



This summer, as I listened to the unbridled joy of children playing outside my window, I read a *New York Times* article about first graders being placed in "Gift of Time" summer schools. For nearly 12 percent of first graders in East Ramapo, New York, summer break means being held back and receiving a "gift" of tutoring, with an extra order of tutoring on the side. Somehow, we are to believe that this will help slower children catch up.

Except they can't catch up. When they return to school in the fall, according to the *Times* article, they'll be segregated in their own small classes made up of other kids deemed "low-performers." At an age when children should be falling in love with learning, these children will be labeled, shamed, and tracked. Such practices have been discredited by a substantial body of research (if not common sense) and yet more and more schools across the country are implementing similarly punitive practices. Schools are seeing recess eliminated, electives are being cut, and teachers are insulted by the prospect of having their career and income threatened by their students' scores on a single multiple-choice test. All in the name of No Child Left Behind, a mathematically impossible piece of federal education legislation, which requires all of the nation's schoolchildren to be above the mean on standardized tests by 2014.

Our schools may very well be in crisis, but not for the reasons bandied about in the press. The crisis is not based on teacher pay, lack of accountability, or a lack of rigor. The problem is that we do not create productive contexts for learning in which the needs of each child are met as

their talent, interest, curiosity, and passion are amplified. The last thing we need is another sweeping top-down reform. In fact, it is my belief that the dominant solution to any educational challenge will be wrong and make the problem worse.

The tragedy of No Child Left Behind, and the private and public efforts to undo its damage, is that not every child is given the chance to achieve her full potential in a caring, creative, dynamic, and intellectually rich environment. And in the absence of ongoing classroom innovation and grassroots advocacy, NCLB has taken over.

These days, anyone who attended school is an expert in education and everybody has a plan to "fix" the public schools-the philanthropist, the businessman, the bureaucrat, the politician. For ages, business leaders and politicians have wanted to privatize the entire system and let the marketplace sort things out-as it did with Enron, Chinese pet food, or oil prices. Now, they're taking control of schools through philanthropy. Parents of means, meanwhile, are opting out in record numbers, sending their children to private schools, or charter schools, or are homeschooling them. Indeed, as the federal government has steadily eroded public support for the public school system, through propaganda and failed policies, children are the collateral victims. The winners of the school wars remain uncertain; the losers can be found in almost any classroom.

Of course, none of this is altogether new. People have been trying to fix schools for as long as schools have existed, but the tone shifted in 1983, when the Reagan administration published "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform." The report began with alarming rhetoric not heard since Sputnik: "The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people."

"A Nation at Risk," which claimed that educational issues presented a threat to our very freedom, changed the tenor of educational discourse. "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today," the report said, "we might well have viewed it as an act of war." For an administration committed to eliminating the Department of Education, these predictions of an imminent apocalypse were the tool of choice to reshape the educational system.

But it wasn't until the first President Bush that the government made a serious push for help from the private sector. Bush thought business leaders might be able to help fix public schools by running them more like businesses. So in 1989, he asked the Business Roundtable (300 CEOs and governors) to try to reform education, since governors and CEOs-administrators all-share similar temperaments and a desire to impose top-down policies. Armed with corporate war chests and support from governors, the Roundtable's influence met little resistance.

Uninterested in the complexities associated with teaching and learning, the Business Roundtable demanded that state legislatures impose "outcome-based education," "high expectations for all children," "rewards and penalties for individual schools," and "greater school-based decision making." In order to enforce and measure these voluminous imperatives, standardized testing

would be required. It sounds familiar now-these are the core tenets of NCLB-but at the time, the idea of applying the rules of business and competition to education was relatively new.

These efforts fuelled the higher-standards movement. It's hard to argue against raising educational standards, but imposing uniform curricula and teaching practices leads to a paradoxical lowering of standards.

The Business Roundtable continued thinking about education through Clinton's two terms-eight years during which nothing lasting changed the course of education reform-until today. Even though the public has lost some interest in buying what they were peddling, the damage wrought by the Roundtable persisted: Standards, and the measuring of standards, ruled all.

Quote:

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Rod Paige, George W. Bush's first Secretary of Education, took his post after being the superintendent of the Houston Independent School District, where he presided over the "Houston Miracle" in the 1990s. Paige, who wrote his doctoral thesis on the reaction time of offensive linemen in football, was responsible for a remarkable increase in student test scores and a substantial reduction in the dropout rate across the Houston schools. Except that the test scores were cooked and the dropout reduction was the result of at-risk students disappearing from his district like Brazilian street children.

