

## BEHIND EVERY SILVER LINING

# A Fight Worth Fighting, a Fight Worth Winning

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*by Wade A. Carpenter*

My mother passed away a couple of days after a delightful Christmas. She had lived ninety-five years, and after all the conflicts and triumphs of “the greatest generation,” she died peacefully with her family beside her, in a faith that proclaims that life doesn’t have to end in death. Mom will be missed, but she will never be a sad memory.

Losing one’s mother naturally makes a person reflect on the really important things. I was reminded that when faced with the Great Question, which even the best schools cannot handle competently, all other questions can seem trivial, and it’s tempting to back away from them. But the “lesser” questions schools mishandle can have a terrible impact on young lives, and suffering great loss can also make one profoundly impatient with half-measures, dodges, and baloney when one is fighting for serious stakes. As sorry as I am to lose Mom, I hate even more to lose children. When children who don’t have to be lost are systematically lost, scholarly restraint can be a loser, and occasionally, just occasionally, it’s okay to get inflammatory. I haven’t had much time recently for serious research, so for now I’ll just have to drop a few bombs (and a few footnotes for honesty’s sake), and expand in subsequent articles. Reluctantly acknowledging the saddest memory of the hardest fight of the greatest generation, let’s understand that he who goes nuclear first, wins.

Nowadays, lots of educators are unusually discouraged. The emphasis now is on leaving no child behind, which is certainly more equitable than the old “Well, somebody’s got to dig the ditches” attitude. But as with so many good ideas in education, we’re doing it all wrong. Instead of helping every kid go beyond “adequate” and toward excellence, our resources are squandered holding kids down to minimal “standards.” No Child Left Behind often means that no child gets ahead, as many of us are pressured to concentrate on the “bubble kids” who might together *statistically* improve a school’s

test scores—as superficial and detached a scale of *human* value as I’ve ever heard of. So now it’s the smart kids sitting there, bored stupid, and drifting toward trouble. Schooling to the lowest common denominator is not equitable; it’s despicable.

We keep hearing that the economy is forcing cutbacks, but we don’t hear of many cutbacks to flashy programs that would get VIPs re-elected, nor to the heavy burdens of exhausting travel and tedious entertainment shouldered by our public servants.<sup>1</sup> I haven’t heard of many cancellations of contracts for the equestrian arenas and the tennis complexes and trolley systems that so uplift the lives of our poor. But I *have* heard that the Georgia legislature is about to eliminate salary increments for teachers with advanced degrees.<sup>2</sup> It’s hard to imagine a better way of demonstrating our state’s commitment to ignorance. (Heck, the best I can come up with is to actually penalize those teachers who score above 100 on an IQ test. Even nominal fines might raise significant revenues, without the slightest danger of costing the legislators a penny!) To be fair, Georgia would replace the equally nonsensical academic-credential scale with merit pay, based partly on a teacher-evaluation program that, I have to admit, isn’t too bad. I haven’t seen anything in the “Class Keys” system I’d take issue with.<sup>3</sup> However, there’s a lot I’d like to see in it that isn’t there, such as methodological flexibility, consideration of mitigating and aggravating circumstances in disciplinary situations, and real personalization that goes beyond pedagogical “individualization.”<sup>4</sup> You remember, what we used to call “humanistic” education. The new way of teaching is okay, I guess, but it’s not my cup of tea. I’m afraid the kids will find it even less satisfactory.

While listening to NPR the other evening, gloomily considering retirement for the umpteenth time, for the first time I heard the term “encore career.” What a wonderful concept! But what could possibly top teaching in Georgia? Door-to-door lobotomy sales? Receptionist in a gastroenterologist’s waiting room? But then the local newscast gave me some ideas of how the good guys can fight back in the meantime, and win.

### Student Nullification

We in Georgia have yet another scandal brewing. Something like 10 percent of last year’s standardized tests were red-flagged for “suspicious erasures,” and a statewide investigation is under way. Hundreds of educators are under suspicion of dishonestly administering a fundamentally dishonest measurement. Needless to say, nobody mentioned the cost of the investigation. And suddenly, the silver lining behind the dark cloud. Oy, what a ploy!

Kids, you are faced with dozens of these standardized tests, and it seems there's not much you can do about it. The old "Christmas-tree the Scantron" trick has been nullified by the punitive measures the bureaucrats have attached to low test scores—retention, summer school, and ruined college aspirations. But I wonder what would happen if you *erased even more*! Is anybody *really* going to penalize you for changing an incorrect answer to a correct one? Or prevent *all* of you changing *all* the answers on *all* the tests to correct ones? The costs of investigation would be prohibitive, and the impact far more widespread than the universally feared threat of "juror nullification."<sup>5</sup> Of course, they would eventually respond by computerizing the tests (which they should, anyway), but it will take time to buy all the equipment, and your parents and their attorneys might just insist that *all* major technology purchases be audited (which they should, anyway). Maybe by the time it all played out, the country's inflatulation with mental methane<sup>6</sup> would have eased, and just maybe your days might be spent in more worthwhile pursuits—like life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, for instance. 'K?

