dance in school. Rather, her perspective appeared to be that there had been a discussion and a vote and it hadn't gone her way, and that was that. Her job now as she saw it was to do the best she could with the activity that had been chosen by her fellow students. She did get to write the dance report for another element in her program, the report I was talking to her about, and she was making the most of that opportunity.

Driving back to the office after leaving the school, I thought about both the exchange with my colleague earlier that day and the time with Meredith and started to put the two together. My colleague was undoubtedly right, I concluded: If I had asked Meredith to tell me what democracy is—and I didn't, it just hadn't come up—based on my previous observations at the school and from my perceptions of Meredith, in all likelihood she would not in any articulate way have been able to tell me. But I also concluded that even if she couldn't define democracy, she might well have learned some very important lessons about democracy from her dance-and-amusement-park-rides experience.

What might she have learned? Meredith might have learned that what happens in a democracy is that everybody gets to say their piece, and then there is a fair vote and things get decided one way or another, and then it is everybody's responsibility to abide by the outcome of the vote. That process is what democracy is all about, Meredith might have concluded. Meredith might also have learned

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of the primacy of the group's interests over her individual needs and desires. The group comes first could have been the message that came through to her. And, Meredith could have learned to accept expressions of majority will as the best determinant of how the group and the individuals who comprise it should proceed—in this case, the majority of students' preference for making motorized rides. What the majority wants is right and the thing to do, she might have decided. Although none of this was formally discussed, nevertheless this activity might well have been a lesson in how democracy—a label that was sure to be attached to this process—works and how things ought to go on. Experiences like this could add up to something significant in Meredith's education; or at least so I speculated while driving the car back to the university that afternoon.

This took place a couple of months ago, but it has turned out to have had a strong impact on me. It has gotten me to think harder than I have about democracy and this country and what is going on in schools in this regard. I have read and observed and spoken with people about this concern. In these next pages, I will describe what has come out of it. The focus, as it has turned out, will be what people thought in much earlier times in the history of America. I have found the contrast between how they saw things and what is happening now in schools to be illuminating.

To begin, even though we use the term democracy to describe our political system, as a matter of fact we don't have a democracy in this country. Our form of government is a republic, not a democracy. We pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the *republic* for which it stands. Our political system is more grounded in the Roman republican form than many realize. For instance, president, congress, and senate are all Roman terms.¹ Unlike in a democracy—say a Greek democracy, Athens—as citizens, we seldom vote on matters ourselves. Instead, we select individuals to take on that task. In the Federalist Papers that justified the political system the Founders were creating, James Madison underscored this key distinction between a republic and a democracy: "In a democracy the people meet and exercise the government in person; in a republic they assemble and administer it by their representatives and agents."²

It is important to note that these representatives are not merely delegates doing the electorate's bidding. The founders of our nation wanted the decisions of state to be guided by the knowledge and wisdom of those who held positions in government and not by the immediate impulses of the citizenry. In Madison's

words, "the public views [should be] refined and enlarged . . . by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interests of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations."³

Within our republican political system, there are many departures from simple majority rule. For example, in the beginning senators weren't directly elected but rather chosen by the state legislatures, and the President still isn't (the Electoral College). States with small populations like Wyoming have as many senators as New York or California. The Supreme Court is appointed. The President can veto legislation. Indeed, in the early years, the distinction between a republic and a democracy was an important one. John Adams declared that "there is no good government but what is republican."⁴

And more than simply a republic, America is a *constitutional* republic. The federal constitution—as do state constitutions—puts a brake on what can legitimately be a matter of collective concern. The Constitution sets up separations of power and checks and balances that prevent majorities in one branch of government—perhaps dominated by powerful factions (the old term for interest groups)—from wielding control. The Constitution's first ten amendments, the Bill of Rights, spell out protections of individuals from the totality as represented by the government. They give explicit acknowledgment to the view that individual citizens have, the term used in the Declaration of Independence, inalienable rights as human beings that can't be taken away. These rights are not up for a vote.

Certainly our form of government reflects democratic principles and includes democratic practices. The government does not have arbitrary power over the people and it operates at their consent. Citizens have the opportunity to participate in the political process. There are open and free elections and referenda. All this is democratic. But still, while the people are heard and wield the ultimate power, this republic does not require, in the words of the Federalist Papers, the "unqualified compliance to every sudden breeze of passion" of a popular majority.⁵

I have before me an essay written by a signer of the Declaration of Independence, a physician named Benjamin Rush, entitled "Thoughts Upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic."⁶ Several things in it are noteworthy in the context of this discussion.

First, while Rush uses the word republic or some variant of it seven times, including in the title, the word democracy appears not once. This raises the question of when in our nation's history the term democracy came to be used to characterize

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our political system and what that change in terminology means. These years, our
 country is not referred to as a republic but rather as a democracy. Why is that?

Also striking about the Rush essay is how much he stresses liberty, referring
 to it as "the object and life of all republican governments."⁷ Rush talks about
 individual freedom time and again, along with his worry that government tyranny
 will rob people of it. In our times, the stress is much more likely to be on
 equality, equity, and group privileges and entitlements than on the freedom of
 the individual. Food for thought.

