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# The Red Pencil

Convictions from Experience in Education

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### 3 Order

In a class called "The American School," which I took from Associate Dean Judson Shaplin at Harvard in the fall of 1956, we were honored by a visit from the then-Superintendent of the Boston Public Schools, Frederick Gillis. With confident pride and good humor, he extolled the virtues of his district's work in a variety of ways, one of which has stuck with me.

Gillis admired order and predictability, and he proclaimed that it was a school system's obligation to arrange for it. He told us, for example, that on any morning of any week he knew exactly what every second grade student in every Boston elementary school was studying. The regimen was all laid out, neat and tidy. All the teachers had to do was to carry it out.

Although even at that time I found this a caricature, it was nonetheless wonderfully charming, totally memorable, even down to the man's friendly stance behind the laboratory table in Mallinkrodt Chemistry Building where large Education courses in those days were conducted. Here was this unthreatening, genial, genuinely concerned superintendent who had regulated his school system in such detail that he

knew the every word and the every move assigned each of his pedagogical foot soldiers on any morning.

Caricature though this might have been, Gillis's descendants are alive and well. I met some of them at a late-1990s conference on school reform held not in chemical-smelling Mallinkrodt but in the elegant penthouse of the A. Alfred Taubman Building of Harvard's John Fitzgerald Kennedy School of Government. The sponsor was the School's Center for Business and Education, and the gathering was in honor of David Kearns, the retired CEO of Xerox and Under Secretary of Education during the first Bush administration. I was on a panel of educators and education industry executives.

All of us panelists agreed, not surprisingly, that America needed "rigorous schooling arising from high standards," in the accepted jargon of those times. The rub came with what that aphorism practically meant, whether there could and should be a single, national meaning and representation of "high standards" and who should decide these matters. The last of our speakers was the CEO of a fast-growing national education tutoring and Charter school operation business. She was clearly frustrated. "My company cannot make money if the product is not specified and national," she insisted. "Without a common curriculum, common assessments, and predictable scale we cannot succeed" (or words to that effect).

From her business perspective, there had to be *order*. Without order—standard expectations, standard products, and standard assessments, ones that would have warmed Gillis's heart—"reform" as she defined it, and as she wished to engage her company in it, could not happen. Education had to be universally predictable, what the historian David Tyack once described as a "One Best System."<sup>1</sup>

Americans have long been on a search for order, especially in communities composed of peoples from varied geographic, racial, and religious quarters. Public education has been perceived as a pivotal mechanism, often the prime mechanism, for such order, the "balance-wheel of the social machinery" of republican government, as Horace

Mann put it in 1848.<sup>2</sup> The worries expressed by our Kennedy School panel had substantial antecedents. As an historian, I long had a special interest in how Americans tried to use schools as an engine for order. As an educator, I fancied the notion of schools being "balance wheels." I understood the benevolence that undergirds this effort: we create this order for you, young person, so that you learn well and thus become free.

To all too many in our time, however, "order" in schools has in effect meant the *appearance* of order: a clearly demarcated district plan, a fully outlined step-by-step curriculum, complete with local, state, and Federal "benchmarks" for students and teachers to meet, quiet hallways, a low hum of teachers explaining things, an absence of graffiti and litter, well-groomed students, unruffled principals, a generous cup of hot coffee and a quiet, uninterrupted briefing for visitors. Most of us who have lived in schools know, however, that such an appearance is a means, and often not the best means, to the end of orderly minds.

There is plenty of noise these days about the necessity of order in schools and a frightening *silence* about what it takes to help shape orderly minds. The hard, familiar reality is that learning is both idiosyncratic (you and I do not learn everything in quite the same way and pace) and messy. Most serious learning is not nicely sequential; rather, it often spirals, with each of us circling back—if we have the opportunity—again to where we thought we were but, ideally, now better informed and thereby finding ourselves at a deeper place. It is situational, depending on immediate conditions for each of us as individuals and the appropriateness of our surroundings. The order that we seek to find in a school is a means to the end of order in each student's mind.

Over time, "order" for me has become both an essential concept in education and a pejorative. Two men profoundly influenced me in my struggle with this contradiction.

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## Ten Wise Men

The first was Charles William Eliot. I never actually met him, but I read his mail.

It would have been difficult for me to talk with him, as he died in 1926. The closest I came was through my father who, while an undergraduate at Harvard College before the First World War, remembered seeing the old gentleman—Harvard's President from 1869 to 1909—riding his bicycle in Cambridge. Eliot was easy to spot, as he had an authoritative carriage and a pronounced birthmark on his face.

I read Eliot's mail while doing the research for my doctoral thesis on the 1893 Report of the Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies of the National Educational Association (now called National Education Association, simplified as NEA) of which Eliot was Chair.<sup>3</sup> Eliot's personal and institutional papers were largely in the Harvard University archives. A chemist by training, Eliot wrote in spare and sometimes breathtakingly direct prose. His attention to the rapidly growing number of academies and high schools arose naturally from his Harvard duties, as well-prepared freshmen would become interesting and adept students at his College. By the end of the 1880s his interest in secondary education clearly deepened. He accepted the opportunity to speak to various school groups and in 1890 published an influential essay prepared for the NEA on "The Gap between the Elementary Schools and the Colleges," an essay that brought him a national audience.

The Committee of Ten emerged from conversations among university leaders who in those times dominated the politics of the NEA. Behind all this talk was the young academic entrepreneur Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia University; it was Butler who persuaded Eliot to take charge of the work, and it was at Columbia that the Committee met. The Ten included the philosopher, ex-school superintendent, and then United States Commissioner of Education William Torrey Harris, and a mix of men who were currently serving as college

presidents, college professors, or high school teachers and administrators. Two of these college presidents had earlier been teachers and secondary school principals. James Baker of the University of Colorado, for example, had been Principal of the Yarmouth, Maine, High School and of Denver High School. Richard Henry Jesse of the University of Missouri had been a high school teacher of French and mathematics. The schoolmen came from well-established institutions, ones that "prepared" students for higher education. For example, John Tetlow was the Principal of Girls' Latin School in Boston. James Cameron Mackenzie was Headmaster of Lawrenceville School in New Jersey. Oscar Robinson taught Latin and Greek at Albany High School in New York. For its time the Committee was nationally representative, and it reflected its age in that all its members were Caucasian males. These were men with clout, none more so than Eliot. Ten Wise Men.

What concerned the NEA and its Committee was the apparent *disorder* in the transition from school to college. Even age grading itself was a relatively new practice in many small high schools, and more than a few colleges felt the need (academic and financial) to provide "preparatory" courses for their incoming students. Course titles had many meanings.

