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Is Small Beautiful? Local Education and Local Democracy

Gary Daynes

April 2, 2014

Conference on Public Education in a Democratic Society"

My aim in this paper is to address a particular problem that lies at the intersection of public education and democracy in the United States. The problem is this: At exactly the moment when national institutions--the federal government, the business sector, major philanthropies--have focused on improving public education, public trust in those institutions is collapsing. The convergence of these trends has led to signal difficulties for educators, administrators, and students. Among them is that efforts to improve schooling by embracing or conforming to national trends in education reform--the Common Core, Race to the Top, No Child Left Behind--run the risk of adopting an approach to teaching, learning, and administration that come from institutions not trusted by the public. That approach to school improvement is unpopular with teachers, students, and parents, of uncertain effect for student learning, *and* may be damaging to the ability of public schools to strengthen democracy. This paper suggests that one response to this problem is to invigorate certain approaches to local democracy. Those approaches have both the ability to respond to actual, on-the-ground educational difficulties and to strengthen the democratic abilities of students, parents, teachers, and communities. And I will suggest that such efforts are particularly important in low-income and highly diverse communities. Or put another way, I am arguing that by attending to local democracy, local schools can both improve learning and improve communities.

The National Context: Public Opinion on Public Schools

The following things are true in America today:

- High school students in the United States are mediocre performers when compared with their peers in the developed world (PISA, 2012);
- While the national average scores on some assessments have improved over the past 40 years, significant differences by ethnicity and geography endure in the United States, and test score improvement has stagnated in recent years (NAEP 2012)

Even while education reform is being shaped at the national level, trust in many large-scale or national institutions is low or declining.

- Americans trust the federal government less today than at any time in the past 40 years, with only 19% saying they trust the government in Washington DC to act correctly “just about always” or “most of the time” (Gallup, “Trust in Government,” 2013);
- Similarly low levels of trust exist for banks, television news, big business, organized labor, and health maintenance organizations (Gallup, “Confidence in Institutions,” 2013);
- Eighteen percent of Americans would give a grade of A or B to “public schools nationally,” the lowest rate in the past 20 years (PDK/Gallup, “Which Way Do We Go? 2013.), and Americans have less confidence in “public schools” than at any time in the past 40 years (Gallup, “Confidence”).

At the same time, though, American’s confidence in small-scale or local institutions, including schools, remains high. For example:

- Approximately 70 percent of Americans trust their local governments; a rate that has been steady for the past 40 years (Gallup, “Trust”). Comparably high percentages of Americans express confidence in the military, the police, and small business (Gallup, “Confidence”);

- Fifty-three percent of Americans would give the “public schools in [their] community” a grade of A or B, the highest rate in the past 20 years (PDK/Gallup, “Which Way?”)
- Seventy-one percent of parents would give a grade of A or B to the school attended by their oldest child, a rate that has been steady for the past 20 years (PDK/Gallup, “Which Way?”).

Taken together, what do these statements mean for education and democracy in the United States? Three things: that trust in large, abstract institutions and systems (the federal government prime among them) is waning even while those institutions are increasingly involved in education reform; that confidence in local teachers, schools, and government remains strong even while their ability to shape educational reform agendas seems to be weakening; and that efforts to strengthen education and democracy must take these two tendencies, now at least a generation old, into account.

This paper does not suggest that small-scale education and local civic life are preferable to national democracy and large-scale education. Nor does it necessarily argue that national efforts, like Common Core, are detrimental to either education or democracy. But it does argue that certain civic and educational problems can be responded to by close attention to the connection between schools and local communities. Attention to context and particularity are needed as much or more than commitment to standardization and uniformity. My goal, then, is to point to ways of thinking about local and small scale things that might be of use as schools and communities work to improve themselves, and to suggest how focusing on those ways of thinking might improve both education and democracy.

