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## *Our Children's Health v. Public Education in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America*

Doug Selwyn

*State University of New York, Plattsburgh*

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### **Abstract**

*What would schools and communities look like if the health and well-being of all our children were our highest priorities? More important than test scores, profits, or real estate values? What actions would we take if we wanted to guarantee that all our children were growing up with what they needed to be healthy, happy, and successful—and not just some of them? The United States was once among the healthiest countries in the world. As of now, it is ranked no better than twenty-sixth. Those who bear the brunt of our worsening health are the poor, people of color, and, most of all, our children. This special report situates our ongoing health crisis within the larger picture of inequality and the complex interplay of systems in the U.S. based on class, privilege, racism, sexism, and the ongoing tension between the ideals of democracy and the realities of corporate capitalism. Public education is caught in the middle of those tensions.*



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I had been concerned about testing and its impact on children since I began my teaching career but became much more seriously alarmed about the significant harm being done to students in the late 1990s when my class of fourth and fifth graders took the required standardized tests. Most of the children came from homes in which they did not speak English and came from cultures foreign to the one in which they were now living. We had spent the year in our classroom focused on what we collectively valued most: pursuing our questions, concerns, and interests; learning how to work together and to communicate as speakers and listeners; and learning how to carry out research and how to make use of the skills we learned to make things better for ourselves and for our learning community. Our focus was on learning how to support everyone in the room to be as successful as possible, so we were all working for each other.

We addressed the academic basics, but we did so through projects, through materials that were of interest and relevance for the children, and which allowed them to communicate what they knew and had learned through a range of modalities. They did not bubble in any circles. I did offer them a two-week course, “testing as a foreign language,” in hopes of helping them learn how tests work, to become familiar with the kinds of questions they were likely to encounter, and to acquire some test-taking strategies. They created tests about Pokémon, which was popular at the time, and the students “administered” their tests to the adults in the school. I had hoped that designing their own multiple choice, true/false, and short answer questions, writing reading passages with related questions, and then scoring the tests when they were returned would help the students to understand how the tests were constructed. I wanted to make clear to them that the tests don’t measure or assess whether you are smart or not, or whether you are a “good” or “worthy” person, but only whether you have learned a narrow slice of content and whether you are able to show what you know using a number two pencil and a test booklet full of circles. The students enjoyed the experience and truly enjoyed that we adults failed miserably. But that did not fully prepare them (or me) for what was to come. These children, who had demonstrated their intelligence, their skill, their compassion, their problem-solving abilities, their caring and respect for themselves and others, their critical thinking, their resilience in dealing with the extraordinary ups and downs that many families face, hit an impenetrable wall with the tests, which many were taking in their second or third language. Just that fact alone, that children who could speak two or three languages were more likely to fail or struggle than children who only spoke English made clear how wrong these tests were.

Watching the students dissolve into tears and sink into their chairs in utter frustration as they tried to negotiate page after page of contextless test questions sounded every alarm bell, raised every red flag, and broke my heart. This test, created by people who clearly did not know “my” students, and maybe didn’t know any students, created great harm to the children in my class, to the other children in our school, and to thousands of children in schools around the state. We knew it as teachers, as administrators, as family members. We knew what the students knew and what they did not know, and we knew a great deal more than that. We knew them, knew that the tests captured little or nothing of who the children were, but we were forbidden (by the state and by the school district) to say anything about it. I decided to share the tests with my teaching colleagues, who were mystified and horrified by the impact the tests were having on their students. Teachers who were not proctoring the tests were not allowed to see them and so they had no basis for understanding what was happening. My sharing with them was illegal, but I felt it was important for them to know what their students were experiencing. As they paged through the test booklets they became angrier and angrier at the abuse being done to their children. And

yet they continued (and continue) to give the tests and to say nothing of their concerns for fear of being punished.

I was investigated by the state for sharing this proprietary material with my colleagues. I finally experienced no formal punishment, but the chill was in the air. I refused to give the tests the next year, but this was handled within the school, as I watched a different class (not taking the tests) while another teacher proctored my class. This “handling” did nothing for the students, and in fact it penalized them in that they did not have their regular teacher to support them while they took the tests. Any learning the students might have done during the weeks of testing and in subsequent weeks was severely compromised by the trauma they experienced while testing, and that trauma stayed with the students well beyond those testing weeks, and it is reintroduced each time the tests are given. What the children learned was that they were not good enough, were not smart enough, were not savvy enough to succeed in school or in life and that it was their fault. The testing process made them less healthy, less whole. Many of us began to speak up about what we saw happening, but my concerns and the concerns of parents, teachers, and administrators were falling on deaf political ears.