In addition, Rush wrote about individual virtue throughout his essay, linking
 it, particularly, to the preservation of freedom ("without virtue there can be no
 liberty"⁸) To Rush, virtue meant the personal traits of self-denial, brotherly
 kindness, character, honor, and physical discipline. To modern sensibilities, the
 idea of virtue has an archaic ring, but it meant a great deal in early America. In
 those years, there was the widely held assumption that the welfare of this republic
 depended on the virtue of its individual citizens. What was meant by virtue
 differed from writer to writer, but the concept of virtue included such qualities
 as a strong work ethic, self-sufficiency, love of country, an austere style of living,
 strict observance of the moral code, and willingness to sacrifice private profit for
 the public good.⁹ In his farewell address, George Washington declared virtue to
 be "a necessary spring of popular government."¹⁰

Rush contended that schools could and should foster virtue among students.
 In our time, while schools talk a great deal about producing good citizens, they
 don't tend to link the development of virtuous people to it. Instead they associate
 being a good citizen with such things as the ability to make informed choices
 and operate effectively within the political realm. This difference between then
 and now is thought provoking.

The last feature of the Rush essay worthy of mention in this context is its
 very strong loyalty to state and nation. Rush writes about the education of a
 child: "He must be taught to love his fellow creatures in every part of the world,
 but he must cherish with a more intense and peculiar affection, the citizens of
 Pennsylvania and of the United States."¹¹ That kind of loyalty to one's state and
 country would ring chauvinistic to most of today's school professionals, who are
 more of a bent to promote group or global identifications and commitments
 rather than state and national ones. This contrast between Rush and contemporary
 educators is worth pondering.

Democracy has become for all practical purposes an unquestioned article of faith
 among Americans. Historically, however, this has not always been the case. Major

figures in the first century of this country's existence were not so sanguineous about democracy as modern Americans. A few examples:

* James Madison noted about democracies that they "have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths."¹²

* Alexander Hamilton: "The ancient democracies, in which the people themselves deliberated, never possessed one feature of good government. Their very character was tyranny; their figure deformity. When they assembled, the field of debate presented an ungovernable mob, not only incapable of deliberation, but prepared for every enormity."¹³

* The writer James Fenimore Cooper saw democracies as tending "to press against their proper limits, to convert political equality into economic leveling, to insist that equal opportunity become mediocrity, [and] to invade every personal right and privacy; they set themselves above the law; they substitute mass opinion for justice."¹⁴

* Highly respected French observer Alexis de Toqueville as early as the 1830s foresaw that democracy was inevitable, but he expressed reservations about that prospect. Toqueville worried about a perversion of society "into a sea of anonymous beings, social droplets, deprived of true purpose . . ."¹⁵ He pointed out that democracy often promotes antipathy toward eccentricity or any other manifestation of defiant individuality.¹⁶ Toqueville wrote: "Democracy encourages a taste for physical gratification; this taste, if it becomes excessive, soon disposes men to believe that all is matter only; and materialism, in its turn, hurries them on with mad impatience to these same delights; such is the fatal circle within which democratic nations are driven round. It were well that they see the danger and hold back."¹⁷

In our time, we are very impatient with, even disdainful of, any country that has reservations about moving full speed ahead toward democracy.¹⁸ We would better understand other country's concerns—and, in my view, be less presumptuous and arrogant—if we had a greater understanding of our own heritage.

Something that did not escape our ancestors but seems to have been lost in modern times is the inherent tension between democracy and personal freedom. At heart, democracy is a method of social coercion, a way to direct or limit the actions of individuals. It may be a good means of doing so when it has to be done, but nevertheless democracy does limit people's liberty, since those who aren't on the side of the majority have to do things the victors' way.

Democratic processes tend to be winner-take-all arrangements. That is to say, they decide on one and only one way of resolving an issue. It is this candidate or that one, this policy or that one. In contrast, negotiations among individuals allow for multiple resolutions of matters of choice. You live this way, there, with those people; I live this way, here, with these people; she lives some other way. You drive a Chevrolet and I drive a Ford, and he just bought a BMW. If we operated democratically and the choice came down to Chevrolets, Fords, and BMWs, and Fords won, you'd have to drive a Ford regardless of which car you preferred or most needed. Or, an example closer to home, if you were in Meredith's class, you would have to construct amusement park rides rather than dance.

Obviously, there are instances when matters have to be decided one way or the other. We can't have one law for you and one for me, one president for you and another for me. But we have to remember that even in a democracy many people have to live with a president they don't want and with resources they have worked to create being put to purposes they don't believe in, whether it be for military hardware, sex education in the schools, or something else. These realities argue against the assumption that operating democratically is the way to go here, there, and everywhere. Rather, the inherent conflict between democracy and human freedom points toward limiting democratic processes to instances where they are clearly necessary—something the Founders sought to do.

In contemporary discourse the term liberal is frequently attached to democracy, making it *liberal democracy*, to get at the idea of a democratic system that does not run roughshod over human rights and is predisposed toward a market economy.¹⁹ While this concept draws important distinctions, it still does not adequately acknowledge the social control dimension of the democratic process, or the reservations about democracy as a political system expressed in the previous section.