The Committee was gathered to recommend order. It shrewdly drew from existing practices in the most respected places. It provided for some variety, but not too much; a student would enroll in one of four sequences—Classical, Latin-Scientific, Modern Languages, or English. It built its curriculum around the "mainline" subjects (Eliot's term) of English, mathematics, foreign language, history, and science. Thanks to Harris, it arranged for the United States Office of Education to print ten thousand copies of the complete report and to send them free to as many American high schools as possible—a "first" in what, a hundred years later, is the routinely expected frenzy of "dissemination" of a national committee's findings.

For me the quintessence of the Report resided in the four tables that the Committee crafted to express its convictions in bold and

practical terms.<sup>4</sup> What these tables assume without much discussion—indeed, with the tacit assumption that they were obvious matters—is important, for those assumptions (if not the Ten’s particular prescriptions) have become deeply embedded in the way that Americans think about and thus craft their secondary schools. The practices following on the assumptions would bring order.

Again, the Committee did not invent these notions. They were abroad in the most respected secondary schools. What the Committee did was to make them totems, ones that we employ to this day virtually without thinking. Lamentably, several simply do not survive scrutiny, and the extent that they persist radically narrows the ways that we think about, and ultimately act on behalf of, schools.

Three of these assumptions are critical.

Assumpt  
(Totems)

The first is the metaphor of school as the deliverer of skills and knowledge. We design schools as lists of offerings, like “English,” and we list what books should be read, what material should be “covered,” what topics should be tested in each area. In our time, scores of committees create these great lists of what is to be delivered, these lists now gussied up as “curriculum frameworks.” Such lists are fun to design, fascinating to second guess (“Why didn’t that committee in 1998 include more study of Islam?”), and useful in that they give some guidance to the “deliverers,” that is, the teachers.

Can't  
do it

The problem is that what we teachers deliver is nice but in the long run secondary. Ultimately, what is relevant is only what the student knows, can do, and is in the habit of doing. For the adolescent to recite a list back to us is little more than evidence that he has memorized that list. However, we wish for more: the practical and resourceful use of that which might be on the list, especially in new situations, because the culture and the economy, inconveniently, do not stand still. Virtually nowhere, either in the Report of the Committee of Ten or in most later documents, save in hortatory rhetoric, is this complex end of the thoughtful exploitation of knowledge honored.

It's  
definitely

\* A traditional curriculum of coverage stops before it is useful. The

philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said it well in 1929: “A merely well-informed man is the most useless bore on God’s earth.”<sup>5</sup> The well-informed person should have been able to *use* the information obtained, in sophisticated ways. The Committee of Ten’s curriculum stopped with a list of what was to be *delivered* in school; the Committee did not ponder what might be needed for students to *use* that knowledge when confronted by new situations.

The Committee’s approach set a pattern. The 1983 influential national report *A Nation At Risk* reflected it—and fell into the same trap as had Eliot. Its suggestions, eerily similar to those of the Ten, were cast in terms of what the schools should provide along with vague language about the intellectual qualities required by an internationally competitive workforce.

The metaphor of delivery can become a curse on educators’ thinking. It is reasonable, indeed essential, as a point of departure, but, if it is used as the only metaphor, especially the central metaphor, for school, it cheapens the enterprise.

— A second problem arises from the Committee’s use of time as the coinage of school. Classes are described in terms of minutes expended, these packaged as “periods” by the Committee, each student engaged in twenty-five to thirty-three periods per week. The more important the subject, the more minutes it deserved. The students in the first year of the Classical program, for example, had Latin five periods a week and History four periods. A second-year student in the Modern Languages track would have four periods for German or French and three for geometry.

The tables in the report of the Committee of Ten describe in detail the time that each subject would be assigned, the metric being the “numbers of classes.” A “class” existed when students and teacher were gathered for a prescribed “period” of time, usually an hour, for the former to be exposed to the subject by the latter. The Ten designed four programs, the Classical being the flagship and the English being the least demanding. In between were programs of middling demand

titled Latin-Scientific and Modern Languages. All had offerings of each of the "mainline" subjects, with different emphases, these represented by time. The fourth year (twelfth grade) of the Classical program, for example, had Latin (four periods per week), Greek (five periods), English (two periods), German or French (three periods), Chemistry (three periods), and Trigonometry and Higher Algebra or History (three periods). The second year (tenth grade) of the English program will be more familiar to early twenty-first-century readers: English (three or five periods), Geometry (three periods), Physics (three periods), Latin, German, or French (four or five periods), History (three periods), and Botany or Zoology (three periods).<sup>6</sup>

By modern standards even the English program is a substantial academic feast. However, that is not my point here. What is here to note is the coinage of time. It is time—time in "periods," minutes in class—that counts. And the time accumulated in these periods leads to "years," a dedication of academic time in school for each of successive twelve-month periods. For the Committee of Ten, every student was to complete his or her chosen program in four years.

All this is very neat, as neat as the markings of the minutes on an old-fashioned pocket watch. The damnable problem is that no one of us learns, in whatever fashion, in precisely the same period of time. As an eighth grader, my heart froze when I heard Mrs. Hitchcock, our teacher, say to me and my classmates, "It's quiz time!" She turned to the board and wrote a question. "You have ten minutes." Pause. "Now, Go!" The hearts of some of my quick-working classmates leapt with joy. Another chance to show off how good we are! For me, the set time was paralyzing. Whatever good work I produced as an early teenager emerged from slow, time-consuming toil. Timed tests were a poor demonstration of what in fact I could do.

If the end is learning by each student, the time expended to get there has to some practical degree to reflect each particular learner at each moment. Some of us are "fast" learners, in some subjects but perhaps not others, and some are "slow." The time each one takes and

when he or she takes it are major factors. On a Monday morning I may be sleepy and inattentive, but on a Wednesday I am brimming with energy. For the teacher and for the distant curriculum planner, that is terribly inconvenient. As did the Committee of Ten, schools today accommodate kids like me by creating "Honors" tracks for the apparently swift (or politically well connected) and "Regular" and "Special" tracks for the apparently less apt. Overall most schools judge their students on how well they "do" in a prescribed, consistent period of time. Indeed, in some situations "more time" is considered "unfair."

What to do? This is a solvable problem. Clarify what the student is expected to show (that is, know and use) in order to receive (say) a high school diploma. Insist, assist, and cajole every young person to work toward this target as attentively as possible. Assess the progress of each student regularly. Recognize the student's hitting of the target when in fact he hits it, and not before or far after his work entitles the hit, whatever his chronological age. None of this is arcane. I am describing what good soccer coaches and violin teachers do routinely with each of their players.

Is such practice totally impractical? No, but it is surely complex. It forces tough issues of content and quality, of not only what is to be "covered" but also how to know if a young person has made useful sense of it all. Students will have to be taken one by one, just like patients in a good hospital and candidates for drivers' licenses in sensible departments of motor vehicles. "Progress by performance" is found in a growing number of schools today and particularly in the home schooling movement. The process is necessarily cumbersome but far more sensible than the inefficient and profoundly discriminatory time-driven/age-delimited system that we have now.

