

# Inclusive Democracy and the Educator Roundtable: Challenging No Child Left Behind

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Though history offers individual exceptions<sup>[1]</sup>, America's teachers, as a collective, have never exercised a strong political voice. When Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education issued its infamous propaganda diatribe, *A Nation At Risk*, blaming America's public schools for the deterioration of the nation's economic competitiveness in world markets, neither of the country's two largest teachers unions, (the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers) mounted any serious challenge to the outrageous lies and ridiculous claims made in that "blue ribbon report." Those unions have done little to call public attention to the destructive effects of the subsequent neoliberal campaign of standards-based accountability and high-stakes standardized testing. As those policies were federalized and intensified under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), teachers have had no institutional structures to turn to for expressing their frustrations and their dissent.

This situation reveals one of the primary weaknesses of representative democracy situated within the dominant social paradigm of a market society. Namely, those persons most directly impacted by educational policy, teachers and students, have no voice in shaping that policy. They don't even have a significant voice in shaping how their own unions respond to policies formulated by others (i.e., corporate elites working through such neoliberal institutions as the Business Roundtable).

To redress this problem, and to counter the prevailing influence of the Business Roundtable and other neoliberal and neoconservative think tanks and institutes, a diverse array of educators, ranging from elementary school teachers to college professors, have formed the *Educator* Roundtable to launch a 21<sup>st</sup> century abolitionist movement aimed at eradicating the standards-based accountability model imposed under NCLB and its state-level predecessors that has made teachers and students slaves to high-stakes tests.

The Educator Roundtable took its first political action toward the empowerment of teachers at 11:00 p.m. on November 21, 2006 by posting a petition on-line that called upon the United States Congress to repeal (not reform) NCLB when it comes up for reauthorization in 2007. Within 24 hours, over 640 people had signed the petition. Most of them were teachers, though many were parents of children in public schools. Within the first week, the petition to repeal NCLB had attracted nearly 5,500 signatures. At the time this article went to press, over 20,000 people had signed the petition to repeal (again, not reform) NCLB. Through an aggressive media and internet campaign, the Educator Roundtable hopes to procure more than a million signatures over the next few months.<sup>[2]</sup>

In order to achieve this goal, members of the group will need to defend their position that NCLB must be abolished rather than reformed, unless by “reformed” one means abolishing the standards-based accountability measures that enslave students and teachers to high-stakes tests. It is the purpose this article to demonstrate how the Inclusive Democracy Project offers a viable language of critique (and possibility) to defend that position.

## Culture versus Dominant Social Paradigm

One of the most important conceptual tools developed by Takis Fotopoulos is the distinction he makes between *culture* and the *dominant social paradigm*. “A fundamental precondition for the reproduction of every kind of society,” he says,

*is the consistency between the dominant beliefs, ideas and values on the one hand and the existing institutional framework on the other. In other words, unlike culture, which has a broader scope and may express values and ideas that are not necessarily consistent with the dominant institutions (this has frequently been the case in arts and literature), the dominant social paradigm has to be in consistence with the existing institutions for society to be reproducible. In fact, institutions are reproduced mainly through the internalisation of the values consistent with them rather than through violence by the elites which benefit from them. This has always been the case. The values, for instance, of the present system are the ones derived by its basic principles of organisation: the principle of heteronomy and the principle of individualism which are built-into the institutions of the market economy and representative ‘democracy’<sup>[3]</sup>.*

The mounting dissent against NCLB, then, can be explained in terms of the incommensurability between the culturally-derived value of education held by many Americans, including many teachers, and the value of education imposed by the dominant social paradigm through high-stakes testing and accountability. These impositions intend, purposefully, to bring “educational” practices into synch with market values and the demands of the corresponding economic institutions and economic elites.