One might object here that it is a more important task to reinvigorate trust in national or global institutions and to build national support for a stronger educational showing

internationally than it is to attend to building on the local and particular tendencies of people in the United States. This is, as far as it goes, a rational point. After all, it is better for Americans to trust the Supreme Court than not to trust it, and to have confidence in Congress rather than to doubt it. And it is a better thing to do well on math tests than to do poorly on them.

But in the particular areas of education and democracy, a focus on rebuilding trust in national, large-scale institutions has at least four weaknesses. First, it sets to the side a long and vibrant tradition linking local education to local democracy in the United States. In this tradition, which dates to before the founding of the public school system, schools served identifiable communities, local boards governed schools, and the civic and character results of education were played out in local communities. Second, such a task is impractical, in that there is no abstract or national way to raise trust in abstract and national systems. Or put another way, Americans have not lost trust in big business (for example) because something happened to the abstract category of big business, but instead because their perceptions have been damaged by particular instances of bad behavior on the part of big business. Third, doing so *feels* wrong. As James C. Scott has argued, abstract systems favor rules, standards, and practices that are intangible and (sometimes) dehumanizing. Raising the reputation of dehumanizing systems is an act of self-punishment, since it is those characteristics of the systems that contribute to their poor reputations (Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 6-7). Fourth, there are certain habits of importance for education and democracy that cannot flourish at the scale of the nation or the institutional type. Most important among them are four commitments--to love of the home place (oikophilia), to local knowledge (metis), to a relational view of personhood, and to practical wisdom (phronesis). These commitments only flourish in local or small-scale settings--in places where people reside in relationship to each other and where the results of actions are visible and

actionable. They can be nurtured in local schools via local social democracy. And they are a valuable counterbalance to abstractions—patriotism, ideology, individualism, and rules—that are particularly strong in national educational discussions.

Of course the distinction between national and local, or between abstract and particular, are not as neat in the real world as they are on the page. The smallest school might be rule-bound; the biggest systems sometimes build the best relationships. So at the outset of this discussion of local education and local democracy I will start with the context of my own, new particular community and the obstacles to improved education and civic life built into it. That case study will lead to a discussion of the challenges and opportunities involved in thinking about particular places and small-scales; to an exposition of the four commitments I have described above; and to the ways those commitments might improve education and civic life.

The Local Context--Public Education in Wilson, North Carolina

Nine months ago my family and I moved to a town most of you have never heard of. Our new home, Wilson, North Carolina, is invisible to you--we don't move the needle, show up on television, or change the world. This is not to say that Wilson is inconsequential. It is home to over 60,000 people, it once hosted America's largest tobacco markets, you can buy fine antiques at Boone's or Boykin's, at Parker's you can eat the best Eastern North Carolina barbecue to be found anywhere. Vollis Simpson's whirligigs have drawn international attention from outsider art collectors; Ava Gardner took classes at my college for a few months before becoming a star. It is to say, though, that the people of Wilson, as people, are not in the mind of legislators, planners, or administrators when they craft laws, strategies, or regulations that influence education.

Wilson can partly be understood by its geography. For hundreds of years life in Wilson has been characterized by tobacco, cotton, and sweet potatoes. Those products grow well in Wilson's warm winters and sweltering summers, and move easily to market via a transit network that connects Wilson to larger cities to the North (Richmond), South (Charleston), and West (Raleigh). Those products help explain both the demographics of our community and its social system. Wilson continues to be shaped by the families whose fortunes and reputations were made in Wilson. A long tenure in the region is the basis of privilege, and a small number of extended families quietly guide the philanthropic, non-profit, and business sectors. These families (the "first families of Wilson" in local parlance) are proud of their roles in Wilson's history and protective of that history in the face of change. At the same time, Wilson is a city of color. Forty-nine percent of the population is African-American; another ten percent Latino. Both groups are equally strongly tied to the place by its agricultural history, and both groups carefully guard access to influence in their own communities.

