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Our students are Being Sacrificed: The Role of Politics in Schools

By now, it has become an oft repeated tale; a school district, or in some cases, even entire states, manipulating curriculum, banning books, or changing school rules due to external political pressures. But why does this sinister force invade the halls of our schools and leech into the minds of the youth? It is quite simple, this force acts to save its own face and to grow in strength. Texas, ashamed of its past of slavery, sought to remove it from history books. Florida, attempting to garner the support of an aging population, sacrificed the safety of its transgender youth. Even we, in Massachusetts today, are not free from this force, with our curriculum downplaying or even omitting the Pilgrim's wrongdoing against the Native Americans. With this mountain of evidence, it would be easy to say that politics have no place in schools, but, if we sterilize education, how will students survive the world? The world is not free of politics; how could we let it be that the first time a child experiences the bitter chill of politics be when they step out of the doors of high school? No, we cannot afford to make our schools bland, political dead zones. Instead, schools must recognize their own biases and external pressures so that they can shift focus to what the core of education is, an effective curriculum for the vibrant heart of the system, its students.

There is no shortage of examples where politics have been used to obstruct facts from being presented in schools. However, beyond this surface level observation, there are biases that are built into the very origins of American mass schooling. School systems in the US were first created “1) To make good people. 2) to make good citizens. 3) To make each person his or her personal best” (Gatto 209). While these goals may seem innocent, they were put forth at a time when the US was dealing with a large influx of immigrants and, as such, were aimed at molding these new students into “model Americans.” These goals are very different from the ones that we have today, with the department of education’s mission statement being “to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access” (*About ED*). Despite the shift in focus, we still see relics of the America-centric education that started public schools. This often means casting the United States in a positive light, a task often achieved through the convenient omission of critical information. Textbooks that teach about the Vietnam war often “[shy] away from controversy, providing [only] an elementary view of it” (Seo). Worse still, even within the miniscule average of three paragraphs of information provided about the war “the texts... tended to glorify America’s role in Vietnam and avoid the controversies surrounding the war” (Seo). Clearly, while the department of education claims to be prepping students for the world, the materials being used are not accurately accomplishing this goal. Instead, these widely spread books of “facts” often are biased to propagate narratives that cater to the idealized history of the US that the government would have wanted those immigrants in the early 1900s to see. Beyond this, even governments themselves are subject to being influenced by other outside forces. In Gatto’s time, schools “encouraged [students] not to think at all. And that

made them sitting ducks for... marketing,” (Gatto 210). Today too, the impact of corporations on schools is prevalent in the form of vocational education. While it may seem that these schools are a good alternative to higher education, the origins are much more sinister. Vocational schools were initially “driven by a philosophy of fitting people to their probable destinies,” (Hanford). These schools are by their very nature predatory, feeding on the students who didn’t have the resources to pursue higher education and simply needed to get a job quickly out of high school. The main reason these schools continue to exist today is due to lobbying by powerful corporations so that they can maintain a less educated working class for them to employ (Smith et al.). If we truly are striving to provide equal opportunities for all students, how can the system propagate schools that are designed to dead-end students into specific jobs? By recognizing the biases in America’s schools, it is easy to see where changes must be made. To truly align with modern schooling’s goals of preparing students for “global competitiveness,” then education should be approached with a global mindset at its core. Political events should not be taught through a lens of benefitting national image, but rather through a clear glass that does not obstruct what can be learned from. Furthermore, schools should no longer bend to the will of powerful corporations and should instead look inward and prioritize the students they teach. Paths should not lock a student into a future they cannot change but should offer the flexibility for a student to achieve excellence.

Seeing how fundamentally flawed the education system is may make it seem like the only solution is to completely remove politics from educational environments. However, while this is the easy way out, it only brings out more issues. If politics were to be fully eliminated, then the very history of our country would have to be erased. If we are going to prepare the

youth, is the best place not to start with the past? The goal is to clarify, not obfuscate. The removal of politics accomplishes the opposite of what we wish for our education system to do. Not only this, but even limiting this sort of education can have negative effects. Students that had more education pertaining to governments and history were “less likely to endorse justifications for the establishment of dictatorships” (Schulz et al.). If we do not allow the youth to experience politics, it is paramount to knowingly implanting a vulnerability in them that can be exploited in the future by a cunning leader. Furthermore, it is not just these students that will be governed by a leader, but also their responsibility to elect a leader. If there is not adequate education for students about how their government works, they will not even be able to make informed decisions for who they should elect in the first place. Perhaps even more critically, the youth of today are the change-makers that can implement fundamental reform in the future. However, these very students lack trust in the system that they would need to become a part of to implement any changes. The pandemic especially has reduced student trust in the government with “only 16 percent of the youth groups [saying] that their students had increased their trust in government in response to its pandemic response” (Sparks). Our school systems are stuck in a negative feedback loop of decreasing trust leading to more poorly informed officials being elected and deteriorating it further. Instead, we must address the root of this problem, students’ trust in schools. Schools must increase communication with students, and this does not mean more mass surveys that have no tangible outcome. Instead, work WITH students to maximize the school to their benefit. If this is done, students’ trust in the school system and government be restored, leading to those same students pursuing roles in those same systems to make them even better

Politics must be allowed to enter schools in such a way that it does not manipulate facts to its liking, but rather in a way that allows students to study it, experience it, and learn from it. It may sound paradoxical, but it was Adolf Hitler who put it best, "He alone, who owns the youth, gains the future" (*Adolf Hitler quotes*). Hitler was a master manipulator and exploited the youth to his benefit during WWII. Our school systems are currently playing the role of the manipulator, turning children into polarized capitalist machines with little trust in the government. If Hitler is anything to go off, this future is one we cannot afford.

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