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The Educator Roundtable: Working to Create a World Where Teachers *Can* School as if Democracy Matters

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At moments of political deceleration, when the forces of reform are stalled, liberal and radical intellectuals often abandon political analysis for the all-encompassing interpretations of psychology and culture. Stunned by defeat, which they do not believe can be reversed, they come to believe that nothing as contingent or plastic as politics can explain their loss.^[1]

The participation of academics in political protests and in the coalition building behind the most successful democratic social movements in our history has been so vital, often joining workers, students, disenfranchised citizens, activists, and politically engaged academics in potent protests of elite corruptions and bringing youths into that energized democratic fold....^[2]

Elsewhere I have argued that neoliberal and neoconservative dominance of both public and private spheres led directly to standardization and privatization, the two dominant narratives of progress for public education.^[3] We formed the Educator Roundtable to challenge and change the conversation. In place of dominant narratives, the Educator Roundtable invites educational reformers to listen to what individual voices across the country say about their particular issues with high-stakes accountability. This listening may not be progress as defined by corporate-minded reformers, but it will be growth, as educators in communities nationwide learn that they share similar struggles, and ideally, begin working with concerned citizens to change the conditions of schooling. Until such a change takes place, “schooling as if democracy matters” may be an important topic for journals, but it will never be a widespread reality for the children attending our public schools.

Rejecting the belief that “the idea of progress – and the project of progressivism – might best be abandoned in this post-utopian age,”^[4] the Educator Roundtable believes that democratic school reformers need clear articulations of goals and viable political strategies for reaching them. Part of the task requires academics engaging in a more public pedagogy and uniting with “workers, students, disenfranchised citizens, [and] activists,” in order to 1) build and develop an infrastructure for articulating and realizing democratic alternatives to the political projects of standardization and privatization; and 2) employing and amplifying messages that generate support for progressive educational policy. To be fair, academics are not the only participants needed for such a transition to take place, but given the audience of this journal, I thought it wise to focus my arguments on how scholars can work with others so that educators *can* school as if democracy mattered.

Understanding the Opposition

Both Maxine Greene and Paulo Freire suggest that we cannot overcome obstacles without naming them. In an effort to better understand and ultimately transcend the individuals and organizations currently defining progress in undemocratic ways, I call the individuals, organizations, and alliances behind standards, accountability, and choice the “Anti-School Movement” (ASM).^[5] The ASM is a loose coalition of neoconservative and neoliberal educational reformers that uses social, political, and economic capital to shape public education according to their needs. They are “anti-school” if we imagine schools to be public spaces that help our country pursue a multicultural, diverse, equitable, just, and participatory democratic social order. Inhibiting such ideals, ASM goals include regulating knowledge and schooling according to corporate and religious needs;^[6] eliminating classes outside of math, science, and reading in pursuit of productivity and obedience;^[7] and forwarding an understanding of U.S. history and civics that is antithetical to a participatory, pluralistic, and peaceful democratic social order.^[8]

Consider here how various organizations within the ASM chart progress towards these goals:

- For Krista Kaffer of the Heritage Foundation, progress is to be measured by increasing the number of states that require school choice.^[9] *Journal of Educational Controversy*, Vol. 3, No. 1 [2008], Art. 14
- For Gregory Rodrigues of the New America Foundation, progress is to be measured by counting the number of schools who eliminate multiculturalism from their classrooms.^[10]
- For Frederick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute, progress is to be measured according to how many states create and adhere to rigorous standards.^[11]
- For Jay P. Greene of the Manhattan Institute and holder of a WalMart-endowed chair at the University of Arkansas, progress is to be measured by running special interest groups, such as teacher’s unions, out of schools.^[12]
- For the Hoover Foundation’s Herbert J. Walberg, progress is to be measured by how many more tests, “one of the cheapest and most effective means of raising achievement,” teachers give to students every year.^[13]
- For Chester Finn of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, progress is to be measured by how much harder teachers force children to work, as currently few teachers or students work hard enough.^[14]
- For Chase Morgan and Shan Mullen of the Alliance for School Choice, progress is to be measured by how many schools are forced to close, regardless of what the immediate impact on families and children may be.^[15]
- For the American Legislative Exchange Council, progress is to be measured by how many states pass legislation forcing citizens to accept school choice or outlaw bilingual education.^[16]
- For former Secretary of Education Rod Paige, progress is to be measured by how many teachers enter classrooms without having been “forced” to attend colleges of education.^[17]
- For Rod Paige’s replacement, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, progress is to be measured by how accountable the federal government holds U.S. colleges and universities.^[18]