### **Taking Initiative**

At the center of public education was (and is) a test created and scored by a private, for-profit publishing company that parents, teachers, students, and administrators cannot see. As the State of Washington was perpetuating, rather than addressing this crisis, two university colleagues and I decided to avail ourselves of Washington's citizens' initiative process that allows any citizen to propose legislation by petition. Our initiative, I-780, would have required anyone running for public office to take the same tenth grade standardized test that the high school students were taking, under similar conditions, and to publish their scores in the voter's pamphlet. They didn't have to pass, just take the tests and publish the results. We would need a considerable number of verified petition signatures to get our initiative on the ballot. We knew it was a long shot but hoped that teachers would jump at a chance to see politicians measured with the same yardstick they were using to define success or failure for their students and would collect signatures in their communities. Our more realistic agenda was to stimulate conversations and raise awareness about the harm being done to our children and to public education.

Teachers loved the Initiative and many signed the petition, but few were willing to collect signatures themselves. They acknowledged that it was legal for them to gather signatures outside of school, but they knew that their administrators would find out, and they were sure they would be punished one way or another. We had underestimated the role that fear would play in our campaign, and while tenured teachers have less to fear than almost anyone in terms of job security, they knew that administrators could still make their teaching lives difficult. Their sense of fear was real. I had a conversation with an assistant superintendent of a district who said the same thing; he loved the initiative, he believed that testing was destroying public education, and even he, an assistant superintendent would not gather signatures for fear of problems it would cause for him with his boss. The same held true for school board members. The fear of punishment was felt up and down the educational hierarchy.

When interviewed by media the question would often come up: why would you want to humiliate candidates by putting them through this? We would respond that the state and federal governments were insisting that passing the tests was the only evidence that counted when

assessing whether students had had a successful education, and wouldn't we want to know whether those running for office were well educated? And then we would ask, if they were so concerned about the potential impact on adults, why were they so seemingly unconcerned about what the tests were doing to our children? No one ever had a response.

I-780 failed to get on the ballot; we had no money for our campaign and our distribution plans were thwarted by the reluctance of teachers and other school personnel to gather signatures. The hard lesson I took from the campaign was that teachers and many administrators were living in fear and would not stand up, despite their concerns about what the tests were doing to their students, and to them as educators. And year after year, as students and teachers continue to endure a curriculum that is mostly test driven, and then endure taking (or administering) the tests, they (students and educators) become more alienated, more disengaged, and less healthy.

These experiences led me to research some fundamental questions about public education: What is the role of public education in a democracy? Who does it serve and in what ways do we in education carry out that mission? They may seem like self-evident questions, but through our history as a nation they have been anything but settled. What is our role as educators when our democracy becomes undemocratic, when our justice system becomes unjust, and when our system of checks and balance is pushed way out of balance by the size of the checks? And how we go about making change that truly leads to our children being healthier, more whole? What would our schools look like if our number one priority was the health and well-being of our children, more important than test scores, real estate values, or scoring political points?

### **Focusing on Health**

My research made clear that when we are talking about health and well-being we are going well beyond whether someone has a cold. Physical health is surely part of the picture, but there is also social health and emotional health that must be considered. British researchers Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2009) investigated the social determinants of health and found that the single most significant factor was income inequality. To put their findings most simply; the more inequality there is in a country, the worse the health of the population. This is true no matter which country, no matter what mix of races, ethnicities, or other factors that make up the population. Their data spanned a wide range of health indicators, from life expectancy to infant mortality to teen births, to drug use and mental health issues, prison populations, and educational performance. No matter what the category, societies that are more equal have better health. Wilkinson and Pickett found that the United States was becoming less healthy when compared with other wealthy countries, and even less healthy than many poor countries.

Take Finland for example. Finland is a country that is regularly lauded for having one of the best educational systems in the world. They only reached that point after they decided to make their society more equal after World War II. They looked at their marginal economy and education system, recognized that their most important asset was their people, and decided to invest in them. They adjusted their economy so that it became more equal, made sure that there was social and economic support for all who needed them, and equalized the school experience such that everyone who attended school got an equivalent education no matter where they lived, no matter what school they attended. As the income levels of the country equalized the health of

the country improved and their educational system became one of the most highly regarded systems in the world.