It must be remembered that how democracy works, whether it works, is strongly affected by who is doing it, what they are like. American democracy, if you choose to call it that, cannot be comprehended without taking into account the nature of the Americans who have engaged in it, do engage in it, and will engage in it in the future. Reviewer George Weigel writes about social scientist Francis Fukuyama's recent book, *Trust*:

The United States, he [Fukuyama] argues, is not, was not, and never can be merely a political-legal system, a republic of procedures. Rather, the American

experiment has worked to the degree it has because a morally assertive cultural tradition, originally sectarian-Protestant, evolved into a 'broadly-accessible identity' for all Americans, thus creating the conditions both for economically useful social capital and for democratically essential civil society.²⁰

The issue for those who care about education is the extent to which schools teach democracy separate from America and Americans, and in so doing fail to help students fully understand either democracy or themselves, or the situations and challenges other countries face who contemplate, or move toward, democratization.

So far, this discussion has centered on political democracy. To come to grips with democracy's meaning for schools, however, the *social* dimension of democracy has to be considered as well. The fact of the matter is that democracy is not only a way for people to govern themselves, it is also a way for them to be in community with one another. While political democracy and social democracy as I use the term here do not exist in totally separate realms—the concepts and processes overlap and interrelate—nevertheless it is helpful to single out social democracy for consideration.

Social democracy reflects the ideology of twentieth-century modern liberalism. With its focus on the collective, modern liberalism contrasts with the more individualistic eighteenth-century classical liberalism of a John Locke or Thomas Jefferson. Modern liberalism is exemplified in education by philosopher John Dewey, whose career spanned the first half of this century and whose influence in schools persists to this day. Dewey was getting at this idea of social democracy when he wrote, "Democracy is more than a form of government; it is a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience."²¹

In contrast to an emphasis on individual virtue as put forth by someone of the mind of a Benjamin Rush, discussed earlier, Dewey stressed the importance of agreed-upon values. To foster common values, according to Dewey, there must be common experiences and exchange. Dewey wrote: "In order to have a large number of values in common, all the members of the group must have an equitable opportunity to receive and to take from others. There must be a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences . . . each party loses in meaning when the free interchange of varying modes of life experiences is arrested."²²

To Dewey, the concepts of democracy and community life are for all practical purposes synonymous. To help people become active and equal participants in their community—and for students, that means their classroom community—

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is to promote democracy. The challenge for educators from this perspective is to create a viable community within the walls of the school, with sharing among students being the sine qua non of community. As Dewey put it, "To extend the range and the fullness of sharing in the intellectual and spiritual resources of the community is the very meaning of community."²³ Thus the emphasis in this kind of democratic classroom is not so much the relationship between students and the subjects of study—math, science, literature, history, and so forth—but rather the relationships students have with one another and the teacher. The students' investigations of math and the rest are undertaken within the context of the group experience. The group mediates students' encounter with these subjects.

The social democratic frame of reference emphasizes the development of the skills of group living. Within this view, good democratic citizens are effective decision-makers, broadminded people, and contributive group participants. Contemporary social scientist Benjamin Barber reflects this orientation when he writes about developing the "competence to participate in democratic communities, the ability to think originally and act with deliberation in a pluralistic world, and the empathy to identify sufficiently with others to live with them despite conflicts of interest and differences in character."²⁴

A social democracy orientation is very prevalent among educators these years. Educator George Wood's account of a middle grades classroom is typical:

In David Smith's classroom the spirit of community that permeates Central Park East Secondary School is demonstrated by the respect, caring, and commitment with which students treat one another. This spirit underpins democratic life. Our ability to live together as neighbors, to tolerate our differences, and to arrive at mutually satisfactory solutions to common problems determines our ability to sustain and nurture democracy. The basic building block of democracy is a deep sense of commitment to community, including an obligation to think of the common good over individual good.²⁵

The reference to "respect, caring, and commitment" in the above quote reflects the tendency among educators grounded in a social democracy frame of reference to emphasize a comradeship among the group members, one that goes beyond tolerating diversity and difference to actively accepting and supporting it. This is but one example of the attributions democracy has come to carry with it in today's schools. Another is the tendency to associate democracy with open communication where feelings and confidences are revealed. And too, democracy

is often connected to an anti-hierarchical, egalitarian posture. As it goes, qualitative differences and ranking distinctions among people ring of elitism, and this is in itself undemocratic. Cooperative learning—or, the term used with increasing frequency these days, collaborative learning—group projects and reports and the like, is justified in large part because it teaches democratic values and supports the idea that everyone is equal. Equality in this instance doesn't so much mean equal rights, equality before the law, and equal opportunity to engage in the "pursuit of happiness" as it does sameness, equal worth or individual merit distinct from conduct or accomplishment. More, it's "We are all alike here; none of us is any better than anybody else." All of this is set off against pushing too hard on one's own personal agenda, trying to stand out, competing against others, operating alone or with just a few select others, and conducting one's business apart from the group and without regard for it. These things are not democratic, so it is believed.