While it is undeniably true that, “the language of ‘making progress’ has been appropriated by those on the political right to mask some very undemocratic projects,”^[19] abandoning progress is not the answer. Doing so would be akin to abandoning medicine because some have used medicine to kill; words because they often harm; or democracy because some have justified abhorrent policy in the name of liberty, justice, equality, and freedom. Alexis de Tocqueville argued that individuals fighting to bring freedom into the world were often ruined not by themselves or by their opponents but by contempt for their convictions. He explained that, turning against themselves, they often “consider their hopes as having been childish—their enthusiasm and above all, their devotion, absurd.”^[20] I see a striking similarity between the individuals described by deTocqueville and those calling for the abandonment of progress and progressivism.

The problem is not progress; it is that neoliberal and neoconservative definitions of progress have ascended to positions of dominance. It is my hope that readers of this journal will help us challenge those positions. Doing so requires understanding the activities and mechanisms maintaining them.

Making Dominant Narratives Dominant: Participation in Public, Private, and Governmental Spheres

Jürgen Habermas defines the public sphere as “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access,” explains Habermas, “is granted to all citizens.”^[21] Public opinion, according to Habermas, is formed through the use of “newspapers and magazines, radio and television [which] are the media of the public sphere.”^[22] To this list I would add only film and the Internet, as both shape public opinion today.^[23] While I agree with Habermas that all citizens should have access to the public sphere, some citizens, and more specifically, some groups of citizens, have been more effective at using the public sphere than others. A brief historical analysis of public education reveals competing interest groups using the public sphere to help make educational policy suit their needs.^[24] It is my contention that when it comes to discourse regarding educational reform today, the ASM dominates the public sphere, generating public support for reform efforts ranging from strict enforcement of standards to privatizing public schools.

Such domination is not possible without aggressive marketing. “I make no bones about marketing,” explains William Baroody of the American Enterprise Institute, “We pay as much attention to the dissemination of product

as to the content.”^[25] Commenting on the importance of marketing to the Heritage Foundation’s mission, former vice president for communication Herb Berkowitz further underscores the importance of marketing to the ASM’s project:

Our belief is that when the research product has been printed, then the job is only half done. That is when we start marketing it to the media.... We have as part of our charge the selling of ideas, the selling of policy proposals. We are out there actively selling these things, day after day. It’s our mission.^[26]

The result of the ASM’s focused-attention is a “message amplification infrastructure [that] has a broad reach, repeating coordinated strategic messages through multiple communication channels.”^[27] These channels include

...conservative talk radio, Fox News, Internet sites like the Drudge Report, op-ed pieces in newspapers [and magazines] across the country, prefab letters-to-the-editor, books, pundits and columnists, talking points distributed to politicians and public speakers, advertisements, and newspapers such as *The Washington Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*.^[28]

Thanks in part to this infrastructure, the Manhattan Institute’s J. P. Greene claims to have been cited on television, radio, or in print over 500 times in one year alone.^[29] In 2006 Greene appeared on NPR, CNN, and PBS to forward research claiming to show a national “dropout crisis.”^[30] When Oprah Winfrey, whose show reaches an estimated 40 million viewers, ran a special concerning the country’s “failing schools,” she used Greene’s work on dropouts as evidence.^[31] ABC, Winfrey’s home network, is also home to *20/20*, which aired John Stossel’s attack on public education, “Stupid in America,” twice in 2006. When he is not “reporting” for *20/20*, Stossel works closely with the Cato Institute, a neoliberal/libertarian institute which lists ending public education as one of its goals.^[32]

The results of flooding the public sphere are arguably two-fold. First, the repetition of themes such as “the schools are failing” results in Americans buying into the argument regardless of whether or not it is valid. Alfie Kohn reminds us that “the demand for accountability didn’t start in living rooms; it started in places like the Heritage Foundation.”^[33] Thanks to its budget and ties to media moguls, including Rupert Murdoch, the Heritage Foundation can make sure that individuals in living rooms across the nation hear what Heritage Foundation “scholars” have to say, repeatedly. “After a time,” notes Kohn, “even parents who think their own children’s school is just fine may swallow the generalizations they’ve been fed about the inadequacy of public education in general.”^[34]