I have had many opportunities over the past two decades to make the preceding argument. Few disagree with it. Few choose to follow its logic into decisive practice, however, and the worship of "time" continues in most schools today. With minutes as coins, the creation

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of "a school day" is a ready and standardizable possibility. It is superficially rational. It certainly appears orderly. It has the weight of tradition behind it: Eliot lives. However, it flies in the face of both common sense and generations of research on human learning.

A third residue in our thinking about schooling that arises in considerable part from the Report of the Committee of Ten has to do with what we have come to call subjects. What Yale College's President Jeremiah Day insisted in 1828 to be "the discipline and the furniture of the mind" has been codified over time into spheres of knowledge, these in turn evolving into topics, and thence into sequences of topics.<sup>7</sup>

We still struggle with this matter of subjects—perhaps better described as a *structure of knowledge* or *disciplines*—as much as did President Day, perhaps more so as our generation's expectations for a competent and principled citizen are broader and deeper than was the case while John Quincy Adams was president. By the 1890s, however, there was a consensus among academics about what were the main lines at least of the furniture of the mind. These lines developed widely accepted titles: English. Classical and Modern Foreign Languages. Mathematics. Science. History. Geography. Most were broken down into subspecialties: for example, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Botany, Physiology, Arithmetic, Algebra, Geometry, Trigonometry, Higher Algebra. In due course each of these was reduced to lists of topics and texts. These were folded into sequences of classes to be delivered to the students.

Such codification makes sense. There is order in knowledge, and our pursuit of the shape of that order has been never ending. Like most deeply important things in our world, however, the codifying of knowledge is in constant movement, affected both by new research findings and by cultural tastes. If one takes scholarship seriously, there can never be, alas, One Best Stable Predictable Course of Study Forever.

The "main lines" identified by the Committee of Ten (and regularly given fresh oxygen by such groups as the 1983 *Nation At Risk* committee) are not necessarily the best, much less the only pattern

that leads most efficiently toward the discipline and furniture of adolescent minds.

Just what, for example, is "English"? A list of "good" books to be mastered? An ability to write clearly and, with special effort, some grace? If this is so, might it be true that "History" is also a list of "good" books and an ability to express thoughts about them and their stories? Perhaps. There is analysis required in both English and History. Of course. Is there analysis required in Science? Of course. One must observe carefully, measure, weigh, and ponder systematically. But don't you do just that in English and History? Of course. So, why separate the subjects? The binomial theorem, *King Lear*, and the Battle of Hastings are very different phenomena. Does the way I think in each of the three profoundly differ from that of the others? Yes, but perhaps in ways that fall differently from what is reflected in the main line secondary school curriculum.

The definition of the curriculum is all the more complicated, as scholars in every field of serious knowledge have persuasively argued for most of the past three decades.<sup>8</sup> The interaction of individual minds and hearts and expressions of reality, whether the television pictures of New York on September 11, 2001, or reports of the unraveling of the human genome, provokes deep and often chaotic, even irrational, reactions. Presumably schooling is in large part about valuing the rational and its ways. How those ways are developed in each young citizen is far more complex than represented in the routines of most schools. A particular mischief is embedded in the metaphor of "coverage," and most school, district, and state curricula compound that error by asking that more be "covered" than can be to meet a worthy standard for all but the most dutiful and favored students.

Nonetheless, *on paper* the standard curriculum gives the impression of order, even if the reality is far more complex. The blunt assurance on these matters provided by the Committee of Ten and its membership of influential establishment authorities gave it political and professional authority. Then and now, however, the codification

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not on page

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a school

of "subjects" followed by lists of matter to cover, books to read, and skills to develop obscures the complexity of the task of teaching. It makes the educator's work appear far simpler than it actually is, and it leads to a course of study that, for most students, is shallow. In an ironic and curious way, the authorities must surely know that it is shallow—the evidence is all around us—which makes the costs even more poignant.

None of this lessens the contribution of the Committee of Ten. Charles William Eliot's relentless work reflected both arrogance and imagination. The arrogance was reflected in the certainty with which he asserted all sorts of educational "truths," most of these far beyond the scope of his personal discipline as a chemist. The imagination was reflected by his recognition that little in the way of reform would emerge from merely an essay on the state of secondary education, however brilliant. What was needed were specific marching orders. The Ten provided them in the four tables, especially Table 4, which set forth four related programs from which high schools could choose.

Later reports, particularly the NEA's 1918 Committee on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, appeared to have jettisoned key parts of the Ten's proposal, largely by the introduction of more "practical" subjects.<sup>9</sup> This is undoubtedly true in some respects, but what Eliot's successors did not challenge were the key ways in which Americans should comprehend schooling. The metaphor of delivery, the coinage of time, and the reduction of learning to discrete "subjects" persisted—even if the subject was Cosmetology.

Eliot had kept it simple, had kept it practical, had made it specific right down to the numbers of "periods" a "subject" would be taught on a school day. Copy one of these four programs, he implied, and you will not go wrong. Overworked school boards, superintendents, and principals all across the country, overwhelmed by a sudden interest in schooling beyond the rudiments and buttressed by an economy that both yielded new tax revenues and lessened the need for adoles-

cents' labor, gratefully cleaved at least to the structure of the blueprint, decade upon decade.

### One Wise Man

Charles William Eliot's arrogance and imagination have always intrigued me. During the 1970s and early 1980s I met those qualities again, this time in flesh and blood, in the person of Mortimer J. Adler.

Adler, a crusty and controversial public intellectual, delivered to me an invitation via a Phillips Academy student of mine, John Van Doren. Would I join the Paideia Group?

I had heard of Adler and had read a bit of what he had written, but I had only the vaguest sense of the man and his passions, much less the Paideia Group. I knew that he was living in Chicago and was associated with the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, as were several adult Van Dorens. John was in a senior History seminar that I was teaching; John's father had joined Adler in a "group" to discuss, debate, and recommend a future shape of American public education. Adler carefully chose the word *Paideia*: it came, he told us, "from the Greek *pais, paidos*: the upbringing of the child . . . In an extended sense, the equivalent of the Latin *humanitas* . . . signifying the general learning that should be the possession of all human beings."<sup>10</sup> I signed up.

Most of the Group's meetings, each of a couple of days, were held at the Wye Plantation of the Aspen Institute in Maryland. Adler had assembled a group of academic luminaries but perhaps felt that it was a bit short on people who had some sense of the realities of the schools. Among others, I was to be one of those people.

Adler was in the chair, figuratively and physically. His principal sparring partners were Jacques Barzun, Clifton Fadiman, James O'Toole of the University of Southern California, and three Van Dorens—John, Charles, and Geraldine—Dennis Gray of the Council for Basic Education, Theodore Puck of the Eleanor Roosevelt Institute for Cancer Research, and Otto Bird of the University of Notre Dame. School

people were members of the Group, but their attendance was spotty due to their high-pressure jobs: Superintendents Alonzo Crim of Atlanta and Ruth Love of Chicago, and Nicholas Caputi, the Principal of Skyline High School in Oakland, California. Two college presidents were included, Leon Botstein of Bard and Adele Simmons of Hampshire. In all, we numbered twenty-two.