Something else to keep in mind, increasingly over the last few decades, educators have been strongly influenced by what they have derived from the field of psychology. This discipline directs a good deal of what teachers do, including some of what they do to educate students for democracy. Accordingly, democratic living in the classroom is often viewed as a way to enhance, for example, students' self-esteem or personal interactions.

So here we see democracy brought into students' lives as a way to enhance relationships and community life and nurture the self and improve personal relationships. And often it goes beyond that: Going all the way back to the early progressive educators—the first third of this century—classroom democracy has been seen as a force for social betterment or transformation.²⁶ The way it is thought to work, democratic group living fosters a focus on collective rather than individual interests among students and increases trust and collaboration among them and feelings of equality among themselves and with others outside their group, and all of this supports a larger aim: the engendering of a commitment to serve others who are in need and to bringing about social justice.

To be sure, today's schools are about more than traditional academics. One is likely to find students engaged in voluntary, and in some cases required, service projects, both in the school and in the larger community beyond the walls of the school. Very often there are school activities related to racial justice and gender equity and such evils as environmental destruction and maldistribution of wealth. The ideology of social democracy is often a major underpinning of these perspectives and undertakings. The establishment of

democratic community life in the classroom supports moving students in these directions.

The point in all this is that a consideration of democracy is a complicated matter. There is political democracy and its relationship to our system of governance in the United States, which I have termed a constitutional republic. And there is social democracy, which focuses on enhancing the quality of group and individual life and, often, making political life more participatory and fair and effecting social improvement or reconstruction. And there is how political and social democracy relate to one another. For example, when a class is operating out of a social democratic frame, what might that be implicitly teaching students about political democracy and the political system in which they live? What might it be teaching them about themselves and their possibilities and their relationship to the group? With these realities and questions in mind, I reviewed the published list of goals that direct the house in which Meredith is a student.²⁷ While such documents are notorious for remaining on the shelf unread, I knew that Meredith's teachers had spent a great deal of time putting the goals together and I thought it would give me an indication of their thinking.

Interestingly enough, the exit outcomes, as the goals are called in the document, do not include either the terms democracy or republic. For that matter, there is no mention of the United States, America, this nation. When a geopolitical context is specified, it is global or local rather than national. There is a strong emphasis in the exit outcomes on what I have called social democracy in all its dimensions. Also here is a psychological frame of reference, and the ideologies of modern feminism and multiculturalism are strongly represented as well.

To illustrate, the preface to the section on social responsibility—one of four in the document—states: "Citizenship must now embrace both the local and the planetary. Our global future is interconnected in ways that our learners need to realize and value. Activities and challenges should provide young people with the experience of working to serve a purpose greater than themselves." Then comes a list of four major outcomes that the house will encourage among Meredith and her fellow students: 1) Learns by serving others, and knows the rewards of giving one's energies for the larger good. 2) Respects and values human diversity as a part of our multicultural society and world. 3) Understands how change occurs, how to create it, and how to deal with it successfully. 4) Acts out of respect for all forms of life, and takes steps to protect and repair the environment. Specific outcomes within these four general goals include: Works cooperatively

with others to resolve conflicts and set and achieve goals. Works to keep the environment clean and safe. Engages in meaningful service to the community. Acts out of a openness to the changing roles and equal rights of men, women, and ethnic and racial groups in our society. Knows and respects the contributions made to society and history by various religious, ethnic and racial groups. Understands that universal themes are found in all cultures and encompass the arts and humanities; science, mathematics, and technology; and the social sciences. Adapts quickly to new situations and reacts to new information. Evaluates the effects of change on various groups and the effects of various groups on change. Makes responsible decisions that take into account the local and global interdependence of systems.

The house's exit outcomes statement indicates that these results will be acquired by students within the context of "the fields of knowledge." Here, the school is referring to a term used in a widely circulated State Department of Education publication outlining what it proposes to be a common core of learning for all of the students in the state.²⁸ Among the fields listed in the state department document are the social sciences—the disciplines most relevant to this discussion—and the following statement:

The central purpose of education in the social sciences is to cultivate citizenship, an understanding of how societies and their systems work, and a lifelong effort to foster just relations among people and institutions. In a constantly changing, increasingly interdependent world, it is more critical than ever that citizens understand other cultures and appreciate their contributions to our planet's human vitality.²⁹

Then comes a list of "examples and themes": democratic principles; structure and function of political, social and economic systems; cultural diversity; historical perspective; geographic themes: location, place, regions, movement; health promotion; effects our decisions have on one another; interdependence; and understanding human behavior.³⁰

After reading the school-produced document and reviewing the fields-of-knowledge recommendations of the State Department of Education, I asked myself: judging by these materials, how much is Meredith going to learn about the beliefs and values that undergird our political system? How much is she likely to learn about what kind of people Americans have been and are now? How continuous is she going to feel with what has transpired in this country before her birth, and what obligation will she feel to build upon what her forebears

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have created? The answer I came to: very little, if any. The exit outcomes clearly point in other directions, and while the State Department document does make reference to democratic principles and to the development of an historical perspective, these are put forth as examples rather than priorities and they aren't referenced specifically in this country's political system and historical experience. Also, these topics are embedded in a long list of possibilities that tends to obscure them. After reading all the references to "just relations" and the "interdependent world" and "our planet's human vitality," I didn't come away with the impression that there was a strong push for personal liberty to be the topic of the day's lesson.