The United States has made other choices and gotten other results. We were among the healthiest countries in the world in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and our economy was much more equal at that time. The tax rate on the highest earners was approximately 90% and the tax on corporations was much higher than it is now. There were manufacturing jobs that paid a living wage that produced a sizeable middle class, who had money in their pockets to spend at stores in their towns and who paid taxes that supported the infrastructure of their communities. Labor unions were stronger, supporting workers and helping to provide social and health benefits, and our health as a nation was much stronger than it is now, among the healthiest in the world.

What changed? We are now a much less equal society than we were sixty years ago. Tax rates on top earners are much less, under 40%, with the recent mammoth tax cut for the wealthy exploding the nation's debt; unions are weaker so that fewer workers have living wage jobs or jobs with benefits. Corporations are also paying much lower tax rates (if they pay any at all), or moving their manufacturing operations offshore, where they avoid paying taxes and where they find friendlier environmental laws, and then stashing their profits offshore, again avoiding taxes. This leaves less money in the nation's treasury to support the health and infrastructure needs of the population.

There are approximately eighteen million millionaires in the U.S. (Kelly, 2019), and more than 2100 billionaires (Kroll & Dolan, 2019). At the same time, nearly one child in five is living in poverty, and estimates range from eleven million to thirteen million children who experience food insecurity during the year, this in the richest nation in the history of the world. This increasing gap between the wealthy and the desperately poor has compromised our health as a nation. On top of that, the proposed military budget for the year 2020 is more than 700 billion dollars, well above the combined totals of the next seven largest military budgets combined (and that's not counting the "black box" military spending that are hidden from public scrutiny).

The U.S. is now rated as no better than the twenty sixth healthiest country in the world despite spending nearly as much on health care as the rest of the world combined. (Mercer & Bezruchka, 2016) More and more of our children are coming to school unhealthy, stressed, and not ready to learn. This is not something that schools have the resources to address, and that increasing gap between what the children need and what the schools can provide has increased the stress levels, depression, and burnout we are experiencing across the country.

### **Caught between the Ideals of Democracy and the Demands of Corporate Capitalism**

Why is this and what do we do about it? There is tension between the twin pillars of the US, with democracy (at least theoretically) as its political system, and corporate capitalism as its economic system. This tension places public education in an impossible position, and it places those of us within public education in the same impossible squeeze. We can serve the ideals of democracy and the common good or we can serve the demands of corporate capitalism; we can't do both.

And for that, I need to tell a story about mushrooms. In particular, honey mushrooms.

When I taught third grade I would tape off an outline of the blue whale, thought at the time to be the largest organism on earth. I developed a pretty cool integrated unit based on the blue whale, incorporating math, language arts, social studies, art, as well as science, and the students were totally engaged, but there was a problem with the unit; it was inaccurate. The blue whale is not the largest organism on earth.

The largest organism on earth is a mushroom, the honey fungus (Fleming, 2014). These little honey mushrooms pop up in the forest at some distance from each other. They seem to be discreet, isolated clumps but they are actually the fruiting bodies of the same organism, whose underground network of filaments reach out over 3.7 square miles. The fungus looks attractive and harmless, and some people even eat those fruiting bodies, but it eventually kills their host trees by sucking out their nutrients.

I often think of these mushrooms when I think about our current times. Like the small clumps of honey mushrooms that we find at various parts of a forest, the issues we face, large and small, local, national, and international, seem to pop up in isolation. On the local level, there are so many seemingly discreet issues: poverty, racism, substance abuse, dislocation, and alienation that are realities for so many of our students and their families. The school funding crises that seem to challenge most every school district across the country, and yet that each town faces alone. The lack of access to health care, the tragedies of drug overdose, homelessness, the lack of jobs paying a living wage that can support a family, the closing down of the industries that once supplied a tax base that supported the infrastructure of the towns and cities. And on the larger levels, the bloated military budget that funds perpetual war in countries rich with oil and other valued resources, the tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans that conspire to steal money from our children, from our towns in order to make the wealthy even more wealthy, and the trade and tax policies that allow companies like Amazon to make unimaginable profits while paying no tax, again stealing money from the public's coffers. Each of these is too often experienced and addressed as a separate, isolated event but, like the honey mushrooms, they are connected underneath by a vast network of fibers, stemming from a common source and they are collectively sucking the resources and meaning from our lives, destroying the environment in which they are growing. And like the honey mushroom, corporate capitalism is attacking the health of our communities and society.

