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**Resistance to Attacks on Public Education is Not Enough**

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Chris Ryan via Getty Images

The *Vergara vs California* superior court decision to throw out five state statutes that provide job protections to teachers underscores the persistence, power and wealth behind current education policies. Response from critics has been swift and sharp. However, if we want to defend and improve a democratically-governed public education system that promotes authentic engagement and equity, resistance to destructive policies is not enough. Exposés about corruption, self-interest and corporate and philanthropic influence on public policy are not enough. Pointing out the absence of evidence to support current policies is not enough. We need to reclaim the initiative as advocates for alternate strategies for improvement, lest we be too easily cast as defenders of an inadequate status quo.

We do not have the educational outcomes we want or need. Inequity is persistent and far too many students graduate without the critical thinking skills needed for life, work, citizenship and preparation for future learning. Unfortunately, current improvement efforts prioritize competition over collaboration, favoring strategies such as merit pay, school closings and charter school expansion, high-stakes testing and weakening teachers' collective bargaining and due process protections. Rather than leading to deep and widespread improvement, these strategies will exacerbate inequity, increase racial and socioeconomic isolation and drive effective teachers from the profession.

Resistance from educators, parents and even state legislatures is escalating. Researchers and testing experts have strenuously challenged the misuse of assessment data. Courtesy of comedians Louis, C.K. and Stephen Colbert swipes at early state-led Common Core testing have gone viral. However, as [reported](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2014/05/08/report-right-wing-extremists-use-common-core-attacks-to-undermine-public-education/) by the Southern Poverty Law Center, it is alarming that some of the strongest opposition is coming from organizations and individuals whose goal is to undermine public education.

We need to build a movement with a central focus on advocacy for alternative improvement strategies. To do so, we need to build common cause with others struggling for social and economic justice. Successful social change efforts often begin with dissatisfaction and then gain strength and insight through the small victories and defeats that accompany shared struggle. However, eventually movements that have sustained transformative impact come to articulate broadly appealing values and easily stated goals. While individualism has been historically powerful, the values of equity and social responsibility also resonate with the American public. These values lead to two goals:

• Prepare students for future learning.
• Help guide students to be decent human beings.

Everything else is derivative. Broad values and goals can expand the movement's base of support beyond the immediately disaffected and the very large audience not currently enmeshed in current education debates. Educators can broaden support for an equity-driven educational movement by articulating an improvement-driven vision of teaching and learning. Here are some suggestions:

**1) I am most effective when I get to know students (your children) as learners and human beings.**

Parents already believe in the importance of teachers caring about and knowing their students. This is a powerful lever to emphasize two important features of effective learning: support for social and emotional well being in the life of the classroom and formative assessment. National attention is currently focused on getting more correct answers on high-stakes summative assessments. Whether these tests contribute to or undermine overall improvement, they will never provide the immediate information teachers and students need each day to optimize learning. Teachers and parents need to advocate for a shift in emphasis to daily diagnosis of student understanding and using that information to move [learning forward](http://www.arthurcamins.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/What-if-we-approached-testing-this-way_-_-The-Answer-Sheet.pdf). Wise teachers and parents know that children exhibit patterns of understanding and behavior, but that they do so in unique, ever-changing ways. Therefore, we need to embrace the idea that the best source of information about student learning is their everyday work. Learning from error should be a guiding principle in lesson design. Employers should welcome the practice of improvement through error analysis. Teachers also know that developing the judgment to respond productively to this complexity is a lifetime project. They know that helping students also includes getting to know students in environments that convey value and concern for them as individuals. That implies small class-size, whether in a face-to-face or online environment.

**2) I don't know enough yet, so I need to keep learning and learn from error.**

Educators and their supporters need to admit and embrace the complexity of teaching and learning. For students, this means conveying to students that their mistakes and partial understanding are not judgments about ability, but rather a source of information for improvement. For educators, it means rejecting anything that remotely sounds like, "I already know what I need to know, so don't tell me what to do." This is refreshingly honest and an essential feature of an evidence-based profession. For policy makers and leaders, this same level of humility would engender a lot more credibility with practitioners and enable discussion with, instead of past, one another. It means abandoning anything that sounds like, "I know more than you, so you have to listen to me."

**3) I need some autonomy, but I know I can't become more effective on my own. We learn best when we collaborate with, not compete against colleagues.**

Balancing autonomy, collaboration and shared responsibility requires three kinds of support. First, the development of expertise in collaboration with colleagues requires time. Current funding methods and scheduling in schools do not permit sufficient collaboration. As is common in many successful school systems around the world a significant part of teachers' workday must be devoted to planning, reflection and professional learning. Second, while learning from peers is vital, continuous improvement is also an outward looking research, development, innovation, and personal challenge effort. Professional growth requires access to external experts and flexibility to try out new ideas. Overly prescriptive standards and curricula discourage innovation. Third, teachers are more likely to share and embrace successful teaching strategies if education policies prioritize collaboration over competition for rewards. Employers who have for decades highlighted the importance of teamwork and continuous improvement should advocate for these approaches for both student and teacher learning. Current education reform, with its emphasis on test outcomes, narrowly measured impact of individual teachers and on competition undermines this principle.

**4) I learn best through expert coaching, not threats.**

Everyday experience and brain research all suggest that excess stress constrains rather than catalyzes improvement on complex tasks, such as teaching and learning. Expert explicit mentorship and apprenticeship is a feature in varied professions from sports to medicine and law to building trades. This should become an essential feature of the structure of teacher development and classroom culture. Students are best able to engage and persist in their learning when they are given specific guidance and provided a chance to think for themselves, try and improve without risk. This is how they develop self-confidence. It is how they make themselves smarter.

**5) I can't optimize my effectiveness as a teacher on my own, so I need the support of my community.**

Students' readiness to engage in and sustain learning is influenced by a range of non-school factors that we can and must do something about. We can and must change school funding methods and tax policies so that they are far more equitable. We can and must implement the pre-school education, family health supports and housing programs that we know help mediate the effects of poverty and racial isolation. Employed parents are more able to provide the family stability that supports students learning. Therefore, efforts to improve education should not be isolated from a comprehensive approach to fuller employment. We need a dramatic policy shift away from giving more individual students the chance to "[escape from poverty](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arthur-camins/escape-from-poverty-for-a_b_5344285.html)" to improving the overall conditions of people's lives.

To move from resistance to common cause, we need to start planning now for 2034. That is the year when children born in 2014-assuming they start kindergarten at five, persist through four years of high school and attend at least two years of college or career training- will graduate. The world into which students will graduate in 2034 will be, if anything, more diverse and more interconnected. From any perspective, success will demand the values, knowledge, experience and dispositions to live with and from people who are different from one another in myriad ways. So, from a practical and moral perspective, a movement for educational equity must have three characteristics. First, to achieve anything meaningful its goals must reach beyond education and address the wider conditions of people's lives. Second, it must reflect and be led in a way the represents the diversity of our country. Third, it should prioritize a renewed movement for integrated neighborhoods and schools.

The final and most important big idea is this: Our fates and that of our children are bound together. We need to tap into parents' high hopes and dreams for their children, especially, but not exclusively those who have been poorly served by the schools in their communities. Linking preparation for future learning, social responsibility and equity provides common ground for solutions. Alternatively, solutions like school choice pit people against one another as they compete for limited resources. In our society with its increasing inequality, being out for oneself is a gamble. We should nurture individual aspiration and drive. However, in all likelihood we will all continue to make valuable contributions twenty feet from stardom. What we need to work toward- together- is not increasing the chances of individual stardom, but instead ensuring that the 99% can still lead a decent rewarding life.

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