So where have my reflections and investigations these past several weeks taken me? I am left with eight major concerns about what is taking place in schools.

The first concern for me has to do with the nature of political understanding Meredith—and, of course, other students as well—is acquiring in school. I would like Meredith to acquire a reasonable understanding of the ideas, institutions, events, and personalities that comprise the American political heritage. I think it would help her understand what this country is about as a political and social experiment and where it has come from. It would give her a context, a foundation from which to proceed as a participant in this culture and society. My worry is that she isn't getting this understanding now, and, from what I know about high schools and what I have read—study after study in recent years has revealed how little American students know about their heritage—she won't get it later on either.³¹

In recent years, the education profession has focused on the development of skills and attitudes among students and accorded subject matter correspondingly less importance and attention. Very often, the criterion for choosing content, what to study, is the extent it captures student interest enough to serve the acquisition of skills or the development of values or predispositions. Whether Meredith investigates a contemporary dance choreographer or Thomas Jefferson isn't so much the issue to the school. What is the issue is whether Meredith learns how to locate and report information and comes to like learning and school more. As the school sees it, content will soon be forgotten—that is, if it isn't so irrelevant and remote in a student's eyes that she will never put in the time and energy to learn it in the first place.

It would be one thing if schools and teachers were opposed to imparting political understanding, or that they were making an attempt to do so and

failing in the process. Neither is the case from what I can discern from talking to and observing Meredith's teachers and from my other contacts with the education profession. Rather, it is a matter of educators having ideological orientations and priorities that lead them to emphasize other outcomes and other activities, which result in students like Meredith coming to equate our political system with democracy as viewed through a particular lens, one very prevalent among educators and one I have called a social democratic perspective.

Prominent educator Mike Rose reflects this perspective in his praise for classrooms he encountered in his cross-country observations of schools that he considers "embodiments of the democratic ideal."³² And what is it that calls up this accolade from Rose? What is the fundamental measure of democracy? It is students' *inclusion and participation in the classroom community*. Rose says the question about classrooms he wants to know the answer to is, "Do members have a vote, input into policy, a place at the table?"³³ There is no question that inclusion in the classroom group is important, but it isn't getting at what students know about the political system in which they live and their rights and obligations as citizens and bearers of a political heritage. And, as well, a concern for inclusion still leaves the question of when participation in the group involves an individual's absorption by the group, subordination to the group, co-optation by the group.

To educators like Rose, democracy is first of all something a student *does* in a classroom, not something he or she *knows*. Democracy is something students *experience*. Writes Rose: "My visits led me to be more interested in the experience of democracy, the phenomenology of it."³⁴ With this orientation, it should come as no surprise that when Rose writes about democracy, he doesn't refer to an understanding of the limits of governmental power, what is and is not the legitimate business of the collective, but instead to whether a classroom is a safe setting and characterized by respect, which to him means "fair treatment, decency, an absence of intimidation, and, beyond the realm of individual civility, a respect for the history, the language, and culture of the peoples represented in the classroom."³⁵

Another factor pointing schools away from an emphasis on promoting political understanding is the current stress among educators on using demonstrated behavioral outcomes among students as the measure of learning. As a practical matter, this emphasis results in downplaying the importance of acquiring knowledge. Charles Sykes, a journalist who specializes in educational issues, describes how it works:

The educationist might notice that men steeped in the knowledge of law and statesmanship behave in a certain way. But the educationist believes that

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we can skip the knowledge, the history, the statesmanship, and just focus on the way they behave and make that the outcome . . . Rather than requiring students to study the philosophical, economic, and historical background of the Founding, the educationist might have students engage in class projects in which they can exercise "collective thinking," a concept that would have been appalling to a Benjamin Franklin or a George Mason. The students would probably not recognize this, since they have not been burdened with the "mere information" and remote facts of the actual founding."³⁶

To the extent that Sykes' perceptions are accurate—and what he says squares with my experience—it raises an important issue that needs to be addressed.

The second concern that has come out of my explorations is where America, this country, fits into today's political education. Currently, schools tend to do a couple of things that give me pause: One is to virtually ignore this country. The other is to attend to it, but when doing so paint a negative picture of it. Journalist Michael Lind writes of those—and among them I would include many educators—who see America not so much as a nation but rather as an idea state. Among the ideas are the concepts of human equality, democracy, and human rights. These universalists, as Lind calls them, zero in on the ideas they most care about separate from the particular institutions, culture, and history of this country.³⁷ In this way, many schools select out democratic processes and deal with them as disembodied activities, unconnected to the American experience. I think of the goals of the high school I was reading when I had that initial conversation with my colleague that started this exploration. They talked about being a citizen in *a* democratic society, not *this* one. In many instances, global citizenship or multiculturalism is substituted for America as the context in which to work with democratic ideas and methods.