Schooling in the context of corporate capitalism takes on the values of that system: competition, winners and losers, one best way to do things. Some students are found to be more deserving than others, and some students are lost by the wayside, waste from this industrial assembly line approach. These underlying values permeate all they touch, so when we look at what came along as a result of No Child Left Behind in 2002, schooling in a one size fits all manner, topped off by one size fits all high stakes standardized tests, we should not be surprised. The current public school system serves the existing structure, helping to maintain the hierarchy that privileges a few over most everyone else. We know that we don't need to test; we can simply check zip codes if we really feel the need to rank students, but there is little educational value in doing so, and it is important that we recognize that the deeper goals of the high stakes testing movement center around money, around profits; money for the testing companies, and data for use by those who would privatize public education, which would give them access to the hundreds of billions of dollars each year that is currently beyond their reach. And it centers around control.

## A Crisis of Democracy

When schools were more student centered during the 1960s and 1970s, and there were intentional efforts to connect what students were learning in the classroom to what was happening around them, students were taking their studies of democracy and movements for justice to the streets with demonstrations against the war, demonstrations for Civil Rights, women's rights and LGBT Rights. The Trilateral Commission (made up of representatives from North America, Japan, and Western Europe) produced a report in 1975 called "The Crisis of Democracy". Many of those representing the U.S. later served in Carter's administration, and they were clearly upset by the role that education was playing in stirring up the public. The report cautioned against what they termed "an excess of democracy;" it said that

The effective operation of a democratic political system usually requires some measure of apathy and noninvolvement on the part of some individuals and groups. (Chomsky, 1981).

Samuel Huntington, one of the authors of the report, expressed his concern that this excess of democracy was bad for the country because it made the U.S. look bad on the world stage. It was harder to be the leader around the world if it could not keep its own population in line. Huntington lamented the increasing actions and influence of the common people. He said, "Truman had been able to govern the country with the cooperation of a relatively small number of Wall Street lawyers and bankers," but activism made this much more difficult by the mid-1960s. The population was much less governable because they were less willing to be submissive. Huntington noted that "previously passive or unorganized groups in the population," such as "blacks, Indians, Chicanos, students and women — all of whom became organized and mobilized in new ways to achieve what they considered to be their appropriate share of the action and of the rewards" were a threat to the smooth functioning of our democracy... (Huntington, quoted in Chomsky, 1981).

James Baldwin had addressed this question of the purpose of education years earlier, in a 1963 talk with teachers:

The paradox of education is precisely this - that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions... To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. If a society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish. The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it – at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change. (Baldwin, 1963)

Baldwin laid out the contradiction so clearly... What we may want for our children, to be critical thinkers and passionate learners who care about others and who stand up for justice is someone that "no society is really anxious to... have around." The thought of everyone's children thinking

for themselves and acting in their own interests, especially in the interests of communities that are not ours, is perceived as a threat because it might produce that “excess of democracy.”

Members of Carter’s administration and then those in Ronald Reagan’s were clear that all those people in the streets, thinking for themselves and questioning their government were not what they wanted from their public educational system and they moved to bring the focus of education to what they labeled “back to basics.” *A Nation at Risk* (1983) spelled out many of their concerns, blaming public education for many of the ills in our world. We have been heading back to basics ever since. *No Child Left Behind*, the high stakes legislation passed by U.S. Congress in 2002 has placed the federal government squarely in the center of the education debate. It has wrested local control from districts across the country and strong-armed educators into teaching to a one size fits all testing regime that is based on ideology spawned by the eugenics movement at the turn of the twentieth century (Au, 2009). There is literally no evidence to support this approach, and despite pouring billions of dollars into this high stakes testing assault on our children, it has not even succeeded on its own terms; scores are flat and the gap between children of color and majority children (a presumed rationale for NCLB) has not closed (Stedman, 2010, 2011). This is what back to basic now looks like, and it more perfectly serves the interests of those in power, at the expense of our children and our democracy.