As a cultural value, the meaning we associate with education may be rooted in Enlightenment ideals such as those contained in Kant’s masterful essay, “What is Enlightenment?” There, of course, Kant defines Enlightenment as our escape from self-incurred tutelage. “Sapere aude!” Kant declares. “Have courage to use your own reason! - that is the motto of enlightenment.” In the language of possibility offered by the Inclusive Democracy Project, we would identify Kant’s notion of enlightenment with the democratic principle of *autonomy*, bearing in mind that Inclusive Democracy defines autonomy in collective rather than mere individual terms. In political terms, autonomy for the individual is useless unless individuals participate equally in the democratic process. Citing Castoriadis, Fotopoulos explains “no society is autonomous, unless it consists of autonomous individuals, because ‘without the autonomy of the others there is no collective autonomy – and outside such a collectivity I cannot be effectively autonomous.’<sup>[4]</sup> In turn, we could use these culturally-derived associations between education and autonomy to formulate an inclusive democratic understanding of accountability. If the value of education lies in its capacity to advance individual autonomy, (i.e., freedom from self-incurred tutelage) in order to strengthen democratic practices (i.e., collective autonomy), then educators should conceptualize themselves as

accountable to the public, the *demos*, to the extent they promote the principles of autonomy among their students. In this model, educators find themselves accountable not to some heteronomous power but to the principle of *community*, to the idea that we are all better off when we can all think and act independently from coercion or other mechanisms of control.

Sadly, as described by Fotopoulos above, the dominant social paradigm of the market privileges the principles of heteronomy (i.e. the principle of non-questioning existing laws, traditions and beliefs that in a hierarchical society guarantee the concentration of political and economic power in the hands of elites<sup>[5]</sup>) and individualism over the democratic principles of autonomy and community. Rather than looking upon education as a vehicle for enlightenment, economic elites view education as a tool through which to encourage “self-incurred tutelage.” Autonomous workers committed to communitarian principles pose a threat to their power and privilege. Steps must be taken then to ensure that schools and teachers do not encourage these dispositions in students. To ensure they don’t, as under NCLB, accountability must come to mean stripping away teachers’ *autonomy* and their feelings of creative interchange within a *community* of other teachers and learners who share a commitment to some ideal of education that touches and bridges the intellect, the emotions, and the spirit of each of its co-participants. The market replaces the principle of autonomy with the principle of heteronomy, and replaces the principle of community with the principle of individualism.

Accountability could mean, under the principle of autonomy, that I, as a teacher, must answer to the teacher within me. Can I look that teacher in the eye each morning in bathroom mirror and know that I am prepared to go to class that day offer my students and my content the best that I have to give of myself? But it doesn’t mean that anymore. Under the principle of heteronomy, which means submission to governance from external control, I must answer to external authority. My judgment no longer occurs in front of the bathroom mirror before each day begins and after each day is finished. My judgment comes on judgment day—the day when my students sit down at their desks and, in taking those Number 2 lead pencils into their hands and filling in the blanks on the bubble sheets for those standardized test, create the evidence to be used against me in the court of accountability. The tests have displaced my identity as a teacher. I no longer know myself as a teacher through the internal dialogue I have with myself in the car on the way home from school. I know myself as a teacher through the evidence presented for or against my behalf by my students’ test scores. In displacing my identity as a teacher, the test scores—if accountability’s heteronomy is successful— also displace my integrity as a teacher. For the primary lesson of accountability’s principle of heteronomy entails learning not to pay attention to your own internal source of authority. Only the test scores matter.

Accountability could also mean, under the principle of community, that I, as a public school teacher, am accountable to the community served by my school and the larger world in which it is embedded. I am accountable to that community, because the products of my labor within my classroom will one day become citizens of that community and shape its future. Whether or not I teach my students the joy of learning, the joy of reading, and the joy of asking questions that don’t seem to have any answers that would fit on a bubble sheet—or questions that the government wouldn’t approve to appear on a test, will have a marked impact on that community. The principle of community carries many other dimensions to issues of how I might feel accountable, but they are all equally irrelevant to the issue of accountability as it’s practiced. In practice, accountability’s principle of individualism tells me to “look out for number

one,” to do whatever it takes to increase my students’ test scores. And the “whatever it takes” might not even be my decision. I could be forced to teach from textbook geared toward the tests and that comes with a script from which my principal requires me to read.