### **Informed Parental Participation**

Speaking of parents, maybe it's also time for Mom and Dad to reclaim the long-forgotten right of freedom of association. We rightly gave it up to redeem our squalid history of racial discrimination and neglect of the handicapped. Desegregation and inclusion were the right things to do . . . right then. But the public's ideals were cynically perverted: instead of coughing up serious dollars during prosperous times for real remedies, politicians settled for measures that only scratched the surface. And now, just as perversely, in hard times they have gone far beyond the inequities and iniquities of forced busing for diverse and full inclusion for the unfortunate, all the way to forced socialization with the deviant and the uncivilized, regardless of interest or criminal record, under conditions no free, responsible adult would knowingly tolerate or impose.<sup>7</sup> Although most teachers and principals are doing their best, many fear being stamped with the "persistently dangerous school" label and its accompanying penalties at a ridiculously low threshold, so some indeterminable percentage underreport. Most parents simply don't know much about their children's surroundings. So ask, and if you do find reason to suspect your kids' intellectual or moral development may be seriously threatened, seriously threaten back—threaten to withdraw. And pay no attention to the mealy-mouthed socializationist whine that "they've all got to learn to deal with the seamier

sides of life.” Most children are perfectly capable of learning about a sewer without having to roll around in one.

## Principled Teacher Nonparticipation

Teachers dream of helping worthwhile kids learn worthwhile stuff and become worthwhile adults. But as we’ve learned all too well, there are a thousand ways politicians can evade teachers’ requests, kids’ needs, and their own campaign promises, and the game is rigged against us. But what if teachers realized that “if you don’t vote you can’t complain” is actually a textbook-quality non sequitur—the conclusion doesn’t follow from the premise? We *can* “just say no”: nonparticipation in a rigged game is not bad citizenship; it’s good sense. It would be much harder for politicians to evade the *demands* of thousands upon thousands of teachers, especially when our nation is so evenly divided between competing theories of governance. One holds that a good government actively helps the people with jobs, social services, redistribution of wealth, and basic protection against immoral predators. The other holds that the best government governs least, that at most it protects the people from predators, that otherwise it enables us to provide for our own families, that “redistribution” is a synonym for theft, and that every day government proves itself incompetent at goodness and morality. Both views are held by intelligent and decent people, and each has elements of truth. Every politician knows that given this razor-thin divide, they need every vote they can get.

I will be glad to publish teachers’ demands from across the country, *if* we are willing to agree upon a set of essentials and then say, “These are our demands, and they are not negotiable. If you do not propose, vote for—and pass—*each and every one of them*, we will not vote for you, and if necessary, we will just stay home on election day. You need us, so pay attention.” My address is [wcarpenter@berry.edu](mailto:wcarpenter@berry.edu). Put the word *demands* in the subject line, and add as much explanation as you think necessary, and your name if you wish.

The cliché is not totally wrong: as an *individual* action, electoral abstinence would be stupid, because by not voting for the “lesser of two evils,” one would by default be voting for the *greater* of two evils. Likewise, demands are contemptible if done for trivial or self-serving reasons. And if presented by organizations that can be bought off with attractive compromises, none of this will work. But if done publicly by lots of teachers for causes that rock the public’s conscience, the threat of principled abstention would not be a surrender; it would be a strategy.

## And We Can Win

Even now I still see signs that excellence is attainable. I teach and coach and host classes and teams and events showcasing extraordinary young people with astonishing knowledge, skill, and wit. I see Olympians like Shaun White and Lindsey Vonn accomplish unprecedented feats, sometimes for the sheer joy of it. And I see pre-service and in-service teachers keep coming to a demanding program when they could easily get alternatively certified in any of a dozen quick-and-dirty ways.

Lord willing, I have a few years left before my “encore career,” and I’ve got a hunch this fight might still be worth fighting, and might still be worth winning. Think you’re up to it?

## Notes

1. As much as I’d like to take credit for the felicitous phrasing, I’ve got to cite Jonathan Lynn and Antony Jay, *Yes, Minister* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 275.

2. See <<http://www.legis.state.ga.us>> for SB 386, lines 150–155, with the quibbles and “grandfatherings” they presume will enable them to avoid the outrage of current teachers.

3. Go to <<http://www.doe.k12.ga.us/DMGetDocument.aspx/CK%20Standards%204-30-09.pdf?p=6CC6799F8C1371F60C8684DFDC96C1C9E173A927D7D04E1B1E862FC762CCF7F9&Type=D>> for the full text of the teacher evaluation instrument, all ninety-nine pages of it.

4. For some thoughtful distinctions between “individual” and “personal,” see Jacques Maritain’s *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale, 1943) and Emmanuel Mounier’s *Personalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952). It’s sobering to recall that these two startling intellects of the 1940s and 1950s were eclipsed by those catastrophic celebrities of the 1960s and 1970s, Jean-Paul Sartre and Timothy Leary. Since then, it’s been pretty much the Reagans and the Bushes and the Clintons and the Obamas. ‘Nuff said.

5. According to Wikipedia, “Jury nullification occurs when a jury in a criminal case acquits a defendant despite the weight of evidence against him or her. . . . Strictly speaking, a jury verdict which rules contrary to the letter of the law pertains only to the particular case before it; however, if a pattern of identical verdicts develops in response to repeated attempts to prosecute a statutory offense, it can have the de facto effect of invalidating the statute. Jury nullification is thus a means for the public to express opposition to an unwanted legislative enactment.”

6. Note to editor: Sorry about the creative spelling and phrasing, but there are some conditions that standard, nontechnical English just doesn’t diagnose adequately.

7. Continuing the neologisms, I suppose we could call it “fool inclusion.”

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*Wade A. Carpenter, Ph.D., is an associate professor of education at Berry College, Mount Berry, Georgia.*