The second result of media flooding is that progressives invested in using schools as sites for the creation and maintenance of a more democratic social order are kept on the defensive, having to respond to the ASM’s charges rather than identifying and pursuing alternative realities for students, teachers, and schools. Constantly playing defense to the activities of the ASM allows neoconservative and neoliberal ideologues to frame educational debates, inhibiting the realization of more democratic educational discourse(s). This is problematic, as Michael Apple explains, because “the very categories themselves—markets, choice, national curricula, national testing, standards—bring the debate onto the terrain established by neo-liberals and neo-conservatives. The analysis of ‘what is’ has led to a neglect of ‘what might be.’”^[35]

The public sphere, however, is not the only place where educational policy is marketed and contested. Policy has a political element, and the ASM effectively uses its resources to shape policy at local, state, and federal levels. For example, when Georgia decided to rewrite its history standards, the state board of education hired Diane Ravitch as a consultant.^[36] Chester Finn and other members of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation spoke before multiple organizations, including the Ohio state legislature, in order to gain control of public schools in Dayton, Ohio, where the foundation now controls a dozen charter schools.^[37] When parents in Boulder, Colorado, wanted to pass pro-school choice initiatives in their community, they called on various organizations within the ASM for help.^[38] When they knew they did not have enough votes to win, they switched their efforts to creating charter schools,

... advocates showered legislators with papers and briefs put out by various foundations and think tanks. They pushed newspapers to promote the values of choice [and] they sponsored a Charter School conference designed to win over enough legislators to pass the bill.^[39]

Members of the ASM are even more active, and arguably more influential, at the federal level, providing scholars for testimony before the House, Senate, and Supreme Court.^[40] Newt Gingrich, for example, represented the American Enterprise Institute, testifying before the Senate that failing to increase math and science scores was a national security threat second only to the use of a weapon of mass destruction.^[41] Krista Kafer of The Heritage Foundation spoke before the House Budget Committee Democratic Caucus, using think tank sponsored research to support her claim that an increase in funding will not help U.S. education.^[42] John Boehner (R-OH), Chairman of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, used a Manhattan Institute “working paper” to attack “left-wing” criticism of No Child Left Behind.^[43] The author of that study, J. P. Greene, was cited four times in the Supreme Court’s *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* school voucher decision, which declared vouchers used at Catholic schools to be constitutional.^[44]

Indeed there is a symbiotic relationship between the ASM and both the White House and Capitol Hill. For example, while scholars from neoconservative and neoliberal institutes and foundations within the ASM are invited to speak to Congress, these institutes also return the favor, inviting representatives to ASM supported seminars and conferences.^[45] Additionally, many members of the ASM have worked as administrative assistants to various policy makers. In some cases, as with Chester Finn, Diane Ravitch, and William Bennett, they have served as under-secretaries, or secretaries, of education in the U.S. Department of Education. Newt Gingrich, former Speaker of the House, still has contacts on the Hill, and Lynn Cheney, Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, has quick access to her husband, the current Vice-President. The State Department sponsors the Diplomat in Residence Program where “diplomats can, between assignments, take up residence at think tanks to write, conduct research, and deliver lectures.”^[46] Or, if they are invited, policy makers and congressional staffers can attend one of the Hoover Institution’s exclusive seminars in Palo Alto, California. The Hoover Institution believes

... these meetings and seminars are now playing a critical role in the ongoing dialogue between scholars and policymakers, which is so important to the effective development and implementation of legislative and executive department policies and programs.^[47]

Ongoing dialog amongst scholars, the various publics, and policy makers—understood to be “critical” by The Hoover Institution—has long been ignored by progressive educational reformers. This must change. Indeed, the Educator Roundtable contends that each of the activities outlined in this section must be replicated by progressive educational reformers, and we call on scholars to more effectively partner with outside entities in order to amplify progressive educational agendas. In addition to publishing in scholarly journals, which according to philosopher David Hull “is roughly equivalent to throwing [a paper] away,”^[48] we believe progressive scholars must utilize magazines, websites, radio, television and other forms of media that speak to multiple publics. Furthermore and importantly, implementing democratic educational reform—schooling as if democracy mattered—is not possible if proponents of that cause do not check ASM domination of public school policy setting at local, state, and national levels. We believe this could be done with the help of academics coordinating nationally via similar mechanisms used by the ASM. Progressing towards a more democratic system of public schools—creating spaces so educators *can* teach as if democracy matters—requires 1) developing infrastructure similar to the ASM’s, and 2) amplifying the message both publicly and politically. The Educator Roundtable works to do all three of the above.