Having too much democracy in a democracy is a curious paradox, and one that really gets to the heart of the question I posed at the beginning of this essay. When the democracy stops being democratic, when the society based on serving the common good stops serving that common good, what does “right action” look like? And if our current course of action is making us less healthy, less happy, and less well educated as a society, what do we do? Are schools doing their jobs when they educate people to notice the injustices and feel moved to act, using the skills and knowledge they gained from public education? The authors of the Trilateral Commission did not think so, and scolded institutions such as schools, churches and synagogues for failing to keep their populations passive.

### **What is to be done?**

What do we do? On the one hand we have education striving to serve the needs of our children and community and to “level the playing field,” so to speak; on the other, it helps to maintain a status quo that helps to increase inequality, that makes our children (and entire population) increasingly unhealthy and that threatens the health of our planet.

There is a big picture answer to that question and a much smaller, more local response as well. The largest response is we need fundamental, societal change, away from our toxic, profit driven capitalistic system that rewards the few at the expense of the rest of us, that is still driven by white supremacy, that is willing to jail children and separate families to score political points. It requires a re-visioning of who we are and what we value such that we put the health and well-being of all of us, and the earth, over the greed and short term profits of the few, and we know that this effort will take a massive organizing and action agenda that will not be realized tomorrow, or even next week. When I have talked with teachers over the years about taking actions such as refusing to give the tests, for example, they are overwhelmed with the thought of taking any action at all. They are afraid and are already stressed just trying to survive. This does not mean they won’t do something, but it is unrealistic to simply say we need revolution and nothing less will do. We do need revolution and organizing for fundamental change is crucial,



but there are also smaller, local things we can do to make lives better for children, educators, and families. Hopefully taking even small actions that make a difference will help educators, families, and communities to feel more able to take additional, larger actions, to begin to build momentum to a larger movement. And at the very least it will lead to our children being healthier and happier.

I will share briefly a few actions we can take in schools and in our communities that will make a difference. I've gone into more detail about this in my book *All Children Are All Our Children* (Selwyn, 2019) for those who want more detail.

## **Taking Action for our Children**

In my book I have organized many of the actions we can take within a school building to support the health and well-being of our students into four general categories: building relationships, attending to physical health, learning how to learn, and providing opportunities. I would now add a fifth category, education and development, which focuses on helping our educators and community members to learn more about why things are the way they are and what they (we) might do to more effectively serve our children. I will present each very briefly in the paragraphs that follow.

### *Build Relationships*

The most important steps we can take are building relationships with all our students and their families, making sure they know we value and welcome them all to school and will do all we can to serve them as well as we can. We know that many of our students are denied who they are when they walk into a school building. There are few or no teachers who look like them, who speak their language. They may even be punished for speaking their first languages in the classroom. Their communities are often not recognized or valued. The way they learn may not fit with how they are taught. They are expected to learn in the same way everyone else learns, at the same pace, and to demonstrate their learning in one prescribed manner. Their interests, concerns, or passions have no room in this educational process, and few of their questions are allowed; there just isn't time.

If we want to truly serve our children, we have to begin by building relationships with them based on respect, on listening, on trust. This requires a multifaceted approach, from the ways in which we greet students in the morning to the ways we get to know students as learners and as "whole children," and the ways we organize our classrooms so that all students are supporting each and every one of their classmates. We have to be clear ourselves, and then make clear to our students that they are more important than any test or curriculum or policy. Students are most likely to thrive and succeed if they feel welcome, valued, included and accepted. It will make a difference if they see artifacts, artwork, and posters from those who come from their communities, races, genders, and/or ethnic groups. It will serve all students if the curriculum includes multiple points of view and ways of knowing that reflect the community of learners within the school and around the world. And if we want them to trust us and the education they are experiencing we must tell them the truth, about how we have come to this stage in our collective history, and about how society operates as we help them to find their paths in and through the world.

### *Attend to Physical Health*

We must attend to the physical health of our students, recognizing that many come to school hungry, tired, emotionally stressed, or physically ill. We can feed them nutritious foods at breakfast and lunch and include healthy snacks in the rooms. We can make sure they have nutritious food over weekends and over holidays, including summer meals programs. We can have clinics and/or medical staff to provide screenings and first level care in buildings. We can make sure our buildings are healthy, making sure to use cleaning agents that are non-toxic, and making sure that there is no mold or other toxins in the environment. We can make sure our buildings don't leak, have adequate heat and cooling, and have adequate lighting. We can make sure our buildings are truly accessible for all, that those who have needs for adaptive technologies have them, and that educators have the training they need to work with those technologies. We can make sure buildings are adequately staffed so that those students who need more focused, personal attention can receive that support and attention. These seem like small steps considering the immensity of the challenge, but they all make a difference, both because the children will be healthier, but also because it says to them that we care about them enough to take these steps. The same message speaks to their educators, who are also working in these conditions.