The talk circled again and again over familiar ground. Adler kept pushing us back to the ideas of the three men to whom the report was ultimately to be dedicated: Horace Mann, John Dewey, and Robert Hutchins. We talked and argued, often over minutiae, with the most explosive disagreements being between the idealist Adler, who believed with the fervor of Mann in universal public education, and the elitist Barzun who (though he never put it as bluntly) felt that both Adler and Mann were naive. Only slowly did I realize that the Group was not to write a report. Adler was. Our function was to provoke Adler, thereby deepening his ideas.

The result was a volume, published in 1982, of fewer than eighty pages. It was prefaced by simple assertions. "We are politically a classless society," Adler wrote. "Our citizenry as a whole is our ruling class. We should, therefore, be an educationally classless society."

He went on: "We should have a one-track system of schooling, not a system of two or more tracks, only one of which goes straight ahead while others shunt the young off onto sidetracks not headed toward the goals our society opens to all. The innermost meaning of social equality is *substantially the same quality of life for all*. That calls for: *the same quality of schooling for all*." (The italics are Adler's.)

"We must end the hypocrisy in our national life. We cannot say out of one side of our mouth that we are for democracy and all its free institutions including, preeminently, political and civil liberty for all; and out of the other side of our mouth, say that only some of the children—fewer than half—are educable for full citizenship and a full human life. . . . There are no unteachable children. There are only schools and teachers and parents who fail them."<sup>11</sup>

*The Paideia Proposal* was appropriately subtitled *An Educational Manifesto*. Adler wanted it to be an abrupt and compelling declaration, one that would catch the imagination of Americans by going back to democracy's first principles. Like Eliot before him, he wanted it to be simple enough to be practical and sophisticated enough to reflect reality. There was far more flourish to Adler's prose than that which had emerged from the Committee of Ten. The rhetoric was worthy of an oration. Again like Eliot, Adler bristled with confidence.

Once again a chart emerged, this one divided into three columns reflecting neither students' ages nor subjects of the curriculum (as had the 1893 Report). Rather, they represented "three distinct modes of teaching and learning, rising in successive graduations of complexity and difficulty from the first to the twelfth year." All three were deemed "essential" for every child. There was to be the same course of study for all, "course of study" being implied by the contents of the three columns.

Column One denoted the "acquisition of organized knowledge . . . by means of Didactic Instruction," including lectures, textbooks, and "other aids" in three grand areas, "Language, Literature, and the Fine Arts . . . Mathematics and Natural Science . . . [and] History, Geography, and the Social Studies." So far, he more or less trod the paths of the Committee of Ten.

Column Two was identified as the "Development of Intellectual Skills—Skills of Learning . . . by means of Coaching, Exercises, and Supervised Practice . . . in the operations of . . . Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening . . . Calculating, Problem-Solving . . . Observing, Measuring, Estimating . . . Exercising Critical Judgment." Here Adler was on ground little covered by Eliot.

Column Three—Adler's special joy—dealt with the "enlarged understanding of ideas and values . . . by means of . . . maieutic or Socratic questioning and active participation . . . in the . . . discussion of books (not textbooks) and other works of art and involvement in artistic activities e.g., Music, Drama, Visual Arts." Adler would include

a specific jab at textbooks—he favored original texts—and would add a word like “maieutic,” one that sent me tumbling to the dictionary. (It means, according to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, “Of or relating to the aspect of the Socratic method that induces a respondent to formulate latent concepts through a dialectic or logical sequence of questions.”)<sup>12</sup> Adler reveled in the intellectual ping-pong over ideas arising from specific texts. He must have despaired of the often rootless debates in which his group engaged.

Two more Paideia books followed. *Paideia Problems and Possibilities: A Consideration of Questions Raised by the Paideia Proposal*, published in 1983, was his restless answer to his critics. *The Paideia Program: An Educational Syllabus*, which appeared in 1984, was a collection of “how-to” essays, including a piece on coaching that I had written. Some of us pursued the Paideia ideas actively, none more than Dennis Gray, who trained hundreds of school teams in how to run a Socratic seminar. Although Adler was never successful in getting a whole university school of education to take the group’s ideas seriously, a few picked up the matter and are still hard at work in Paideia centers today.<sup>13</sup> I used the Paideia work in 1984 as an organizing arrangement of ideas in *Horace’s Compromise*.

Sadly, while the Paideia Group’s ideas flickered for some months, they never had the staying power anticipated for them by Albert Shanker, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, who predicted that the *Proposal* “would dominate education discussion for the next decade.”<sup>14</sup> Adler’s flinty personality had something to do with it. He had little patience with what he believed to be sloppy-thinking folks. Even though the text was deliberately short and blunt, it never attracted the interest of book lovers’ discussion groups or education activists. The Group was composed neither of nationally known public educators nor a person with political leverage such as Eliot had in William Torrey Harris, the U.S. Commissioner of Education. The ideas did not fit neatly into any Education school program.

Nonetheless, Adler’s chart, and the ideas it adumbrated, remains

important. It was a provocation, not a road map. It insisted that school people *think*; it did not tell them exactly what to do in their schools with that thought. It was not something to “put into place,” in the easy jargon of our time. It did not frontally address schools’ problems as educators defined those problems. Actually, it added to those educators’ burdens by asking them to ponder anew and deeply about the direction of their public enterprise. It was, thereby, dismissed as impractical.

All that being said, Adler was closer to the heart of the matter of serious schooling in a democracy than had Eliot been. Although it did not specify any contrary view, the *Proposal* did not accept and use education’s bad habits and faulty metaphors as had the Committee of Ten. Rather, Adler implied that thoughtful educators would inevitably recognize the costs of the metaphor of “delivery” as the only manner of teaching, of the rigidity of an institution constructed primarily by the allocation of time, and of the distortion of scholarship arising from a secondary school curriculum broken into impermeable academic subjects.

Adler deserved better. The education establishment, barely reading—much less pondering—his work, let him down. He was dismissed as a prickly, out-of-touch, and narrowly “classical” (in the pejorative) philosopher. Or, more charitably, perhaps the establishment was fully, but quietly, aware of the implications of his manifesto. Much would have to change, especially the very way that educators defined teaching and learning. Such would require a revolution, not only in practice but also in the way a democracy views its duties toward its young. Such a move would, thereby, create disorder.

## Order in Theory

The word “order” serves as both verb and noun.

As a verb it means to issue a command and as such is an active word. It shapes. It compels. It presses into arrangement. “I order you to wash the car.”

reflection

As a noun, "order" is composed. It describes. It offers, again more or less, a shape. It just sits there, however, sometimes implying as much as limning what it specifically represents, like the balance reflected in a Hokusai print. The viewer makes what active sense of it that he wants. But before he acts, he has to think about it; he has to describe for himself precisely what to do.

