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Haven't We Done Enough? Must We Have Winners and Losers Even in Education?

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There are stark contrasts between the Democratic and Republican candidates for President of the United States across many issues of values, style and substance. However, none of the Democrats have distinguished themselves from their rivals with respect to K-12 education policy by challenging the winners and losers ethos has come to pervade even the education of our children. When will someone finally say, "Haven't we done enough? At long last, have we no sense of decency?"

It's been a long time coming. I remember a signal moment around 1984 when [Hill Street Blues](#) sergeant Phil Esterhaus's daily send off to his officers, "Hey, let's be careful out there," changed to Stan Jablonski's, "Let do it to them before they do it to us." Four years after the election of Ronald Reagan, the new language seemed to be an auspicious cultural shift in was to be the beginning of a three-decades-long hardening of America's heart. Since then, the nation has cemented a turn away from caring about the poor, about integration and, indeed about the very idea of social responsibility.

Now, callousness passes for entertainment. Before NBC fired him, Donald Trump, enhanced his fame by proclaiming "You're fired!" as he summarily eliminated would-be business tycoons- the "losers." However, competitions and ranking to produce winners and losers is not just a disturbingly popular turn in show business. The New York Times reported on the [bruising culture at Amazon](#) that turns potential colleagues into plotting backstabbers. [Other reporting](#) surfaced a similarly brutal, if somewhat kinder, cutthroat culture in Wall Street financial firms and Silicon Valley technology enterprises.

In education, competition between schools for students and between parents for their children's entry into schools is touted as an improvement strategy without any evidence of systemic impact. Policy makers plug charter schools and vouchers as a means to make the contest to climb the economic ladder fairer. Parents, frustrated by the quality of their local public schools, anxiously apply to charter schools, hoping their child will be selected over the competition- other people's childhood losers.

Is this the ethos that we want for education is the United States?

To advocates for market competition as the improvement mechanism for education, the opening and closing of schools and the resultant dislocation of students are necessary sacrifices on the altar of disruptive innovation. Similarly, education policy makers promote competition among teachers to get the biggest improvement in student test scores in order to win bonuses or ensure they are not the ones fired. Politicians fantasize about making firing teachers as easy as Donald Trump's televised summary dismissals with no unions to raise pesky issues like due process.

In faux-reality entertainment and in the real lives of workers and students, the unchallenged context is unalterable scarcity- from desirable mates to desirable jobs to desirable schools- in which the only way to get ahead is to beat an opponent.

We do not have to accept the scarcity of high-quality schools as an unalterable condition of life in the United States. The formerly discredited notion of social Darwinism has reemerged as a triumphant management ideology. However, the idea that in life we are all contestants fighting one another as we audition for survival and for the approval of the empowered has not yet fully pervaded our education system. Maybe, our country retains some sense of decency with respect to its children. A struggle over education policy can be the place to build the collaboration barricades against the onslaught of selfish individualism. Maybe our schools can be the beachhead.

How did we reach this nadir of community responsibility and loss of confidence in the promise of collective action? The answers are surely complex, but it is probably a mix of self-interested ideological intent and global economic developments. For example, as jobs continue to be offshored in a globalized economy and the income distribution in the US has grown more skewed, the idea of shared expense for public services has come under increasing assault. Selfishness has become an increasingly normative middle-of-the-road behavior.

The fundamental assumption is that inequity is an immutable condition. This was not always true. Throughout the 20th century, unions and social movements challenged that idea and made significant gains, albeit never without resistance from the empowered.

However, over the last several decades the wealthy and their political supporters have scored an ideological coup, and not coincidentally increased their share of national income. They have systematically undermined confidence in public institutions in large measure by lowering their own tax burden and then underfunding public institutions so that their effectiveness is diminished. Billionaires have successfully convinced many working people that they have a common interest in the stock market by shifting retirement programs from defined benefits where payments are ensured and risk is shared to various forms of investments where payments, risk and benefits are individualized and market-determined. With help from narrowly focused union leaders and the constant threat of cheap overseas labor, we have witnessed a massive and successful campaign to undermine the idea of collective action.

What can be done in the arena of education to reassert collective values? First, supporters of democratically governed equitable education need to fight as hard for we are in this together ideas as they do in opposition to the dominant we are each on our own policies. Second, small victories, such as the growing opt-out of the misuse of testing movement, must be leveraged to develop a renewed sense of public agency.

Several tough to win, but important, we are in this together policies are a good starting point to reframe war for the soul of education.

- 1) Demand policies that support integrated public schools to ensure equity and shared experiences so that children can learn to live productively in a diverse society.
- 2) Demand a move away from local property tax funding of education that replicates inequality. Instead, campaign for a system of more equitable state or national support based on a progressive tax system.
- 3) Demand systems that support teachers' collaborative professional growth.
- 4) Demand support for adequate teacher compensation, respect, professional autonomy, and responsibility.

You're fired and other such coldhearted winners and losers competitions are poor excuses for entertainment, but far more dangerous prescriptions for our children's education. I do not expect the candidates to come to these solutions on their own, nor do I expect the mainstream media to ask them to respond questions about such policies. That is up to voters.

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