### *Help our Children to Learn about Learning*

We can help our children learn how to learn, and to recognize the full range of what is called intelligence so that they know that too many schools value only a narrow range of their gifts. A student who can take apart an engine and put it back together, or who can dance, or paint, may be labeled a failure at school because she does not read well, but that is not an accurate reading of who she is. Students who are taking a test in a second or third language are not less intelligent than their classmates who only speak one language but score higher. Helping students to learn about themselves as learners, and to learn to appreciate their strengths while developing other areas can approach their education with confidence and appreciation for who they are. It also helps them to understand that others in the room may learn differently than they do, which is not an indication of intelligence, or worth, but a recognition that there is no one "right" way to be in the world. We can, as teachers help our students to learn to communicate with others, especially those who process the world differently than they do. It is also a reminder to us as educators that we need to teach in ways that reach our full range of learners, particularly those whose learning style does not align with our preferred teaching approaches.

### *Provide Opportunity*

We can offer students an opportunity to use their learning and developing skills in service to what matters to them. We know that students bring their worlds with them into our classrooms, and we can allow space for those worlds as part of our curriculum. When we are teaching research skills, why not allow them to research what matters to them, what they care about? When they are writing persuasive essays, why not have them write about issues that are their concerns. Why not allow them to read about what they care about most? The skills required are the same and they will be most engaged when their learning is meaningful to them.

We can respect them enough to include them in making decisions about their education. And, we can tell them the truth. We can offer students the opportunity to dig deeply into

significant aspects of our collective history, helping them learn how to conduct inquiry, to evaluate and challenge material, to seek the voices of all relevant parties and points of view with a goal of understanding what they are studying rather than memorizing it for a test. We can help them to make connections among things that have happened in the past and what is happening to them and around them today, to understand that the reason they are learning what they are learning is to gain the knowledge and skills that will enable them to make good decisions, for themselves and for the benefit of those around them.

### *Educating Educators and the School Community*

Many of us came through our certification programs with an establishment view of the educational world. It was a world that did not lead us to question why schools were the way they were, or even to really question what the goals of education might be. We were not led to question the bias of textbooks, or the orientation in social studies that led us to follow the “settlers” in their god driven journey to civilize the American continent. We did not really learn about the role of white supremacy, the origins of the standardized testing regime in the eugenics movement, or the ways in which public schools served the status quo. As a consequence, many who chose to teach were doing so in relative ignorance and have continued in that manner. I do not say that to disparage, but to recognize that we don't tend to question the way we've been taught and the content we've been taught until we experience something or someone who leads us to question, and for too many that does not happen in their K-12 and even college experiences. It's also true that the pressures on educators to follow the company line, without question, are immense. The penalties/ punishments for those who question are enough to cause business to continue, as usual in too many cases. If we want change in our schools we have to help our educators to get educated. Introducing educators to an array of materials, to critical conversations about inequality, about white supremacy and institutional racism, about the publishing industry, and about education within the context of a corporate capitalist agenda would be steps to take. And these can't be one shot workshops, but an ongoing deep dive into the underlying issues in which education is carried out, and a focus on how we can better serve our children.

At the same time, educating families and community members about the roles that schools play, and could play in educating our children and maintain (or challenging) the status quo can help them to work with educators in the schools to challenge the way things are and to work together to demand change.

This is a woefully abbreviated list of small steps that will add to larger consequences. It represents a shift in focus, from performing to keep the state off our backs to identifying our students as our highest priority and making decisions based on what will help them to become healthier and to support their learning. As I said earlier, these actions can help make lives better for students in the short run, but also may serve as confidence builders for those taking these steps, encouraging them to find ways to take more steps, larger steps, alone and with others.