Wilson's agricultural and social history has been a powerful determinant of the town's current condition. The collapse in tobacco (and to a lesser extent cotton) markets has marked Wilson meaningfully. Twenty-six percent of the population lives below the poverty level (Wilson County NC Census Quickfacts, 2012). Education rates and income rates are well-below state averages (Wilson County NC Census Quickfacts, 2012); the unemployment rate is nearly twice the state average (Friedman, "Wilson Has 4th Highest Unemployment") and nearly twice the rate it was in 2008 (Neighborhood Scout, "Wilson, NC."). Wilson's crime rate is far higher than the national average--according to one metric, 91% of US communities are safer than Wilson, NC.

As one might expect, students in Wilson County Public Schools perform unspectacularly on standardized exams. Their performance lags the North Carolina average across the board (NC School Report Cards, “Wilson County Schools,” 2013.). Class sizes are larger, fewer students take AP/IB courses, and fewer teachers and principals have advanced degrees in the Wilson County Public Schools than in other North Carolina districts, on average.

North Carolina schools themselves are in upheaval. The state has embraced the standardized testing regime, with state-wide end-of-year exams required in reading and math, and common state-wide end-of-course exams in other disciplines. The inauguration of these exams coincided with the economic downturn, which hurt state revenue and in turn led to salary freezes for teachers in five of the past six years. A new Republican governor and Republican majorities in the state house and senate have pushed through a series of education reforms in the past two years that removed tenure for teachers, did away with salary increases for teachers earning advanced degrees, removed class size caps, and limited salary increases to only the top 25% of teachers in each district (Smith and Imig, “The Public Schools our Children Deserve?” 2014).

This context is personal to me. My two youngest daughters started school at Ralph L. Fike High School in Wilson, NC during August 2013. Their school experience is being shaped by these three clusters of influence--the community’s history and challenges, the national educational context, and changes in state education law and funding. School feels to them like it is made up of unbendable rules designed to enforce inexplicable rules in an effort to fix unfixable problems. Their ability, and the ability of their friends, neighbors, and classmates to flourish depends heavily on the ability of teachers, administrators, and community members to find local

responses to these problems which are beyond their individual control. This is, of course, a challenge for educators in all communities. And it is the basic challenge of modern civic life.

My focus in the coming pages, then, is not on all aspects of strengthening local democracy or local schools. Instead, it is to argue that the development of a love of local places, the strengthening of local knowledge, the enhancement of relational, not transactional behavior, and the development of practical wisdom are essential tools to respond to the problems of the modern schools. In each section that follows, I will describe an effort in Wilson, NC to respond to one of the challenges of modern schooling—conflict between charter schools and public school systems, the role of public feedback in setting school standards, the challenge of neighborhoods in crisis for school quality, and the challenge of failing schools for neighborhood quality. And in describing those responses, I will highlight approaches to building local democracy.

Love of Place, Charter Schools, and the Sallie B. Howard School for the Arts

While support for charter schools is strengthening nationally (PDK/Gallup), they continue to be controversial with advocates of public education (Ravitch, *Death and Life of the Great American School System*, 2011, 132-147). Evidence on the effectiveness of charter schools nationally is mixed, with some studies finding no variation between charter school students and their public school peers (Institute of Education Sciences, “Charter School Impacts,” 2010) while others showing some value-added for particular types of students in particular areas (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, “National Charter School Study” 2013).

Of course, the performance of charter school students in these studies is an abstraction—on the ground what matters is how a charter school works in a particular community, with its particular students. The emergence of charter schools can pose difficulties for public schooling in

smaller communities or poorer districts, since charter schools often attract strong students with engaged parents while simultaneously drawing away revenue that may be of importance to the district. And since students, teachers, and administrators opt-in to charter schools, the creation of a charter school has social and political components to it that effect the local community. Or put another way, charter schools highlight the tensions between local education and local democracy.

Since 1997, Wilson, North Carolina has had a single charter school—the Sallie B. Howard School for the Arts and Education, a K-8 school that serves 800 children, nearly all of whom are students of color from at-risk backgrounds, including a rising number of Latino students (Sallie B. Howard School for the Arts and Education, “About Us,” 2014). Sallie B. Howard School emerged from a non-profit, the Youth Enrichment Program of Wilson, dedicated to improving the educational attainment of at-risk students, and is named after Sallie B. Howard, a Wilson native who after a period living in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance, became a school teacher and returned to Wilson. Howard’s love of the arts and her affinity for global travel made her a mentor for many African-American students, and both of those characteristics are built into the school’s curriculum.

