

How the Gospel of Pragmatism Undermines Education Improvement

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We need improvements in K-12 education. Too few students learn the critical thinking skills they need for [successful life, work and citizenship](#). The race and class of students and the financial resources of their communities skew student learning. Republicans have an answer: competition and privatization. Mainstream Democrats have an answer too: compromise with Republicans.

In his [Letter from a Birmingham Jail](#), Martin Luther King expressed his grave disappointment with the “white moderate [...] who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom.” He lamented that, “Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance,” he wrote, “is much more bewildering than outright rejection.”

Read today, his words are a stinging indictment of those who advocate for half-measures to achieve equity in education while claiming the mantle of a contemporary civil rights struggle. His words are a resonant rebuke to contemporary calls to be pragmatic about what can be accomplished in the face of Republican obstructionism and extremism. Clearly, Republican have emerged victorious as a result of a well funded, decades-long concerted effort to [frame the political dialogue](#), taking substantive efforts at achieving social and economic equality off the table. But however easy it is to blame the Republicans, there is plenty of room for culpability among moderate Democrats.

At King’s writing in 1963, he decried the entreaties of “moderates” to be

patient, to engage in less direct action, to accept slow incremental changes. Today, the brakes on transformational change come with the dogma of pragmatism. Especially in education policy, the politics of social justice and equality denial have taken a more cynical turn. Instead of promoting and supporting the highest quality education for every child, currently dominant education policies promote the expansion of charter schools in which parents must compete for limited slots for some children. Worse, taxpayer-funded charter schools drain funds from existing public schools. Instead of a national and state system of equitable funding for every school based on progressive income and corporate taxes, politicians leave unchallenged reliance on inequitable local property taxes. Instead of a full-fledged assault on poverty, the pragmatists settle for escape from poverty for a few. Instead of advocating for enriching and expanding democratic participation, bipartisan support for state takeovers of local school governance and promotion of private charter schools has subverted democracy while making no substantive improvement in reducing inequity.

After the election of Ronald Reagan, Democrats made a strategic shift in hopes of winning back white working class men. Led by the [Democratic Leadership Council](#), they began to eschew the unifying social responsibility rhetoric of the New Deal and Great Society. The shift was epitomized by Bill Clinton's value-laden phrases just as, "[work hard and play by the rules](#)," or "[ending welfare as we know it](#)." The not so subtle implication was that some folks were trying to get a free ride. Wittingly or not, the language served to confirm the canard that has long divided the poor from potential allies among the employed who still struggled to make a living. The relative boom of the 1990's may have taken the edge off working people's anger at the abandonment this direction represented. However, with the economic collapse in 2008, anger at economic dislocation has roared back with gale force. Hefty campaign contributions and support for deregulation, [NAFTA](#) and now the [TPP](#), have further eroded Democratic credibility as the friend of working and middle-class Americans. Support for half-measures in the name of realism has abetted rather than mediated multiracial inequality.

The result in education, as in other domains, is that parents turn to self-preservation— and at times against one another— for two reasons. First, they are isolated. There is too little unified organized opposition to the erosion of democracy and social supports and insufficient public support for jobs and living wages. Advances such as unemployment insurance, social security, Medicare and Medicaid, collective bargaining, voting rights and school desegregation were all a response to organized political movements. The enabling legislation for each of these was not

the result of visionary elected leaders making pragmatic compromises, but rather their response to public pressure. Second, with the waning of public pressure and the simultaneous increase in corporate lobbying, policy makers offer no collective solutions thereby reinforcing individualism and tribalism.

The system is rigged to support the super rich and their ideas. They are well organized, leaving everyone else to squabble over what is left. Countering the influence of the torrent of money unleashed by the [Citizens United Supreme Court](#) decision will not be accomplished with calls for pragmatism or even the election of lone progressives. (This, I think is Bernie Sanders point when he calls for a political revolution.) That result demands organization and around some simple unifying ideas.

- 1) Rebuild the infrastructure of United States while creating millions of well-paying jobs. The costs will be offset by increased consumer buying power that will spur economic growth and stabilize families.
- 2) Recalibrate income tax rates so that the wealthy pay their fair share.
- 3) Fund public education with federal support from a graduated income tax and corporate taxes. This step would reduce state and local taxes while reducing inequality.
- 4) Provide federal incentives for integrated public schools and communities so that all citizens have a shared interest in school improvement.
- 5) Establish a single-payer universal health care system.

Ironically, it was Barry Goldwater who said, [“And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue!”](#)

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