Then there is the prevalence of what can be called the debunking of America. Here, the foibles and failures of this country are underscored. When America is considered, the focus is on it as a setting for oppression, victimization, and power struggles between groups, with injustice invariably prevailing. Even though, as the story tends to go, in recent years the tide has turned some—things aren't quite as bad as they were because of the actions of certain organized groups—there is still a long way to go and the negative characterization of America still holds. Feminism, the civil rights movement, and the related ideology of multiculturalism have had a major influence in the schools, and they have supported this way of perceiving this country.

Supporting this debunking tendency is the currently fashionable approach to literary criticism known as *deconstructionism*. Though an esoteric theory understood by few outside of the academy, its basic orientation has seeped into the lay consciousness. David Lehman, author of the book, *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul DeMan*, describes deconstructionism as “a vigilant activity born of distrust and suspicion It proceeds on the assumption that what you see is never what you get.”³⁸ This way of looking at things has been congenial to pulling the rug out from under favorable views of most anything, and particularly anything having to do with white men operating within the Western tradition, which a study of this nation’s political system predominantly involves.

Of course these two approaches—disembodying and debunking—are not mutually exclusive. Schools can, and do, play back and forth between the two, and in the process integrate them. That is to say, they deal with democracy separate from this country, and when they do refer to America, highlight its negative aspects. The big problem with schools doing this is that many Americans—among them, those with children in school—reject both these orientations and practices. Michael Lind describes these objectors.³⁹ Lind writes of individuals to whom America is a primary referent. They have a sentimental attachment to the people and customs of this country and do not consider their strong loyalty and commitment to the United States to be inconsistent with good citizenship in the world. They contend that America is not as aggressive, sinister, and dark as some think. To the contrary, in their eyes America is a fundamentally good country. They see America as having a special history and destiny. To them, America is an exceptional place with exceptional people and exceptional ideals, and they don’t see this perception of America’s distinctiveness as a bad thing but rather as a charge to live up to, a responsibility. These people are optimists and gradualists: They view our history as a painful but progressive working out of the ideals of the Founders—liberty, equality, and justice for all. They hold that all groups—including whites, they don’t villainize whites—have contributed to this country’s betterment.

These exceptionalists claim that the movements, the media, and the schools have misled us. They contend that most of those who are labeled white, black, Hispanic, and Asian have in fact assimilated to the mainstream culture and are members of a single national community, the American nation. They say that amid our differences there is a common American culture, and they look upon a middle class drawing its membership from many ethnic and racial groups to be the holders of the core American values. In their view, while privately we are

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different, publicly we are the same: Americans. They reject categorizing Americans by group membership in public life. They view America as a nation of individuals, not competing groups. They want what they think Martin Luther King wanted, an America in which a person's character is what counts and not what category he or she fits into.

These individuals, these parents, want an education for children that reflects their affection for this country and their commitment to America and what it represents, and many of them do not believe their children are getting it. They think public schools, without taking their views or hopes into account, impose a perspective on their children that is not only alien to their own orientation but also bad for this country. They believe that what their children are getting in school is discouraging them and making cynics out of them. They fear that what is going on in schools is dividing people, setting individuals and groups against one another rather than bringing them together. They perceive schools as being so focused on the here-and-now and being relevant and interesting and child-responsive that they don't feel compelled to take on the crucial task of teaching children where they came from and their obligation to carry on from where those who went before them left off. They see their children's schools being unconcerned about tradition, and to them tradition matters. They agree with University of Chicago Professor of Ethics Jean Bethke Elshtain, who writes: "Culture changes through the ongoing engagement between tradition and transformation. If we lose tradition, there will be no transformation. Only the abyss."⁴⁰

A third concern is the current politicization of schooling. Again, Elshtain:

Education always reflects a society's views on what is excellent, worthy and necessary. These reflections are not cast in cement like so many foundation stones; rather, they are refracted and reshaped over time as definitions, meanings, and purposes change through democratic con-testation. In this sense education is political, but being political is different from being politicized—being made to serve interests and ends imposed by militant groups, whether in the name of heightened racial awareness, true biblical morality, androgyny, therapeutic self-esteem, or all the other sorts of enthusiasms in which we are currently awash.⁴¹

There can be no disputing that the schools are highly caught up in the "cause" business these days. The question is whether this activity is political education

or political indoctrination, who is mandating that the schools and their teachers do this, and whether this preoccupation is getting in the way of the political education that ought to be going on.

A fourth concern of mine is whether schools attend enough to the level of individual virtue among their students. The Founders were right: it matters greatly whether individual citizens possess personal qualities such as a strong work ethic, self-sufficiency, personal morality, sense of duty, and self-discipline. The kinds of things schools have talked about in recent years—civic competence, the desire and ability to participate effectively in the political process, personal well-being, communication, relationships, positive self-images, and initiating positive interactions—aren't enough. The schools put more stress on "with-it-ness" than virtue, which can play out as being up on the latest in contemporary mass culture or plugging into the Internet. If that persists, it could cost this society dearly in the future.