Developing Infrastructure

Infrastructure comprises “the organizations and functions that support a movement which is based on underlying ideologies or principles. Infrastructure organizations are able to advance positions that are consistent with the ideology for a range of public issues.”^[49] Progressive scholars, housed in universities nationwide, could in fact

create an infrastructure similar to the ASM's, using university space and networks to support information gathering and distribution. This network of democratic public school proponents could engage in a number of activities such as the following:

- articulating underlying ideologies (i.e. outlining what a democratic education might be);
- conducting and distributing research (on such things as teacher attitudes towards standardization, on media treatment of "non-partisan" reports);
- creating strategies and coordinating activities (such as email campaigns);
- developing model legislation (such as that produced by the neoliberal American Legislative Exchange Council);
- advising legislators, jurists, politicians, school boards, and other advocacy organizations (this might be done by setting up a liaison within departments of education);
- preparing papers, communications, and programs (at a variety of cognitive levels) for a number of media channels;
- recruiting and training new members;
- and identifying sources of funding.^[50]

Currently the Educator Roundtable engages in all of the above, though on a very limited scale. Given the participation and support of progressive scholars from various departments around the country, each of the above tasks would be easier to complete. Immediately, every department of education in the country should have a liaison, possibly a graduate student as part of a graduate school requirement, who works directly with local school boards and elected representatives. Rather than leaving research and theory in journals, departments could and should take ideas to policy makers and make a compelling case for why policy should, or should not, be changed.

While teachers, teachers' unions, parents, students, and local PTA's are obvious partners, progressive scholars must also work to build coalitions with groups who do not have anything to do, ostensibly, with public education. Johnson and Salle argue that groups attacked by the Right—unions, environmentalists, trial lawyers, feminists, scientists, the elderly, international organizations, human rights groups—have multiple incentives to work cooperatively to counter neoconservative and neoliberal activities. Progressive scholars wishing to realize a democratic public education could be identifying, accessing, and utilizing resources (human, time, and fiscal) to bring diverse groups of people together. Furthermore and importantly, obtaining support from the above groups will facilitate pro-democratic school movements across a number of race, class, and cultural divides. In a little over seven months, the Educator Roundtable has developed a diverse and growing list of partners ranging from libertarian think tanks to NEA locals to the Executive Director of the American Association of School Administrators.^[51] Ideally, that list will grow as departments of education partner and work with our organization.

Maintaining alliances and coalitions, coordinating their work, and amplifying their messages requires capital. While Johnson and Salle seem to believe progressive foundations and wealthy individuals are willing to join the effort to democratize public education, progressive scholars will have to identify numerous sources of income to properly counter the ASM's work. This includes the use of the Internet to garner geographically diverse support for their efforts, a type of grass roots funding all but ignored by progressive scholars. As of today the Educator Roundtable has raised over \$7,000 dollars in small-dollar donations from individuals across the country, money we used to purchase advertising both online and in publications such as *The Nation*. The Woodhouse Foundation recently donated \$10,000 to our project, and we are now engaged in grant-seeking activities.

Finally, in terms of building and maintaining infrastructure, Johnson and Salle believe adopting a business-like approach, coordinating activities, being patient, and planning for the long-term will help ensure success. Adopting

a business-like approach does not mean trading souls for dollar signs; it requires strategic thinking, clear objectives, appropriate staffing, and proper resource management. In the university setting this means coordinating amongst individuals or departments in order to focus energy on one goal at a time. For example, foundations departments nationwide could work together to monitor, debunk, and counter the activities of organizations such as the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), The Gates Foundation, or the American Legislative Exchange Council. Each university department might pick one ASM entity to monitor, and when the organization is active in public spheres, progressive scholars could work to reveal and undo their doings. The American Federation of Teachers' response to John Stossel's hit-piece on public schools is an excellent example of what I call for here, as it debunks his claims line-by-line.^[52] While Arizona State University's "Think Tank Review Project" is a good start, they have failed to market their important work.^[53] The result of their scholarly non-engagement is an archive of detailed reports that few people utilize for anything save more scholarship.