The Committee of Ten was active. Its order was a verb. Here, the members said, is in detail what you should do. Get on with it.

The Paideia Group was passive. Its order was a noun. *The Paideia Proposal* described a human condition, a way to categorize and thereby to understand what it means to learn and to teach. The Group's proposals were a set of ideas, a suggestive arrangement rather than a strategy and a cluster of specified tactics. *The Paideia Program* that followed presented some images of what the ideas meant, but these carried no expectation of structural adoption. They were meant only as provocative examples.

Charles Eliot's time required a verb. Influential people believed both that Americans wanted many more high schools and that the existing institutions were ill designed. Accordingly, the Committee provided a plan. That plan caught hold, with a vengeance that the members could not have foreseen. Not all of what the Ten recommended survived, or was even faithfully represented, but the shape of the age-graded, time-driven, subject-described program, driven by a metaphor of delivery, took hold with extraordinary speed.<sup>15</sup> The times called for a verb. The Committee of Ten perceptively responded.

Adler's tactic was more oblique. *The Paideia Proposal*, he recommended, is a disciplined way to think about learning and teaching. Read it carefully. Create a seminar and debate, with all the constructive ferocity that would warm Socrates' heart. Only then—when you fully understand it both in its complexity and in your own appropriate terms—go forth and do something with it.

Unfortunately, Adler's time was indifferent to a proposal that pre-

sented itself as a noun. Late twentieth-century educational leaders appeared to think neither very hard nor very long about the substance of their work. Influential folks believed that they already knew what was needed and that Americans had to get on with that. They wanted a Plan, a System, something to "put into place."

Contemporary critics of education are apt to use adjectives like "soft" and "hard," "mindless" and "rigorous." Interestingly, both the 1893 *Report* and the 1982 *Proposal* have usually been categorized in the latter group—reports that are demanding and "academic." Such assignment is proper as both reports put serious and informed intelligence at the center of American democracy and of a thriving economy. The difference between the reports resides in the implication of each for "order." One is a detailed command for action; the other is an outline for rigorous reflection that would lead to actions arising from an affected community. As an American, the former distresses me; "order" in this sense of *imposition* is a pejorative. Order in the sense implied by Adler is both wise and essential.

I believe, then, for our times the Adlerian approach to "order" is to be favored. It is demanding; but it stresses the importance of free minds, of individual responsibility and creativity, and of the power of true democracy to create goodness—including "good" schools—from a process of invention rather than a predigested, imposed plan for education. Although Adler himself was among the most assured, and thus arrogant, of men, his plan reflects a trust in the People, in their necessary obligation to decide their own fates, which is poignant and profoundly democratic. Such faith is in short supply today, to democracy's peril.

Most participants at that late 1990s Kennedy School conference showed little interest in such matters. The statement by the CEO who needed standardized routines to shape her business was balefully crass. The processes of serious learning would be trivialized, reduced to uniform and predictable routines that could produce evidentiary test

scores. Those routines were the basis of order; visible, predictable, standardized order was necessary, and the existence of that order presented a workable "market."

Further, most of the Kennedy School participants assumed without much thought that school was the primary, even the only, place where children could learn and that school would have a universal shape. Education began and ended with schooling, something that happened in a familiar, predictable, resource-requiring, and revenue-generating place. The conference unwittingly represented the poverty of turn-of-the-twenty-first-century thinking by American leaders on what a powerful education, an education worthy of a free people, can and should be.

### Order by Mediation

Many Americans think hard about football. Most principals of most large high schools have to attend carefully—some very, very carefully—to their football teams, whether they want to or not. Most tax- and tuition-paying publics want victories.

Within days of the opening of school in my first year as a principal I deliberately wandered to the fields where Andover's team was practicing. Standing alone watching his boys work out was the school's storied coach Steve Sorota. I joined him. He took no notice. I took a stab at communication, trying to sound like an aficionado of Steve's complicated craftsmanship. "Have you a likely quarterback here?" No Sorota response, not even a slight bit of body language suggesting that he knew I was there. I waited, and then slunk away. "Nice to see you, Coach." No response.

Sorota turned out to be a warm friend. My mistake was even to suggest with a dumb question that I might invade his turf. He made sure that I knew exactly where that turf started and where it stopped. I learned to respect that.

Like most team sports and in spite of its messy expression, football is a carefully ordered game. Perhaps there are lessons here about "order" that transcend that sport.

Football has very specific rules and referees to enforce them. These rules set clear boundaries. However, within these boundaries each team is allowed—nay, expected—to devise its own best strategy and tactics. Although there are patterns, those tactics differ by team, even by year and by week.

Sorota had to build a program with the kids he was given. Tactics would differ if the quarterback was experienced and able to throw long and accurately or if he was green and equipped with an unsteady arm. Day to day, matters changed. A boy was ill or injured. A boy was failing a course and had to take a makeup test. Some boys did stupid things and were benched by a dean. Sorota had to improvise, often play by play. He had absolute authority to do so. For play on the field, no approval by the principal or any other interested party was necessary nor tolerated by a man with the experience and pride of Steve Sorota.

Nonetheless, for Steve there still were those general rules. When an official made what appeared to be a close call about a breach of a rule, Sorota or his deputies could contest that decision and ask for review. Professional teams have reduced this right to excruciating precision, with reruns of televised tape and time allotted for its painstaking review.

At that same time, the fans expected that the coach and his team would do what they had to do—in whatever way seemed best within the rules—to reach the highest level of play. Variety within the rules was a highly rewarded virtue. Engaged people will endlessly argue that football's rules are too numerous or not numerous enough, reasonable or unreasonable. Overall, however, football enthusiasts applaud a system of minimal, sensible rules and admire resourceful, original teams and their coaches.

If in football, why not in education? Why not a framework of rules,

not  
to  
involve  
to  
authority

Schools too

a set of referees (who fully expect that their judgments could be challenged), and an expectation that each school, given its particular situation—its size, its students, its faculty, its funding, and the mores of its community—would be designed and would function in its own best way? Principals would be like Steve Sorota: proud and experienced people who had and fully expected to keep their independence—albeit within overarching, demonstrably sensible but minimal rules.

The ways and means of providing social services and the organization of competitive football have a great deal not in common. Yet both face similar issues: the need for an orderly, fair common ground and the correlative need for local authority and wise diversity. Football, in its tiny little world, appears to have settled on a tolerated balance. Public services like schooling are nowhere close to a comparable balance and, indeed, exhibit little talk and less action about it.

In the late 1970s while I was at Andover and continually concerned about what should be the public role of a private school, I came upon an approach in the form of the argument by Peter L. Berger and Richard John Neuhaus in their short book *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy*. The metaphor of *mediation* struck me—and still strikes me—as one constructive way to fill the silence in public policy for public education.