There is talk in the profession these days, more than before, about personal character, a concept akin to the idea of virtue.⁴² Although it is not that schools' attention to character comes out of a realization of its essential contribution to the welfare of this republic. Rather, schools' growing concern for character is a response to the alarming amount of pathology in our society—crime, drugs, illegitimacy, welfare dependency, lack of civility, and the rest. And too, educators are catching on to the fact that whether schools are successful is greatly influenced by the personal character of the students who attend them. But whatever motivates it, a focus on character contributes to the effective and just operation of our political system.

A fifth concern: where the individual fits in. I've spoken to a number of parents of elementary—and middle school-aged children who have taken their children out of the public schools. One of their major complaints is that for their child everything in public school is referenced in the group—the projects, the teams, the meetings, the trips, all of it. It looks to these parents as if their child's individuality is getting lost, their identity as a separate unique individual is being overlooked, flattened, blurred. As these parents see it, the most salient identity their child has in the classroom, the one most fostered by the school, is as a component of the collective. It appears to these parents that the school is more interested in producing cadres of do-gooders than teaching academics, or anyway is in the business of inspiring children to think of the common enterprise before their own personal growth and self-expression. It seems to these parents

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that the school is so tied in to horizontal relationships, a kind of benign niceness, egalitarianism, cooperation, tolerance, and trust-building that it is inhibiting their child from becoming an independent and self-determining individual. It seems to these parents that what goes on in their child’s school is more in tune with a collectivist society than the one they believe ours represents.

It is true that our political system is grounded in the individual; that was the frame of reference in the first years of the Republic. This is a nation of individuals not groups. The Bill of Rights, for instance, protects individuals not groups. This is important to keep in mind in a time of preoccupation with group identities and demands. The idea of individualism has come to carry a negative connotation in our time, particularly in schools, as it is linked to selfishness and a lack of concern for others and the common welfare. This wasn’t the case in the beginning. Back then, it was assumed that individuals would legitimately focus on serving their own private wants and needs, but it wasn’t assumed that this would be a bad thing or that it would run counter to the interests of the whole. There was the conception of individuals conducting their lives in such a way that the more they serve themselves the more they are motivated to and capable of serving others.

Republican citizenship is not a matter of always looking out for oneself, nor is it deferring to the common good in every instance. Rather, it involves striking a balance between private interests and public responsibilities.⁴³ At their best, individualists harmonize the private and public dimensions of their lives. In fact, our political system depends on true individualists to make it work. To the degree that schools play down the individual and put down individualism, to the extent they stress interdependence at the expense of independence, they miss the point of what this country is about. In our system, it all starts—and ends—with the individual human being.

A sixth concern: How much do schools care about freedom? America involves the respect for a number of contrasting values. There is human equality and popular sovereignty, but there is also individual liberty. Reading through Washington’s farewell address for this essay, I was struck by how many times he referred to liberty—fourteen by my count. An example, he speaks of a government “consistent with the perfect security of Liberty.”⁴⁴ (By the way, he uses the term republic time and again, and democracy not once.) In our time, it does appear that schools’ concern for community, equality, social justice, and getting everybody on the same page and pulling together is obscuring their attention to freedom. But in this country freedom matters incredibly. At its core, this political

experiment is a test of what will result both personally and as a society when people are free to conduct their lives as they see fit.

In schools, the issue of freedom comes most immediately into play in matters of curriculum. The most fundamental question that must be posed and resolved in this area is, what does the government operating through its schools have the right to compel a student to learn? Brown University professor emeritus Theodore Sizer provides a good answer to this question. Sizer argues that absent a consensus grounded in cultural traditions—we can agree, he points out, that the causes of the Civil War and fractions should be taught, that's not an issue—schools should allow and encourage freedom of choice:

Catcher in the Rye or *Silas Marner*? Calculus or probability and statistics? Organic or inorganic chemistry? An outside reading assignment by Howard Zinn or one by Oscar Handlin? Mandatory instruction in birth control? *The Bible* as literature or as a holy book? Happily, few communities can achieve a consensus on these kinds of issues. American values vary too richly for that. Such being the case, what do schools do? The only sensible answer is for them to make choices available, to give students and their families the opportunity to follow their preferences . . . The alternative—a course of study mandated as the result of decisions reached through special interest politics and unrelieved majority rule—is both insensitive educationally (no one of us, including an adolescent, learns much from things that, forced on us, we resent) and un-American (the tradition of minority rights is an important aspect of American liberty).⁴⁵

To be sure, there are practical limits as to the amount of choice a school can provide, but still, at the very least the school can take seriously the issue of whether a student is compelled to make amusement park rides when she would prefer to study dance.