Importantly, the ASM has been framing, pushing, coordinating, and attacking for some time, and progressive scholars have much work to do. While the task appears disheartening and Herculean at first, progressive educational reformers must not become impatient with the organizational steps that need to be taken to effectively counter the ASM, a movement 30 years in the making. As Saul Alinsky reminds us, "to build a powerful organization takes time."^[54] The Educator Roundtable will turn eight months old June 24th.

Amplifying the Message

The ASM aggressively markets regulation and choice, tailoring both the message and the messengers in order to resonate more deeply with various publics.^[55] While progressive reformers do not yet enjoy the same access to the mainstream media as does the ASM, reaching specific audiences is still possible, and tailoring messages to suit specific audiences remains a solid strategy for increasing democratic discourse. To that end, progressive educational reformers need to develop and forward narratives that actively counter ASM propaganda while at the same time disseminating information that informs multiple publics about what Apple calls "the positive effects of more socially and educationally critical alternatives."^[56]

While offering such alternatives is indeed an important move, doing so in a manner that is accessible to multiple publics is also essential, as progressive scholars have the tendency to offer alternatives embedded in syntax that prohibits individuals from understanding and practicing Apple's "socially and educationally critical alternatives." The petition represents our first attempt at using simple and accessible language to change the narrative.^[57] Thirty-five people spent three weeks debating each point on the petition, a document that underwent significant revision once every 48 hours. When we finished, no one was completely satisfied with the document, but everyone felt as if his or her voice had been included. We contend that each of the sixteen points stands alone as a worthy argument against NCLB in particular, and the more corporatist language of high stakes, standardization, and performance in general.

In order to help scholars bridge the gap between academia and various publics, we created a network of editors ranging from elementary level special education teachers to retired professors from Harvard to former newspaper publishers who read and critique op/eds. We simply use an internal listserv to send submissions to the team, who then offer constructive criticism before we distribute pieces for publication at local, state, and national levels. At present, we have helped scholars and public school teachers publish over a dozen op/eds in publications ranging from the *Denver Post* to www.townhall.com, a rather conservative outlet. But this is just the beginning. We need more people writing articles to change the national discourse. Additionally, we are developing programs for television and radio, as well as creating flash animation for the Internet. Importantly, this programming would not just be anti-neoliberal/neoconservative but pro-democracy, using compelling evidence and good storytelling to explain why citizens are better served by one another than by corporate or religious governance. Towards this end, the Educator Roundtable uses services such as Youtube to broadcast its message. Dr. Deron Boyles spoke before 60 people at our first meeting in March. We posted his presentation online, and the audience grew to over 900.^[58]

Our first informational DVD is now available for sale.

Entering public spheres will require individuals capable of relating to multiple publics. While most scholars working in universities have little difficulty speaking publicly, experience has led me to conclude that few individuals, scholar or not, are truly gifted speakers. However, speaking publicly is a craft that can be perfected, given the time and teachers to do so, and there is no reason why education departments couldn't extend their programs to include public engagement. We might offer classes that help future teachers (or educational policy analysts) with debate skills so they are not run over by more experienced speakers. Such classes would include topics covering framing and language; keeping on message; responding to questions; staying on the attack; resisting bullying; remaining calm; and effectively using voice, diction, and nonverbal behaviors in order to enter and win debates on radio and television, arenas few progressive scholars thrive in.^[59]

Participating in the growing blogging community will also be essential for claiming public schools as sites for democratic revival. While a great deal of information disseminated online is useless, there are sites that produce and forward information and ideas that are of great value. Sites such as commondreams.org offer venues for progressive reformers to publish short pieces to an audience upwards of 400,000 a day, an audience larger than most, if not all, scholarly journals. Dailykos.com offers an even larger venue for interested intellectuals, as the site receives over 700,000 unique hits a day.