The Berger/Neuhaus argument, published in 1977, was simply outlined: “We suggest that the modern welfare state is here to stay, indeed that it ought to expand the benefits it provides—but that *alternative mechanisms are possible to provide welfare-state services*.”<sup>16</sup> They went on to recognize the existence of an “anti-government, anti-bigness mood [in the society] . . . impersonality, unresponsiveness, and excessive interference, as well as the perception of rising costs and deteriorating service.” Their basic concept was the creation of “mediating structures” defined as “*institutions standing between the individual in his private life and the large institutions of public life*.”<sup>17</sup> Mediating referees, perhaps? I wondered.

\* Mediating Structures: Petal Individual - Faculty

Democratic Disobedience

Their argument rested on three propositions. First: “Mediating structures are essential for a vital democratic society.” To my educator’s eye this is crucial: there must be a constructive balance between family specialness and collective democratic and economic needs.

Second: “Public policy should protect and foster mediating structures.” That is, the state should not be passive about mediating structures that give life to private values. Rather, the state should actively assist their creation and vigorously protect them.

Third: “Whenever possible, public policy should utilize mediating structures for the realization of social purposes.” That is, autonomous “street-level” private institutions (meaning places in charge of their own practice) can and should shoulder public obligations.<sup>18</sup>

Later in their essays, Berger and Neuhaus write bluntly of the schooling situation. “Most modern societies have in large part disenfranchised the family in the key area of education. The family becomes, at best, an auxiliary agency of the state, which at age five or six coercively takes over a child’s education.” They address the private school issue: “Of course there are private schools, but here class becomes a powerful factor. Disenfranchisement falls most heavily on lower-income parents who have little say in what happens to their children in school. This discrimination violates a fundamental human right, perhaps the most fundamental human right—the right to make a world for one’s children. . . . Our purpose is not to deprive upper-income families of the choices they have. . . . Our purpose is to give those choices to those who do not now have decision-making power.”<sup>19</sup>

Why?

As I read these last words, I recalled Edward Banfield’s argument that there are some families—his “lower class”—that live in such disorganization that concern for the educational future of their offspring is far from their minds. Given options, many of those families would not know how or whether to take advantage of them. Although I feel that Berger and Neuhaus are, therefore, somewhat naive on this point, I still believe that the philosophical heart of their argument is correct. Disorganized and desperate families are a reality, but their existence

neither trumps policies that are right for healthier families nor bespeaks any conclusion that state and private effort, imagination, and caring could not help such beleaguered families find some decent stability.

Berger and Neuhaus turn to policies that provide practical school choices for all families. They point out that "monopolies endowed with coercive powers do not change easily. The best way to induce change is to start breaking up the monopoly—to empower people *to shop elsewhere*. We trust the ability of low-income parents to make educational decisions more wisely than do the professionals who now control their children's education."<sup>20</sup>

There are ways beyond direct management wherein the state effectively remains a monopoly. A state, for example, could decide not to operate schools at all but still control the remaining so-called independent institutions with a blizzard of regulations, mandatory curriculum frameworks, and universal standardized examinations. The state thereby asserts that it knows, in substantial detail, what is best for the child but lets private entities carry out these centralized, standardized orders.

I doubt that such an omniscient state is what Berger and Neuhaus had in mind. The state—the People collectively—should retain some outer limits, such as decent, safe physical arrangements and programs that assure at least literacy, numeracy, and civic understanding, but, in the name of fundamental American freedom, it should allow "private" (family) interests substantial room to shape their own school communities. This requires restraint and good will on both sides, and it is this good will, this trust, as Deborah Meier has repeatedly reminded Americans, that is the primary fuel allowing mediating institutions to form and flourish.<sup>21</sup>

Berger and Neuhaus close their essays with an appeal for pluralism. "E Pluribus Unum" is not a zero-sum game. That is, the *unum* is not to be achieved at the expense of the *plures*. To put it positively, the national purpose indicated by the *unum* is precisely to sustain the *plures*. Of course there are tensions, and accommodations are neces-

sary . . . such tensions are not to be eliminated but are to be welcomed as the catalysts of more imaginative accommodations."<sup>22</sup>

One might conclude that Berger and Neuhaus were merely giving a fancy name to "choice" among schools, at least for those who can afford it. I believe that there is more to the idea. "Choice" can imply passivity. If you happen to want another school for your children than the one down the street, it is there, but you have to have the wit and energy and often the money to find it, and to get your youngster enrolled.

"Mediation" is a more active word. It connotes a process, a systematic—an orderly—means of relating and balancing the legitimate privacy of the family and the equally legitimate expectations of the People in general, represented by the state. A mediating institution would be Janus-faced, looking at once to the *unum* and the *plurum*, and balancing their claims.

The Berger/Neuhaus idea triggered others. For example, at the initiative of the American Enterprise Institute, which had sponsored the Berger/Neuhaus essays, David S. Seeley followed up with *Education Through Partnership: Mediating Structures and Education*, a careful and provocative analysis of what "mediation" might be within public education.<sup>23</sup> John E. Coons and Stephen D. Sugarman examined the legal and constitutional issues of "choice" in education in *Education by Choice: The Case for Family Control*.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, the disinterest in and often scathing hostility to these ideas by leaders in public education during the 1970s and 1980s kept their ideas at the margins of the advanced training of school leaders and off the agendas of professional meetings and school boards.

Signs of a change in popular attitudes, however, were apparent in the 1990s following on "best seller" status for David Osborne and Ted Gaebler's *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit Is Transforming the Public Sector*.<sup>25</sup> Osborne and Gaebler repeatedly use education as an example of a public enterprise stuck in frustrating mediocrity. In this new context, the late 1960s ideas of competition

and "choice" for families reemerged, though now often cloaked in the mantra of a new conception of management and reflecting the furious assault on the existing system first provoked by the 1983 *Nation At Risk* report. The Berger/Neuhaus idea of new structures to forward families' "empowerment" was still alive.

### Order as the Movement of Money

Money—who has it and how does it move—explains most of governmental policy. To put it baldly, richer Americans have most of the money and most of the say in how it moves. That is how a capitalist democracy works. The extent to which the People generally wish, for whatever reasons—charity or self-interest (stable communities, educated workforce, social tranquility)—to share the country's wealth is the extent to which the poor receive a worthy education, among other things, at public expense. How the money is to be spent in the service of the poor is a perpetual wrangle, the nature of which—even the language of which—provides a dependable barometer of Americans' priorities.

In 1965 I was asked by the Johnson administration to join a White House Task Force On The Cities to advise the President on policies to address what appeared to be growing chaos in our urban areas. The Congress had such a group under way, chaired by Senator Paul Douglas of Illinois. The Douglas effort was high profile and likely to nettle Johnson. The White House wanted a low-profile group quietly to plow the same ground and provide the President's staff with ideas and evidence independent of the Congress's work. I was as surprised as I was flattered to be asked to serve. Save for some research and writing that I was doing for a project led by Professor James Q. Wilson at Harvard on what he called "the metropolitan enigma," I was a neophyte on these matters.