Moreover, the principle of individualism teaches me to conform to the dictates of heteronomy by appealing to what is absolutely worst inside me—my fears, my hubris, and my greed. If my students score too low on the tests, my school could, under NCLB, be designated a “failing school.” If that happens, my district could be labeled a “failing district.” I could lose my job. Or, as is common practice in many schools around the country, I could be made to suffer the humiliation of having my students’ scores posted alongside the scores of my colleagues’ students outside the principal’s office. If my students score high enough, on the other hand, my school could be recognized as an “exemplary school.” Don’t we all want to teach at exemplary schools? I might even get a bonus; and everyone should know that any bonus on top of a teacher’s salary is always welcomed thing. Forget my identity as a teacher. Forget my integrity. Yes, I will willingly teach to that test and read from that script, just keep my life uncomplicated and let me work toward the rewards that external authority offer me.

## Conclusion

The members of the Educator Roundtable understand the untenable situation that teachers find themselves in. This is largely due to the fact that most of the members of the group *are* teachers. In no small terms, teachers today find themselves in a situation similar to Rosa Parks just prior to her decision to no longer remove herself politely to the back of the bus. As Parker Palmer has written,

*Rosa Parks sat at the front of the bus because her soul was tired of the vast, demoralizing gap between knowing herself as fully human and collaborating with a system that denied her humanity. The decision to stop leading a divided life is less a strategy for altering other people's values than an uprising of the elemental need for one's own values to come to the fore. The power of a movement lies less in attacking some enemy's untruth than in naming and claiming a truth of one's own.*<sup>[6]</sup>

The establishment of the Educator Roundtable and its call to abolish NCLB may mark the beginning of a new era in the lives of teachers. It presents them with the opportunity to loudly proclaim their refusal to go along with a system that denies them, as well as their students, their autonomy from heteronomous authority that inhibits them from connecting their work and the mission of public schools to authentically public purposes proper to a democratic community. While their critics from within the established teachers unions (that National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers) have already begun attacking the Educator Roundtable for its failure to outline a positive alternative to NCLB, those same critics fail to recognize the truly radical nature of the vision offered by this group – teachers working autonomously and in community to shape the policies impacting the institutions entrusted to them by the public.

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[1] We can point to people like Margaret Haley, whose powerfully democratic voice and actions

led to the founding of the Chicago Federation of Teachers. More contemporaneously, George N. Schmidt, a former Chicago schoolteacher fired from his job by then CEO of Chicago Public Schools, Paul Vallas, for alerting the public to egregious flaws in the standardized high-stakes tests being used to hold teachers like himself and students “accountable”, carries the tradition set by Haley forward by operating Substance – The newspaper of public education in Chicago.” As described on its website:

*Substance* is a monthly investigative newspaper devoted to in-depth reporting on the major issues facing public education. Our mission is to report facts and provide interpretations of the news about public schools unhindered by the biases against public education that currently infest both the "liberal" left and the "conservative" right. We are also pro-union, pro-child, and pro-democracy. Because of this, the news stories in Substance provide accurate information but never maintain the pretense of "objectivity." "Objectivity" as it is practiced by the major media in this case means slanting the news to reflect the biases of the millionaire and billionaire individuals and corporations that control the public's access to news and information.

[2] For our readers in the US who want to sign the petition go to:  
<http://www.educatorroundtable.org/petition.html>

[3] See Takis Fotopoulos, “Mass media, Culture, and Democracy”, *Democracy & Nature*, Volume 5 Number 1, March 1999, pp. 33-64.

[4] Takis Fotopoulos, *Towards An Inclusive Democracy* (London/NY: Cassell/Continuum, 1997) p.180

[5] *ibid.* p.331

[6] Parker J. Palmer, “Divided No More: A Movement Approach to Educational Reform,” (Center for Courage and Renewal, 1992) available at [www.couragerenewal.org/pdf/rr\\_divided.pdf](http://www.couragerenewal.org/pdf/rr_divided.pdf)