**Why God Bless the Child That's Got His Own Is Not a Worthy Education Policy**

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*Them that's got shall have
Them that's not shall lose
So the Bible says and it still is news
Mama may have and Papa may have
But God bless the child that's got his own, that's got his own*

Who would have imagined that many decades later Republicans and Democrats alike would unwittingly channel verses from Billie Holiday's 1941 haunting song, *God Bless the Child*. Now, however, it is not a sorrowful lament that is popular, but instead vocal support for a divisive "be on you own" charter school policy.

Lately, I have heard this defense of charter schools: *It is not fair to trap students in poorly performing schools.* This, sacrifice some and save the rest, rationale for segregation, exclusion and differential opportunity is not a new, but the recent argument has grown more cynical. I think it rests on the following unarticulated assumptions and conclusions:

1. Local elected school boards are too politically contentious and ill informed to oversee effective school change.

2. Current teachers and administrators lack the intelligence, work ethic and entrepreneurship necessary to improve schools.

3. Anyone who is smart and has drive can teach or lead a school.

4. Not all children can be saved. Some are so-damaged either as a function of genetics or upbringing that no amount of efforts will suffice.

Improving all schools is hopeless. Poverty will always be with us. Therefore, we need to set up privately governed (charter) schools outside the current system that will serve the best among the unfortunate. We know that not all charter schools will be successful. As with business competition, market forces will serve to sift and winnow so that only the best schools will survive. We (self appointed, smart, usually wealthy folks) will provide a little extra cash and training to other self-described smart entrepreneurial people to staff the schools. We know that not all children will be successful. These new charter schools will permit various admission, behavioral control and sorting mechanisms, so that only the ablest and most likely to succeed will be selected and allowed to remain. This is the cold hard truth. Only we have the guts to act on it.

Hardly anyone is willing to articulate these cynical and elitist ideas out loud, because they conflict so profoundly with the more socially responsible values of most citizens.

Nonetheless, it is important to remember that efforts to save the "deserving few" are not new. The resulting damage to those left behind is not new.

I woke up at 3 a.m. one night recently remembering the myriad pre-charter schools strategies that our nation has employed to avoid dealing with the educational effects of poverty and to satisfy the desire of some to avoid the presumably damaging influence of sitting next to less desirable "others."

In the 1980s, I worked as a teacher in Bedford-Stuyvesant, in Brooklyn. Children in our school had benefited from the federally supported [Project Follow Through](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_Follow_Through), which provided health and other social services from pre-school through early elementary grades. However, by the mid- 1980s, severe budget cuts and the debilitating crack epidemic had decimated social cohesion and hope in the community. The district's K-8 magnet school for the "gifted" provided a sanctioned place for some to avoid mingling with poorer kids. In that context, the magnet school isolated the potentially highest performing students from and weakened the education of the children in the remaining schools.

I also remembered the difference among my own fifth grades classes, which in different years were classified as gifted or not. These in-school tracking strategies tended to segregate children by socioeconomic and family stability. Interestingly, these segregation mechanisms were not a racial phenomenon, since there were no white kids at all. However, the segregation reinforced class biases and provided differential expectations and opportunities to learn.

Over a decade later, I saw these same tensions in Louisville, KY in the wake of the Supreme Court ruling that declared the Jefferson County Public Schools student assignment plan unconstitutional because race was the leading variable in the district's efforts to ensure diverse schools. Subsequently, the district devised an alternative plan, still aimed at diversity, but based instead on the average socio-economic status and educational attainment level of the parents in different geographic regions. The [Supreme Court decision](https://www.aasa.org/content.aspx?id=30808) reopened and energized dormant but long simmering tensions about who goes to school with whom. At the same time, many schools continued to offer an "Advance Program," that served to separate kids within schools.

In-school tracking and magnet schools have long served to mediate dealing the hard truth that poverty undermines children's readiness and ability to engage in and sustain learning. However, there is something more explicitly elitist and anti-democratic in the new well-funded public-private partnership efforts to provide charter schools as a systemic alternative to remaining public schools.

These avoidance mechanisms have a long history. Overall, it is not the parents who make these "choices" for their own children who are to blame. Their "choices," while reflective of our society's race and class prejudices, are made in the context of the differential options available to people in a deeply and structurally inequitable society. As long as the only seeming rational choice is self-preservation, people who can, will choose it.

What is new is the scale of the effort and resulting damage. What is new is the ever-widening disparity in income and differential life chance opportunities. What is new is that the very idea of social responsibility for the common good is under sustained attack and erosion.

In God Bless the Child, self-preservation is a sorrowful lament on the hopelessness of poverty. This contrasts sharply with the enthusiastic embrace of self-interest inherent in advocacy for charter-schools. What is new is the increased, federally-sanctioned effort to invest in escape hatches rather than in systemic programs to alleviate the conditions of poverty that undermine students readiness and ability to sustain learning.

That poverty and its effects will always be with us is not a self-evident truth. Such defeatism leads to acceptance of self-interest as inevitable. Instead, we need a united campaign for jobs, health care, housing, food security and education. We need to re-embrace Dr. Martin Luther King's 1968 call for economic justice. "We are," he said on the eve of his assassination, " all tied in a single garment of destiny."

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