Paul Ylvisaker was the Task Force's chairman. Paul traveled over two jobs during the Task Force's tenure, serving first as New Jersey's

Commissioner for Community Affairs and later as a staff member at the Ford Foundation. Other members of our group of eleven included Ivan Allen, the mayor of Atlanta, Edwin Berry of the Chicago Urban League; John Dunlop from Harvard's Department of Economics; and Ezra Ehrenkrantz of the Building Systems Development Corporation of California. Our focus was on four discrete topics: neighborhood centers, home ownership by the poor, the prospect of an Urban Development Corporation, and landlord-tenant relations. Schooling played a peripheral role. The Task Force was expected to get quickly into the sorts of details that could shape legislation. For most of the meetings, I necessarily acted the dutiful slightly-over-his-head student in a seminar taught by a clutch of highly experienced professors.

A theme that increasingly informed all our discussions (usually held very discreetly in the Old Executive Office Building) was that we should give "the poor" substantially more control over their lives. More services for their benefit from government was part of it, but equally important was how those services might be deployed—how the money was to move—in ways that were respectful of the recipients. For example, we recommended that the Neighborhood Centers' programs "be shaped from the standpoint of the individual's needs and not from a particular supplying agency's standpoint."<sup>26</sup> We made frequent references to various "voucher" schemes for housing and other services, especially those being discussed by the economist Milton Friedman. We talked often of how to get a modicum of significant initiative into the hands of poor families.

All this reminded me at the time that I was the beneficiary of the country's largest and most ambitious educational voucher scheme, the so-called G.I. Bill of Rights. Those of us who had served x months in the active military could apply for y months of tuition support for our education in federally approved schools, colleges, and universities. My twenty-two months of active duty translated—as long as I worked at full tilt—into the tuition for my entire graduate program at Harvard. With a growing family, Nancy and I knew just how crucial this was.

the poor  
move  
concern  
of or own  
lines

GI Bill  
Rights

← from ?

asset - school (community)

Without this federal program, my career in education would have been very different.

The G.I. Bill let me choose my graduate program, as long as it was on an approved list. The government sent the money (in response to Harvard's "vouchers" on my behalf) to the Comptroller of the university. My responsibility was to sign in with the Comptroller each month, to pass all my courses, and to keep my nose clean. Here was, in fact, an example of "mediation." The state provided the resources as long as I chose a governmentally approved institution; the institution provided the program of its own design; I provided the authorities at that approved institution with evidence of my progress. Here was a public end (an educated workforce) and a private means (I chose a university that had designed a program that gained approval from the state).

If this governmental device worked for me, was there an analogous program that might serve poor children? I worked up an idea for the Task Force that I deliberately called the Poor Children's Bill of Rights. Although it played no part in our recommendations to the President, our charge falling in somewhat different channels, I kept working on it and, ultimately and with the help of a Harvard graduate student, Phillip Whitten, published its outline in *Psychology Today* in August 1968.

Whitten and I summarized the idea: "Ours is a simple proposal: to use education—vastly improved and powerful education—as the principal vehicle for upward mobility. While a complex of strategies must be designed to accomplish this, we wish here to stress one: a program to give money *directly* to poor children (through their parents) to assist in paying for their education. By doing so we might create significant competition among schools serving the poor (and thus improve the schools) and meet in an equitable way the extra costs of educating the poor."<sup>27</sup>

Put differently, if the vouchers were *added* to existing per-pupil revenues, if these vouchers were large enough, and if intradistrict

movement were allowed (as with Boston's METCO program, for example), a financial incentive would exist for all sorts of schools in the cities and in the suburbs to take poor kids. The fancy suburban high school could both salve its soul and add to its discretionary funds by admitting children from low-income families (should those families choose to apply). We larded the article with apt references across the political spectrum, from Paul Goodman to Milton Friedman. Our argument reflected the late 1960s priority of "racial and social class mixing" and a belief that a solid education is the necessary platform for a move out of poverty.

Upon publication, the article attracted some notice but quickly disappeared in the avalanche of news following on the murders of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy and on the expanding and increasingly unpopular Vietnam War. Rereading this article in 2003, it seems naive in its simplicity and optimism. Nonetheless, the idea persists. The Poor Children's Bill of Rights was specifically mentioned by Lamar Alexander in his run for the presidency in 2000 and continues to pop up occasionally. While the old details are now inapt, the notion of money following the child is still on the table. The argument has been distorted, however, by proposals that set the cash levels so low that they provide no incentive whatever save for certain nonpublic schools and thereby becoming an effective means of funneling moneys primarily into the private, religious, and for-profit sectors. For many advocates of truly public education, "voucher" has become, not surprisingly, a vile word, and the idea behind it a tactic for capturing public education for the private/religious and for-profit sectors.

It deserves better. Giving money to families is respectful; having bureaucracies tell them what to do in great detail is disrespectful. Competition among schools for dollars puts a premium on a faculty's imagination and performance; a lack of competition allows what is comfortable but inefficient to persist. The device *mediates*, giving families (private lives) and the schools (public institutions) each a part of the action. The practice mirrors the freedoms absolutely expected and

too  
low

respects

carefully used by wealthier families, choosing where to live (often on the basis of the reputation of the local public schools) and whether to patronize a private school. If this works well for wealthier folks, why not for everybody?

There is a place for the money-following-the-child strategy in liberal as well as conservative politics. Indeed, for me that is the idea's particular strength. The tricky issue is how to arrange for it in an equitable and practical manner. To attach choice onto the existing systems is likely to be difficult. Perhaps the entire way that public schools are governed and financed, for rich and poor alike, needs clear-eyed examination.

### Reordering the System

In 1997 I was asked by Frank Newman, then the President of the Education Commission of the States, to serve with sixteen others on the National Commission on Governing America's Schools. ECS is a not-for-profit creature of state governments, a think tank and convening authority serving the states with issues that transcend state borders. A rethinking of public school "governance" was such a timely task. The Commission's conclusions were to help policy makers and aid "the general public to make informed decisions about how to improve governance."

The Commission was co-chaired by Governor Paul Patton of Kentucky and James Renier, the recently retired CEO of Honeywell Corporation. Members were drawn from many quarters—teachers' unions (Adam Urbanski of Rochester, New York, and the American Federation of Teachers), academia (Lisbeth Schorr of the Harvard School of Public Health), state legislatures (Luther Olsen of Wisconsin), state and city Boards of Education (Thomas Davis of Missouri and Donald McAdams of Houston, Texas), and city school districts (Anthony Alvarado of San Diego, California). It had a slightly right-of-center tilt (reflecting the political temperature at the time), and it included David

Osborne, one of the authors of *Reinventing Government*. A key consultant was Paul Hill of the University of Washington and the RAND Corporation, who had written widely on matters of educational governance and control.