Of course many schools are named after locally prominent educators, but few have so consciously designed themselves around the legacy of their namesake as Sallie B. Howard. Any tour of the school begins in front of a portrait of Howard. Prospective students and their families learn about her life, her global perspective, her vision for the arts, her high expectations of students, and her commitment to Wilson, NC. Howard’s descendants are presences in the school as well; one of Howard’s students, Dr. Joanne Woodard, founded the school and is its Principal to this day.

I go on at some length about Sallie B. Howard herself for two reasons. First, the school's culture is animated by Howard's legacy. Students are held to high expectations for academic, social, and civic performance. Teachers embody Howard's approach to education—a combination of nurturing, challenge, and creativity—that ensures high levels of performance for those who stay. School leadership is both collaborative and strict. Teachers work together to develop curriculum, or to build the performances that link the arts and other academic disciplines (on my first visit to the school middle-school students were rehearsing dances they had choreographed in order to demonstrate Newton's Laws of Motion). But Dr. Woodard, as Howard's direct educational descendant, is clearly in charge of the school.

Second, Howard's legacy is the basis for a strong sense of oikophilia, or love of the home place, to borrow philosopher Roger Scruton's term (Scruton, *How to Think Seriously About the Planet*, 2012, p.25-7). For Scruton, oikophilia is built from civil associations, groups of people organized for the sake of their members rather than the achievement of an external goal (Scruton, 35). Those associations, in turn, foster a sense of trusteeship in that they respect both their ancestors and their descendants. They see themselves as part of a stream of history in which they bear the best traditions of the past forward for those who will follow them. Doing so gives those associations a framework for making decisions in the present, especially in the face of dislocations and uncertainty (Scruton, 215-8). And it anchors those associations to a place where they understand that they must work and where they can see the impact of their efforts.

Scruton's work is focused on using oikophilia to respond to the environmental crises of the current age. But it takes little imagination to see the possibilities for oikophilia for local schools. In the case of the Sallie B. Howard School, the connection to Wilson's past, and to the school's intellectual and educational ancestors is explicit. And that connection does several

important things. First, for students from families who have little stability, Howard's legacy provides an anchor that is culturally appropriate and leads towards improvement. Second, the connection helps students and their families see Wilson as a place with potential rather than either a place to flee or a place without significance. That is, it builds oikophilia for people who come to school without it. And third, this connection to Wilson builds a bridge between the community's lone charter school and supporters of the public schools. Charter schools are, in actuality, public schools—accountable to the same goals and funded from the same sources as the public school system. But in most communities, charter schools and the public schools share few commitments. This is due in large part to charter school efforts to differentiate themselves from the image of the public schools in order to attract students. Sallie B. Howard School does that, to be sure. But it is clear that the Sallie B. Howard School benefits Wilson itself, not just the families of the students who attend the school. Sallie B. Howard's graduates go on to play significant roles in Wilson's three public high schools, and people in its networks visibly strengthen the public schools as well. In this way, the development of oikophilia bridges the divide between charter and public schools to the good of the community.

Local Knowledge, the Problem of Community Input, and the Youth Master Plan

If I were delivering this paper 50 years ago, there would be no need for me to call for the development of oikophilia, because the conditions for it would be built into the administration of schools. For much of the history of public schooling, the curriculum, funding, goals, and results of public education were a local hodge-podge, shaped by teachers, principals, superintendents, and school board with close connections to the local community and an eye towards the local community's needs. This was, of course, not always a good thing, since it allowed schools to

carry out local prejudices as well as local wishes, and since the outcomes of one approach to schooling often were vastly inferior to those in other locales.