A seventh concern is whether today's educators care about any of this. Neil Postman, a professor at New York University who recently died, wrote insightfully about education for over a quarter of a century. He compiled a list of books and documents he said every teacher should read: Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*, *The Declaration of Independence*, *The Constitution*, Alexis de Toqueville's *Democracy in America*, *The Gettysburg Address*, *The Emancipation Proclamation*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Scarlet Letter*, John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, and Martin Luther King's "I have a Dream" speech.⁴⁶

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An impressive list. But I ask myself: would the teachers I know think it worth their time to read any of these materials and ponder the issues that come out of them? Some would, yes; but I don't believe that most would see the need to go through this material. For them, it is enough to find direction in the current accepted wisdom about education, which they pick up from their teacher training courses and from talking to one another. They integrate this into what they deem to be reasonable, and that is in derived from their own experience in school, what they take away from the liberal arts courses they took in college, and their own ideological and political allegiances. My experience has been that the majority of those who choose teaching and submit themselves to the licensing process operated by colleges of education are not of the sort to take on the heady task of taking on the books that Postman recommends. To the degree this is the case, it raises questions about who is teaching in our schools and how they got there. And—just as important—who *isn't* in the profession. Particularly, are there enough people with top-tier talent, predilections toward serious independent reflection, and philosophical orientations other than neo-Deweyian ones in the education profession? It doesn't seem to me that there is.

And last, what about parents? Do they care about any of this? I surmise that, here too, most don't care all that much. But again, some do care a great deal. The issue related to those who don't care is why they don't care about something as important as what kind of political education their children are getting. And for those who do care, there is the issue of what they can do about it.

I suspect that one of the reasons parents don't care—or at least behave as if they don't—is that they are getting the message that, when it comes right down to it, what goes on in school is none of their business. And why isn't it? Because they don't control the education of their children, others—teachers, schools, politicians—do. Thus something like the kind of political education their children are receiving is not legitimately within their domain of concern. This brings up the most fundamental question of all: Whose children are they? Government-run, compulsory, and professionalized schooling is so embedded in the fabric of American life that it is difficult for most of us to imagine it any other way. Looking back in history, I have been struck by how many have challenged this arrangement. For example, way back in 1839 journalist Orestes Brownson wrote:

To entrust . . . the government with the power of determining the education which our children shall receive is entrusting our servant with the power to be our master . . . Government is not in this country, and cannot be, the

educator of the people. Government here . . . has no right of control over our opinions: literary, moral, political, philosophical, or religious. Its province is to reflect, not to lead, nor to create the general will . . . The real educators of the young are the grownup generation.⁴⁷

A number of forces have pushed parents to the periphery of the schooling picture. I will list three:

* *The replacement of local control with state and federal funding, standards, and mandates.* Three forces have given impetus to this trend. One is increased federal and state involvement in efforts to integrate the schools and foster social justice. The second is the perception that local funding alone will not solve the problem of the inadequate financial resources of cities. Money has to be redistributed, so it is assumed, through state and federal taxation, i.e., extracted from those who reside in the suburbs and rural areas and given to city bureaucracies and schools. The third force is the perception that only higher-level government intervention will increase the overall standard of academic achievement in this country. Parents and communities cannot be trusted, it is believed, to take on this crucially important task.

* *The professionization of teaching.* Increasingly, teachers hold the view that they are professionals like other professionals—doctors, lawyers—and ought to have the same autonomy and discretion these other professionals have. Therefore, it is the teachers' prerogative to decide what goes on in schools, and it is the parents' job to understand and support what the teachers do but otherwise stay out of it and allow the professionals to do what they deem best with the children.

* *The shift toward the early reduction of parent responsibility for and authority over children.* Increasingly, due to both choice and economic necessity, parents are invested in their careers and their own fulfillment, and this leaves less room for attending to their children. There is also a large underclass whose values and pathologies get in the way of parental involvement. And then too, the idea has gotten around in recent years that parents shouldn't try to call the shots in their children's lives lest they be interfering parents. And anyway, so it goes, particularly as their children get older, parents aren't the vital force in their children's lives, something else is—peers, the media, the school. So parents should ease off and go along with the program. Some parents, however, have come to the conclusion that *they* are the program. They have concluded that mothers and fathers and families are the key to what children become. They assert their right and responsibility to be center stage in their children's lives and to inform these other forces to get in line with them rather than it being the other way around.

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As for the schools, these parents declare that they, the parents themselves, will decide what their children will learn and not some outside expert. They assert that they should decide where their children go to school and not the government. They don't want the situation they perceive themselves being in now: being forced to send their children to a particular government school unless they are rich enough to buy their way out by paying tuition to a private school. In short, these parents want more of the liberty they believe to be the promise of America.

A few days ago, I had that talk I told my colleague we ought to have as I left to visit the school that day. This time it was an unhurried one. We had the time to get into all that has been written about here. We discussed the contrast between constitutional republicanism and Deweyian social democracy and what that means for schools and students. We talked about the concerns that grew out of this investigation: the level of political understanding students acquire in school; the view of America being propagated in the classroom; the extent to which schools are politicized; schools' responsibility in the area of personal virtue; the way schools look upon the individual; the value schools accord to human freedom; the diversity of intellectual and philosophical orientations among educators; and the control parents have over their children's education. And, yes, we talked about Meredith and whether she ought to be studying dance. I can't say we agreed on everything, but it was a good exchange. As we spoke, I saw just how productive the explorations over these past two months have been for me. And, most significant, I came away from this dialogue even more convinced that this topic, these ideas, these concerns, are exceedingly important to us all.