The Commission met in several venues and depended heavily on its members working over a series of drafts. Its report of some thirty pages, plus charts and graphs, was issued at Williamsburg, Virginia, in November 1999. All the Commission members—demonstrably a varied group—had signed it.<sup>28</sup>

The Commission proposed two "governance models"; however, both models had much in common. Each called for "strengthening, not discarding the public system of education." The fact that we had to start with that premise says worlds about the education policy climate in the late 1990s.

Next, however, came "allowing the money to follow the child to the school where he or she attends." This suggested budgetary authority moving downward, and the Commission expanded this by "granting individual schools control over their personnel and budget." What followed was "giving parents more choice about where their children attend school" and "providing good information on student, teacher and school performance for parents and the community." All schools were to be "of choice" and largely self-governing. "Redefining labor/management relations" and "focusing accountability systems on improved student achievement" followed. Precariously dangling at the end was a wan wish for "strengthening local school boards."<sup>29</sup>

What struck me then and now was not that any of these ideas was new but that this quite diverse late twentieth-century Commission had unanimously agreed to it. Furthermore, ECS is a very mainstream organization. "Choice," and thereby competition among schools, and decentralized budget control now appeared to be thoroughly centrist ideas.

In some quarters, the report was considered dangerous. The National School Boards Association, for example, arranged for substantial

numbers of well-briefed members to attend our Williamsburg presentation and to voice strenuous, coordinated opposition. They accurately recognized that the Commission was threatening their existing powers and dignities.

Like most such efforts, the report was submitted, caused some ripples of interest, and then largely disappeared. ECS has kept at the work, however, providing some technical support to states wanting to try out these ideas. From my vantage point, the Report was a telling piece of evidence of how fragile the confidence in the status quo is even among a group of key "insiders."

Shortly thereafter, I had an opportunity to see how such ideas played out with a younger generation. Three of us serving as "visiting" teachers at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, offered an education policy course, largely to undergraduates, in public school governance. My two colleagues were Jay Kaufman, an historian by training and a long-term member of the Massachusetts House of Representatives, and Sarah Cannon Holden, an attorney, mediator, and longtime leader in local government.

Jay arranged for a succession of state officials and experts to join our three-hour-long evening seminars. We drowned the students in books, including the ECS report, and asked them, in teams, to come up with a plan for the "governance" of a hypothetical county school district about which we gave them extensive data. (The county was, in fact, Massachusetts' Middlesex County, with the data simplified and rounded off.) Time and again the student teams saw the nub of the problem to be a balance among the rights of the People collectively (the State), the authority of each specific school, and the reasonable expectations of families. Their designs, formally presented orally and in written form to us and to some outsiders whom we had persuaded to be jurors, largely reflected a new balance of authority between central government, local communities, and families.

Who had the right to decide what is to be in the mind of each child was, for most of these college undergraduates, a question of funda-

mental importance. For them, centralized authority had neither all the answers nor the right to impose its own. It was not just ECS's experts and active politicians who sensed much wrong with our inherited top-down system of public schools.

## Order and Authority

The 1893 Committee of Ten, Boston's Superintendent Gillis with his 1956 systemwide day-by-day directives to teachers, and the Federal No Child Left Behind Education Act of 2001 all reflect a belief in the need for order in schooling that arises from a detailed, uniform, imposed set of goals and procedures. All thereby tacitly reflected limited trust in school-level professionals to make not only major decisions but most minor ones as well.

There is irony here.

As with most professional work, the quality of a school is no better than the quality—the authority—of its on-the-line professionals, its teachers and administrators.

Most strong people only take and stay in jobs that entrust them with important things. That is, they—the Micheles, Edythes, and Phils of the world—expect to be free to exert their professional authority in ways they judge best serve their particular students at a particular time.

The more that higher authorities impose standardized procedures and demand that school-level people adhere to them, especially when these procedures have demonstrably limited merit in their particular situations, the greater is the likelihood that strong people will not join the profession or, if already in it, stay in the work but a short time—Peace Corps volunteer-like—even when the allure of working with children is an extraordinarily powerful one.

Learning and teaching is inescapably messy work. Adolescents especially are often volatile, changing before our eyes, testing their own freedoms, learning about life at every turn but often not in the ways

Need  
authority

Respect  
- need to  
contribute

Strong people  
won't stay

\*

Imbalance  
rights of  
State  
school  
a balance

we can't  
standardize

we desire for them, understandably myopic (many think that life is no more or less than what they personally are experiencing). They do not pigeonhole. Ordering their lives with standardized procedures is a Procrustean bed: it fits some, but those it does not fit suffer.

lowers  
quality

Thus the more the system dictates, Superintendent Gillis—style, the greater the likelihood that the school will be mediocre, even harmful to some children, and unable to attract and hold a full complement of able staff. There rests the irony.

At the same time there has to be *order*, at the least in the sense that good schooling is made available to all young citizens wherever and in what conditions they live, and that the People generally are protected from incompetent, cruel, or corrupt school staff.

add  
authority  
& order

It is at this point that *authority* and *order* intertwine. Public schools must have authoritative staff, and the People need an orderly, universal system of schools.

Again, and as I have outlined in Chapter Two, an argument can be made for harmonious authority, a balance among the state, the school, and the family. A further argument can be made that such an arrangement is an example of admirable order—which brings us, perhaps oddly, back to football.

rules &  
enforcers  
(minimum)

The state would set the key rules,—yea, the *standardized* rules—providing the irreducible minimum of direction and inspection. It would provide for referees—inspectors to assure that these key governing rules are met. If the rules appeared to be egregiously ignored, the state could insist on timely changes.

in school  
different

To the maximum practical degree, schools should vary and families should have choice among them. The conviction that there is One Best School for all children should be replaced with the conviction that there should be One Best School for each individual child. Even as all schools (teams) share common goals (winning) and common overarching rules, no single school/team is likely or should be expected to be exactly like every other.

Money should follow the child (player), to each what is needed.

Order for strong education in a free society reflects an articulated, equitable, and richly varied system of schools, one where accountability is balanced between parental choice and state supervision, with a tilt toward the former.

The easy standardization genially reflected by Superintendent Gillis's boast is a recipe for disaster. And standardization of compulsory public education merely for the convenience of for-profit education businesses—as reflected by the exasperated plea of the Kennedy School speaker—is outrageous.

The sports metaphor works at least part way: competition within an accepted and refereed framework with local variety, each place seeking its own genius and gathering its own supporters.

Steve Sorota would understand both the aptness of the metaphor and its serious limitations. He accepted the order, and he gloried in his substantial freedom to work within it. Fortunately, Steve never knew that I too had been a football coach, for one year only, with middle school boys. Alas, we lost every game.

Choose one order:  
Therapy, Mediation, Money  
a well a response  
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your reference