While participating in the blogging community is one matter, establishing a viable presence on the Internet is another, and scholars wedded to democracy through education cannot afford to ignore the medium. In fact, the Educator Roundtable was born online when 35 individuals "met" on Gerald Bracey's EDDRA listserv.^[60] Troubled that the Business Roundtable dominates discourse over the future of public schools, we formed the Educator Roundtable without ever having met in person. The Internet facilitated the creation of our petition, which continues to serve as a conduit for bringing new people into our organization. At present, the online document has over 30,000 signatures. More importantly, the petition led to a mailing list that now has nearly 4,500 participants, all of whom receive bimonthly updates concerning news and activities. In order to facilitate a larger conversation amongst diverse peoples, the Educator Roundtable now operates a forum for individuals wishing to share, engage, and debate.^[61] In an effort to increase all three, we are inviting journals to make full or partial issues available on our website. Most recently, *Teacher Education Quarterly* posted a full volume on the future of teacher education, making it available to the public weeks before the print edition went out.

In addition to disseminating scholarship and reaching out to like-minded individuals and organizations both locally and nationally, we intend to use our homepage as a database, a hub for activism, and a recruitment center. Given that thousands of documents have been scrubbed from ERIC,^[62] progressive researchers need to establish publicly accessible databases for all research, especially forms of research directly challenging the neoconservative and neoliberal movement to reform public education. Additionally, newspaper articles, magazine stories, and video clips should be stored for later use, as many mainstream media outlets delete material after a specified period of time. One of the largest problems we had defending our petition was finding research that was not fire-walled. While neoconservative and neoliberal educational reformers make certain all of their work appears online (often with media coverage), the best academic journals are off-limits to individuals who can't afford the subscription.

Finally, we use our website as a public sphere for cultivating "citizen scholars," individuals who can write letters in response to media stories (positive and negative) dealing with such topics as public education, vouchers, and NCLB. At present we are seeking concerned citizens interested in helping us monitor online news for ASM press releases and stories. For example, I have a "Google Alert" for Jay P. Greene, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, and Frederick Hess. Whenever an article appears containing those names, I am notified, and when I have the time, I post responses to op/eds or articles that cite or invoke these names. As the Educator Roundtable grows, we imagine a team of volunteers who would monitor publications and respond immediately to misinformation.

Stone's Theory, the Right Reality, and Possible Alternatives

In addition to amplifying their message so that it reaches multiple publics, progressive scholars must promote and distribute their work amongst policy analysts and policy makers. Here, Deborah Stone offers insight into strategy

for moving policy ideas onto agendas, in effect making the imagined, real.^[63] While a complete and in-depth analysis of Stone's work is beyond the scope of this paper, a brief examination of her theory of "causal stories" offers progressive scholars insight into how the ASM wins policy battles. Imagining a progressive educational coalition that did not fear political progress—realizing a more democratic educational system—I also offer examples of how progressive scholars could use her theory to garner political support for democratic school reform.

1. According to Stone, "political actors deliberately portray problems in ways calculated to gain support for their side."^[64] Such support is generated through problem definition: the active manipulation of images or conditions by competing political actors.
2. Political actors "compose stories that describe harms and difficulties, attribute them to actions of other individuals or organizations, and thereby claim the right to invoke government power to stop the harm."^[65]

In an effort to gain support for their side, political actors within the ASM manipulate data and image in order to convince publics and privates that schools are in various states of crises and disaster.^[66] After depicting public schools as failing or violent or dangerous, political actors use the federal government to "stop the harm." NCLB, we are told, stops harm by forcing lazy teachers to meet rigorous standards. Progressives willing to enter the policy arena might counter the ASM by showing how ASM policy has created new problems, such as Bill Gates' incursion into public school reform in Detroit, Michigan, and Lebanon, Oregon,^[67] or exacerbated old harms, such as keeping good teachers out of "failing" schools.^[68] Importantly, those wishing to educate as if democracy mattered must compose and deliver narratives showing the benefits of alternative forms of schooling.