The Houston Miracle soon became the model for the massive, standards-based No Child Left Behind Act, enacted in 2001. NCLB represented the most radical federal education initiative in history, passing easily in Congress with bipartisan support. Even today, both presumptive presidential candidates intend to keep the law in place, albeit with amendments.

As it stands, NCLB requires continuous improvement in academic achievement. At-risk children failing to make adequate progress are subjected to an extra helping of the very same instruction that has already proven ineffective. Electives are taken away, while teachers in "low-performing" schools are given scripted curricula with ambitious titles like "Success for All!" A teacher in Miami might be greeted by a lesson in mid-November that requires them to read, "Brrr! It's cold outside today. I wonder what the temperature is? Maybe it will snow." But nothing is more central to NCLB than standardized tests.

When most of us were children, we took standardized tests once a year for a few half days. The tests were a temporary distraction intended to offer one indicator of progress or aptitude. A teacher's reputation or salary was not at risk; administrators didn't feel compelled to cheat; and third graders certainly didn't vomit on the test booklet. (Some NCLB tests actually come with instructions for what to do when a student hurls on a test.) When a child comes home from school, parents don't ask, "Which quartile toward annual yearly progress were you in?" They ask, "What did you do today?" Since knowledge is a consequence of experience, it's critical that children be engaged in learning activities that nurture their soul, expand their interests, build

upon personal talents, and challenge their thinking. But today's standardized tests-proudly called "high-stakes" by their proponents-trump all else. The theory behind the tests seems to be analogous to the theory that taking a sick patient's temperature every seven minutes will cure him.

Students in some cities and states can spend months each year engaged in test-taking. That does not include the incessant preparation for those tests. Just a few years ago, policy leaders would say, "Don't teach to the test," since it makes the results less valid and detracts from the richness of classroom activity. All of that has changed. Today politicians are unapologetic when they say, "Of course you should teach to the test! How else are you going to raise test scores?"

It has long been said that voters hate Congress, but like their own representative. The same is true for schools. Parents hate schools, but they love their child's school. This affection for neighborhood schools may help explain why previous efforts to revolutionize public education have failed: People felt that in general something needed to be done, but their schools were doing just fine.

But NCLB's shame, blame, and name-calling, accompanied by a steady stream of negative media accounts, miserable children, and low test scores, may finally push parents past the breaking point. A loving parent cannot help but be concerned by constant, very public reports of their children failing and their school underperforming. Perhaps the singular accomplishment of NCLB is the erosion of community support for public education. If parents do not trust their school, they are likely to withdraw their support and seek private alternatives. And that's exactly what they're doing. Homeschooling and private-school enrollment are on the rise; there are more charter schools than ever. And when that many people withdraw from thinking about and participating in the school, things go downhill even more quickly.

With the business community, politicians, and parents hysterical about public schools, the conditions are right for something really big to happen. But major changes in schooling are costly and require bold leadership. A bake sale isn't going to do the job. And so, over the past decade, two billionaires have stepped onto the scene. Taking it upon themselves to rescue public schools from teachers, administrators, parents, organized labor, and even democracy itself, Bill Gates and Eli Broad are turning public-primarily urban-education upside down.

The philanthropic work of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in the areas of health, education, and poverty is well documented, and Bill Gates's generosity is unprecedented. The foundation's well-intentioned investments in public education have not been particularly destructive or effective. Although they have spent more than a billion dollars to date on school-reform initiatives, the foundation's grants-given to wildly conflicting models of education and primarily focused on making schools smaller-have been met with mixed success.

More intimate schools with smaller class sizes are good for kids, who get more attention from teachers, form closer social bonds, and don't get lost in the crowd. However, you cannot change just one variable in a system this complex and expect total transformation. Also, despite the enormous benefits of small schools, there are consequences as well. It may be impossible to maintain electives, extracurricular activities, sports, or student diversity in small schools. A 2006

Business Week article detailed how a Denver high school known for its award-winning choir crumbled when students were dispersed to three different "small" schools within the building. Surely, the program could have been preserved even when the school was divided, but the Gates Foundation says it doesn't like to meddle. Additional focus and oversight by the foundation might ensure that the public schools to which it grants money actually improve.

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Eli Broad, a Los Angeles billionaire, is another kind of philanthropist. Broad funds a narrower range of interventions and has demonstrated less willingness to experiment than Gates. Broad's efforts advance a very specific model: top-down school management based on business principles. Over the first five years, Broad has committed over \$500 million to his notions of school reform. He even runs an academy that trains school leaders in precisely this kind of management.