### *In the Community*

There are many steps we can take outside of school once we have decided that what matters most is the health and well-being of our children. We can start by identifying the resources, the assets we have in our communities, ranging from individual talents, interests,

experiences, cultures, skills, and histories of our individuals and families and moving to the organizations, institutions, and other resources at hand. We can bring together agencies, religious organizations, social agencies, and concerned individuals to focus on issues of common concern, and bring community resources into the schools as part of the children's education, even as we bring students out into the community, to both serve the town and to learn from experiences out of the classroom. We can create or support community school type organizations or arrangements such that there are health facilities, job training programs, child care, and other social service offices on or near school campuses so that families can get what they need without running all over town. This would help families to become healthier, which in turn will support our children becoming healthier. We can take on environmental and climate issues that threaten the health and well-being of all of us, and many of these policies are well within our reach financially if we have the will to work towards them. We can prioritize the ways in which our towns and cities develop budgets, with an emphasis on what will serve the well-being and health of the people and environment.

Schools are part of the larger communities in which they reside and the more we can cooperate and collaborate to bring together our assets and ideas, the more we will be able to support our families and children to live healthier and valued lives. We can't expect schools to go it alone, nor to fix problems that are not of their making. When children come to school hungry, or without sleep, or in an emotional uproar because of what is happening in their homes or neighborhoods, they aren't coming to school ready to learn. We can organize ourselves to begin to address the inequality in our neighborhoods and communities, to address the racism and hatred that shows itself in so many aspects of our lives. Remembering the work of Wilkinson and Pickett (2009), we can't make our schools healthier, or to support our children to be healthier unless we work on reducing inequality within our communities. Schools are largely funded by property taxes, and so those communities with the largest tax bases have the most money to bring to schools, through taxes and through other community resources. The rich get richer and stay richer. It is an absurd and unequal system that perpetuates the inequality.

I want to close by returning to those honey mushrooms, those seemingly isolated clumps of fruit connected by miles of underground rhizomes that are slowly killing the forests in which they reside. There are so many clumps of these seemingly isolated issues to attend to: health care; "failing schools"; housing and homelessness; energy; military incursions; institutional racism; hunger, and all the rest. It seems like every time we turn around there is a new, overwhelming issue, a new clump of shrooms to address, and it never slows down, because underneath, connected by those fibers across the miles and continents, the underlying unjust system stays intact. Dealing with any one of them without making the connections to the larger, underlying issues is bound to be incomplete, insufficient and temporary. Having said that, it is still worth taking the smaller steps that we can take, at little cost and with the resources we have, to make the lives of the children and families in our teaching lives healthier and happier (Mathison, 2019). We can take steps to ensure that all our students and families feel welcomed, valued, and involved in the educational community. We can teach in ways that make sure all learners are supported to learn through their strengths even as they are getting support for strengthen those areas that need more attention. We can create an environment and offer a curriculum that honors, represents, and includes representative voices from multiple races, cultures, genders, and points of view, and focus on learning for understanding rather than to propagandize. And all the while, we can encourage our students and families to find allies who have a common interest in working for justice, for all of us, and help them gain the skills,

knowledge, and confidence to act on that knowledge. These small acts of organizing to serve those in front of us are also acts that build momentum and confidence for the larger movement we need in order to make necessary fundamental change, and so are acts that serve the present even as they build towards a more just and equitable future.

It seems to me that the role of educated beings is to suggest alternative frameworks, to imagine better ways of living and evolving worlds, to imagine new human relations that are free from, and hierarchies, whether they be economic, racial, sexual, political. This is the spiritual significance of education. That significance is that education, critical education is truly the practice of freedom. Freedom then is not so much a state for which one yearns, but rather an incessant struggle to remake our lives, our relations, our communities, our democratic future. (Angela Davis, 2016)

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## Appendix

In addition to cited references, I am including some readings that support or expand on what I've written here. Much of what appears in this article is taken from my book *All Children Are All Our Children*, published by Peter Lang in 2019, and appears with permission.

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## Author

Doug Selwyn has been an educator for more than thirty years, the first half as a teacher in K–12 in the Seattle Public Schools and the second half in teacher education, first at Antioch University Seattle and then for ten years as a professor of education at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh until his retirement in 2017. He received his doctorate from Seattle University in 1991 and was named Washington State social studies teacher of the year in 1990–91. He has published several books on education, most recently *All Children Are All Our Children* (Peter Lang, 2019). He lives in Greenfield, Massachusetts, with his wife, writer Jan Maher.

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