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Some Things You Can Do to Support Public Education Now

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Abstract

Yesterday a group of students here at Gettysburg College, where I teach, organized a Solidarity Rally. It consisted largely of teach-ins designed to start conversations, and hopefully it will be the first of many events that bring people together to think more carefully about how we should respond to things going on outside of our college and town. [*excerpt*]

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Comments

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Some Things You Can Do to Support Public Education Now

By Dave Powell on March 2, 2017 11:37 AM |

Yesterday a group of students here at Gettysburg College, where I teach, organized a Solidarity Rally. It consisted largely of teach-ins designed to start conversations, and hopefully it will be the first of many events that bring people together to think more carefully about how we should respond to things going on outside of our college and town.

I was invited to speak at this rally and I'm glad I did. I decided to use the time I had to provide a quick rundown of the last sixty years or so of education policymaking. That's a tall order to meet in ten minutes, and I probably said too much—but, hey, that's what professors do. We impose our ideas on people and force them to accept those ideas. [Just ask Betsy.](#)

Kidding, kidding. I did speak for awhile, and after a colleague spoke I shared some thoughts on what we can do to try to wrestle control of the narrative surrounding public education back out of the hands of people whose first priority seems to be to retreat from public spaces, not engage in them. I thought it might be helpful to share those ideas here. Maybe we can start a conversation ourselves about what to do next.

Here's the list:

- **Get to know the issues—and especially learn your history.** We learn best when we're able to make connections between new knowledge and things we already know—and we need context to do that well. Start by reading a clear account of our country's history with public education (I can recommend, to start, David Labaree's *Someone Has to Fail: The Zero-Sum Game of Public Schooling* or David Tyack and Larry Cuban's *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* for an overview of school reform, or Dana Goldstein's *The Teacher Wars* for an overview that offers a window into the work of teachers), then follow the Rule of Three: unless you can find three credible sources to corroborate the effectiveness of a particular reform policy or proposal, keep looking. When you are looking for everyday news and commentary on education, it's crucial to corroborate the claims you encounter. There are many smart and engaging thinking out there writing about education, and many genuinely want to understand what we can do to

improve our education system. Find them. Engage the people who are more interested in pushing an ideological agenda, but do it to *understand*. Listen and learn, then come back to your principles.

- **Separate fact from fiction, and philosophy from policy.** But how do you separate the "good" education thinkers from the bad ones? Philosophies inform policy choices, as they should; but much of what you read or hear about education is presented as fact when really it's just a philosophical position. Knowing the difference is a key to unlocking the best approaches to education reform. For example, a person who says that students *must* pass rigorous exams in order to keep up with students in other developed countries is expressing a philosophical opinion, not a fact. This doesn't mean that person's opinion is wrong—it just means it's an opinion. Likewise, facts are deployed in ever-more-creative ways these days. Make a list of credible sources you can trust and try to stick to those—but never stop questioning them. When you read stories that appeal directly to your emotions or frame problems in education as an existential crisis, be wary. We *are* in crisis, in some ways, but it will take level-headed, deliberate, thoughtful people to steer us toward something better. Avoid people who don't make you *think* in fresh ways about the problems we face.
- **Remember that any good education system puts the needs of students—not adults—first.** If you get engaged in education policymaking or promoting educational change, try to remember that your north star is the student. Doctors follow a simple credo when they make professional judgments: First, Do No Harm. As a teacher or educator, or simply as a concerned citizen, try to frame your thoughts on education in a way that puts the needs of students—especially the most vulnerable students—first. A lot of reformers will tell you that they do this. They'll create entities with names like "StudentsFirst" but spend too much time raising money for their cause. They give their schools names like "Success Academy," which implies that student success always comes first, but then will design programs that exclude certain kinds of students or will make it clear that their *own* success—the success of their idea, or their model, or their approach to school reform—is what really matters.
- **Understand that equality and "excellence" are always in tension in our public education system, but that it doesn't mean they are mutually exclusive.** Some reformers would have you believe that equity is the enemy of excellence, or that it's the other way around; actually, our own history confirms that our schools are more excellent, and our society more equitable, when we fight for both. We can do both. We need to do both. We owe it to ourselves and to our children, and their children, to do both. Argue for higher standards to ensure that teachers and students both know what is expected of them, and to ensure that students never get away with quitting when an extra push would do them some good. At the same time, don't forget that standards can be high without being unrealistic. When we set the bar too high we cultivate inequity and discourage students from giving their best effort. Keeping these two in balance is crucial in any educational program.
- **Maybe most important: be an advocate for taxpayer-funded public education that is free at the point of delivery and available to all.** Maybe you think more choice is a good idea; maybe you think teachers deserve higher salaries; maybe you believe that education is a local responsibility, not a federal one. Whatever you believe, one thing

should be non-negotiable: **everyone has a right to a good education**, and providing access to one is the first responsibility of a democratic society.

Maybe that all seems a little too abstract. Know your facts? Separate fact from fiction? Support public education? How will that help us resolve the political tensions that divide us all now? Well, for one thing, those political tensions we all feel, which are the result of profound political polarization, don't map well onto educational issues. Education reform was bipartisan for the longest time not because Bill Gates orchestrated a vast neoliberal conspiracy to turn your kids into mindless drones, with Obama acting as his henchman; it was bipartisan because there was genuine agreement on the idea that schools should improve. And schools *should* improve, always. We may disagree about whether the ill-fated approach of the past two decades was an effective or appropriate one, but we're facing an entirely different challenge now. School choice is taking center stage, and it's not about letting parents choose between two local, well-funded, well-staffed public schools. It's about encouraging people to disengage from public schools altogether. We all lose when that happens. The battle now is not over how to fix public schools. It's about whether to save the system we have or dismantle it and replace it with something else—most likely, a hybridized public/private amalgamation that exacerbates inequality and has all the negative characteristics you might associate with many other experiments in "public/private partnerships" Those characteristics being: inefficiency, poor service, high cost, and lousy products.

There are no shortcuts. Get involved. Make a commitment. Write a letter. Work to elect good people to the school board. Get on the school board yourself. There can be no democracy without a good education system. It's up to us to make sure everyone has access to one. It's hard, slow, deliberate work protecting public education, but it's worth it.