Broad's money supports more standardized testing, a longer school day, scripted curricula, merit pay, the replacement of school administrators with managers, support of charter schools, and mayoral control. In Broad's worldview, incentives drive everything, including education. The annual Broad Prize for Urban Education gives a total of \$1 million dollars to five urban school districts that do the most to raise student test scores. The award also grants college scholarships to students in the district. That sort of money and the press it attracts has a domino effect: All of a sudden, others want to get tough and adhere to the Broad manifesto, too.

In 2002, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his newly appointed schools chancellor, Joel Klein, seized control of New York City's public schools, disbanding local school boards and reducing community involvement. Under Klein and Bloomberg, test scores may have risen, but chaos has ensued as the organizational structure of the district changes continuously. Now, policies similar to Broad's educational blueprint are being followed in the city's public schools. Last year, New York City earned the coveted Broad Prize.

Broad and his followers also embrace charter schools. Charters are quasi-public schools that receive public funding but don't have to play by the same rules; they have more latitude than public schools, including the freedom to use different curricula, employ non-credentialed educators, change the school calendar, ban unions, and be selective in student enrollment. In some cities, affluent parents use the charter laws to create private schools with public money. In others, like the New City Schools in Long Beach, California, innovative educators with a coherent vision of education teach in ways they believe will benefit children in their community.

It is natural for parents to want the best for their children. Unfortunately, the charter laws may create greater educational inequity-rich, involved parents get their kids into the best charter schools, leaving only the poor students behind in the slowly deserted public schools. This forced choice could be avoided if every school was shaped by its teachers, parents, and community, with all children free to attend the school best-suited to their needs or interests. For example, the Montclair, New Jersey, public schools have experienced decades of success with mandatory school choice. Each elementary school is distinct and parents are required to choose the best option for their child.

Broad recently gave a total of \$23.3 million to two charter-school umbrella groups, the Knowledge Is Power Program and Aspire, to open 17 new charter schools in Los Angeles this fall. KIPP is known for its uniforms, longer days and school year, Saturday sessions, strict rules, and lots of homework. Supporters hail this formula as a boon to Angelenos, citing the schools' remarkable success at raising test scores. Critics, meanwhile, fear that students who don't get with the program quickly enough will vanish. Regard-less of whether these schools offer solutions to the challenges of urban education or not, opening so many of them so quickly may be considered reckless and surely dispenses with public involvement.

In a new twist on the public-charter debate, Broad and his colleagues have also convinced school districts to hand over public schools to private or nonprofit charter-management companies. These companies are given the use of public facilities and get to run what are essentially private schools in them. That not only removes a public resource from the community, but also gives a handful of charter providers a hefty advantage over the community-based charters. With a little imagination, it's easy to guess where this is headed.

Traditionally, corporate philanthropy in education consisted of a speaker on career day or sponsorship of a softball team. I'm all for generosity, but I'm also for accountability. And I wonder, to whom are the Gateses and the Broads of the world accountable? They were not elected or even appointed, but their money is changing the ways public schools operate. They may do this for altruistic reasons, but what is a citizen's recourse if their ideology harms children? And, worse, what happens if a billionaire finally throws up his or her hands and publicly exclaims, "Even I can't fix the public schools"? Our schools may not be able to survive the sudden cash withdrawal-or the backlash.

One way to navigate this new era of "giving" is by asking a simple question: Would these folks send their own children or grandchildren to their "reinvented" schools? Is a steady diet of memorization, work sheets, and testing the sort of education the children they love receive? Of course not. If affluent children enjoy beautiful campuses, arts programs, interesting literature, modern technology, field trips, carefree recess, and teachers who know them, I suggest that we create such schools for all children. What's good for the sons and daughters of the billionaires should be good enough the rest of the children, too.

Amending No Child Left Behind won't fix these problems. Neither will asking the billionaires and businessmen to try to be a little more careful with our children's education. These solutions filled the void we created with our own apathy and complacency. And we are not powerless to

reverse the recent trends and make public schools wondrous learning environments for all children.

But in order to achieve such equity of opportunity, parents need to be vigilant and take a stand. Parents can go to back-to-school night this fall. If the science lab contains no equipment, they should demand to know why and not wait patiently while the district hopes they forget. If their first grader was excited about going to school, but by the third day cries hysterically and says, "The teacher hates me," his concerns should be taken seriously. If their kid's school is test-obsessed, parents should let teachers and administrators know that they expect more of an education. If every parent was vocally fighting for the best public schools for their children- instead of some of the most involved and caring opting out in disgust-the government would be forced to listen.

Because despite their flaws, inequities, and shortcomings, public schools are an American treasure owned by the citizens, and we should treat them as a public trust.