3. Causal stories have two dimensions. "On the empirical level, they purport to demonstrate the mechanism by which one set of people brings about harms to another set. On the normative level, they blame one set of people for causing the suffering of others."^[69]

Undoing ASM doings necessitates understanding where and how they attribute cause and harm. Keith Mooney's recent work, *The Republican War on Science*, offers insight into the how. Specifically, he details what he calls "political science abuse," namely, "any attempt to inappropriately undermine, alter, or otherwise interfere with the scientific process, or scientific conclusions, for political or ideological reasons."^[70] While Mooney does not address education specifically, his terminology can be extended to the ASM's war on public schools. In their attempts to demonstrate harms and blame individuals for those harms, members of the ASM engage in political science abuse by these methods:

- *Undermining science itself*—such as when creationists call evolution "just a theory" or when neointellectuals attack multiculturalism, a theory and product of social science, calling it dangerous and partisan.^[71]
- *Suppression*—quashing scientific reports that don't support political philosophies, as was the case with a 2004 Department of Education report critical of charter schools.^[72]
- *Targeting individual scientists*—either discrediting scientists or attempting to silence them, as with David Horowitz's list of dangerous college professors and social scientists.^[73] Similar targeting occurred when Massachusetts state officials refused to let Alfie Kohn speak at a conference on standardized tests.^[74]
- *Rigging the process*—controlling the input of data in a policy debate by either packing a panel with scientists who are like-minded or by airing one side of the story, as was the case with the approval of Reading First.^[75]
- *Hiding errors and misrepresentations*—making false claims or distorting data, as is the case when neoliberals and neoconservatives claim all schools are failing or claim there has been no increase in test

scores despite doubling the amount of money spent on public schools.^[76]

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- *Magnifying uncertainty*—hyping scientific uncertainty to prevent one type of action or to allow another, such as when members of the ASM claim there is no scientific evidence supporting teacher certification.^[77]
- *Relying on the fringe*—when politicians handpick experts whose views match what they want to hear, as was the case when John Boehner (R-OH), used one of Jay P. Greene’s “working papers” to support NCLB, arguing there was irrefutable proof that NCLB was a success.^[78]
- *Ginning up contrary science*—generating science in order to manufacture uncertainty or consent, as is the case when neoconservative think tanks, institutes, and foundations manufacture report after report in order to build consensus for accountability based reform and choice initiatives.^[79]
- *Dressing up values in scientific clothing*—claiming scientific justification for purely political moves, such as when market fundamentalists claim competition works, despite having no research to prove it or basing their claims on research with one of the above flaws.

Progressive educational scholars cannot continue to let political science abuse go unchecked, as this abuse leads directly to policy that inhibits progress towards an inclusive, multi-cultured, healthy, vibrant, and democratic public school system. Countering each of these abuses could take place if progressives developed the necessary infrastructure for doing so. The Educator Roundtable seeks volunteers willing to monitor and debunk misinformation and political science abuse. Given the support of 50 scholars nationwide, the task would be fairly straightforward, with individuals setting up news alerts for names and organizations, reading their press releases, and crafting appropriate responses. Those responses will then be edited in a timely fashion and, importantly, distributed to media outlets and staff members of elected officials.

4. Stories are more likely to be successful if the storytellers have “visibility, access to media, and prominent positions.”^[80]

At present, the ASM enjoys public and political access that members of the educational Left do not. This is not the result of a vast, media conspiracy, nor is it the result of far Right dominance of political channels. It is the result of progressives ignoring both spheres. Being visible, accessing media, and maintaining contacts with prominent figures has never been a part of life in the Academy. Should they decide to do so, progressives will, if Stone’s theory holds, enjoy greater success undoing the damage done by ASM interests and forwarding democratic reform initiatives. Towards both ends, a member of our growing coalition recently hired a public relations firm that works to aggressively market ideas in both public and political spheres. The cost: \$15,000 for one year. That partner has given us full access to the program, and we stand ready to flood the media and the halls of Congress with democratic school alternatives. What we need now are scholars willing to provide material.

5. A story is more likely to be successful if the theory behind it resonates with “widespread and deeply held political values” and “captures or responds to a ‘national mood.’”^[81]

Regimentation and choice, the two key “reform” efforts forwarded by ASM interests, speak directly to deeply held values. Regimentation and hard work guarantee success, no matter what your background, as anyone familiar with Horatio Alger knows, and choice goes part and parcel with words such as freedom and liberty. Arguably, the neoconservative/neoliberal mantra, “the schools are failing,” corresponds to a national mood of terror and crises, making individuals more amenable to their reform initiatives.^[82] Progressives could respond to all of the above by showing how regimentation has negatively impacted various groups, as well as pointing out that many families could never afford the choices offered in place of fully funded public schools. Forwarding research that contradicts the claim that all schools are failing, and Gerald Bracey is spearheading this effort, is also essential to interrupting ASM activity. In place of regimentation, pseudo-choice, accountability, standardization, and failure, progressives might offer creativity, innovation, equity, justice, and responsibility, all of which correspond to the democratization of the United States of America.

6. Stories are more likely to be successful if the “prescription entails no radical redistribution of power or wealth.”^[83]

Neither regimentation nor choice, ostensibly, require radical redistribution of wealth. However, progressives might point out, as Peter McLaren and Ken Saltman have done, the amount of money some interests make from both.^[84] Progressives might also ask U.S. citizens why corporate leaders such as Bill Gates and members of the Walton family are so interested in taking over “failing” schools; that is, if there is nothing to profit from, why get involved? In an era of continued corporate scandal, progressives should argue for keeping public schools public in order to prevent more money and power from moving into corporate coffers. At the same time, progressives must point to decreasing corporate tax rates, from 30% in the late 1980s to just over 7.5% today, and ask whether or not corporate America has already radically shifted and redistributed power and wealth away from communities and into their record-sized pockets. We must ask, “What would it cost to school as if democracy mattered?” And we must answer: “What price will we pay if we don’t?”

7. “Causal stories need to be fought for, defended, and sustained” because there is always someone with a competing story.^[85]

The ASM constantly fights for, defends, and sustains multiple narratives in its attempts to garner support for neoconservative/neoliberal progress. If Stone is to be believed, individuals and groups with alternate narratives have the potential to win policy battles via competition. This, of course, requires a willingness to engage politically, something the progressive educational Left, until very recently, has not been willing to do. We created...*we are creating*...the Educator Roundtable in order to help individuals and organizations amplify competing stories. Whether or not storytellers wish to work with us is another matter.

Critiques of the Roundtable

I wish to close with critiques of our organization, some justified, others shortsighted. I hope this self-analysis encourages others to identify other weaknesses, as treating them accordingly will only make us stronger.

1. “You don’t offer anything in place of NCLB.”

This has been the most repeated critique of our efforts and organizations. Not only is it untrue, it is wrongheaded. We state quite clearly that we support educational reform from the ground up, led by educators rather than corporate supported ideologues. To offer a prescription for all schools in all cities above and beyond dialogue would lead to the very same standardization we set out to undo. While we list a number of possible alternatives to the legislation—and we provide links to scholars, educators, and other organizations with their own models and ideas for educational reform—they are possible alternatives and not “best practices.”

2. “It will never work.”

Respected educational historians have told us time and time again that “there is no chance NCLB will be dismantled.” The phrase “no chance” has little meaning to genuine students of history. There is no chance that the Sun will ever stop orbiting the flat Earth, no chance that slavery will end, no chance that women will ever have the right to vote. Working in the university system of Alabama, I can’t help but recall the words of the state’s former Democratic governor, George Wallace: “Segregation then, segregation now, segregation forever.” The words “no chance,” “never,” and “forever” are generally uttered by those who fear the opposite.

3. “Your organization is too political.”

On the contrary, our organization is not political enough. At present we lack the resources and the support to function as a political force to be reckoned with, and we never will without the participation of a broad coalition of political actors. Scholars who refrain from political engagement make a very political decision not to do so. As university-housed scholars recuse themselves from political engagement, think-tank housed “neo-intellectuals” work diligently to sell their story lines. Watching and commenting on their activities will do nothing to stop them,

Schooling as if democracy matters is a political project, plain and simple, and our refusal to engage is akin to fiddling while Rome burns. In hopes of thwarting the Anti-School Movement in order to create spaces so educators can school as if democracy mattered, I encourage the reader to become more involved with politics; to listen to teachers, students, and parents; to contact local and state representatives; to speak at board meetings and before civic organizations. Your informed voice must be shared outside the halls of the academy, to do otherwise guarantees more of the same.^[86]

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- [4] Quote taken from the American Educational Studies Association’s 2006 call for papers. I use this quote and cite this organization as an “authority,” as AESA claims to be interested in the foundations of education. Foundations scholars, I will argue in this paper, must not abandon progress lest others continue to impose their own definitions of the term.
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