Today, though, a rapid standardization of outcomes and centralization of administration, funding, and reporting, has made maintaining oikophilia a challenge in any school district. In fact, among the most vexing problems for school leaders is now how to impose externally developed curricula, tests, and accountability measures on teachers, students, and communities who have had little say in their development (Schwartz and Sharpe, *Practical Wisdom*, 2010, p.127-42). The external source of so many recent changes has led to ideological protest movements, where parents organized around a particular concern—math curricula, the use of the term “democracy,” the trustworthiness of IB testing (to choose a few local topics)—have turned many school board meetings, planning sessions, and parent-teacher conferences into political battles where student learning becomes secondary to ideological debate. (Scruton’s argument, following Burke and Oakeschott, that for oikophilia to flourish politics must be seen as a way to resolve problems rather than drive society towards a goal is a propos here (Scruton, 33).) This is particularly the case in North Carolina, where recent policy changes on testing, class sizes, teacher pay, teacher tenure, and curriculum are overwhelmingly opposed by teachers (Smith and Imig, “Listening to Those on the Front Lines,” 2013) and the public (Smith and Imig, 2014), placing school leaders in a pinch between their supervisors and the people they serve.

Sean Bulson, Wilson County School District’s superintendent, is certainly in this pinch. After a successful career in the Montgomery County (MD) public schools where strong student performance on standardized tests is a marker of the district’s success, he was hired to helm Wilson County Public Schools in 2011 (Wilson County Schools, “About Sean Bulson,” 2014.). Bulson realized both that performance needed to improve and that the imposition of a

standardized regime from outside the city would fail. So in collaboration with Wilson 2020, a community planning effort, Bulson has led the creation of a city-wide Youth Master Plan. That plan, which is nearing its final stage of development, is built on dozens of small task forces (made up of representatives from highly-trusted institutions—local schools, small businesses, local civic leaders, etc.) setting goals for the community as a whole on the well-being of young people. Bulson’s insight is that these task forces engage the public in setting the directions of the schools, embed school performance in the overall well-being of the community, and emerge from the local knowledge of community members.

I use the phrase “local knowledge” in a particular way. It represents both information about Wilson that might be hidden to the outside (and is thus aligned with the idea of trusteeship at the basis of oikophilia) and a way of deploying that knowledge in particular situations. James C. Scott, who uses the Greek term “metis” to describe this type of knowledge, contrasts it with the “more general, abstract knowledge deployed by the state and its technical agencies (Scott, 311).” For Scott, metis is analogous to the wisdom that comes from long years of practicing a craft. He writes, “Knowing how and when to apply the rules of thumb in a concrete setting is the essence of metis. The subtleties of application are important precisely because metis is most valuable in settings that are mutable, indeterminant...and particular (Scott, 316).”

It is not hard to see the place of metis in Wilson’s youth master planning process. The planning groups bring together people who have developed metis—who know the community (or put another way, have made improving Wilson their craft) and who know the experience of encouraging students to learn, in and outside of the classroom. The Youth Master Plan will contain goals that link to improving test scores on standardized examinations. But those goals will exist in context of the overall well-being of the community, their achievement will depend

on the ability of the community to improve itself (indeed, task force members, in addition to writing the goals, become responsible for their implementation and reporting), and their creation will have served to bring into the open the community's local knowledge (often hidden by Wilson's social system). The Youth Master Plan, then, is a way to turn the political tensions inherent in national school reform into an asset for the improvement of local community life.

Relational Behavior, the Challenge of Crumbling Neighborhoods, and the St. John's Community Development Corporation

The Youth Master Plan will work only as well as Wilson's neighborhoods and schools are able to support it. And the problem in Wilson, and many other economically struggling, racially fraught cities is that the functioning of neighborhoods is an uncertain thing. It is this insight that has led to some of the most visible recent efforts to reform schools—the Harlem Children's Zone, for example (Tough, *Whatever it Takes*, 2009). In Wilson, the hope for the creation of functioning neighborhoods that support public schools, resides most visibly in the St. John's Community Development Corporation and its Executive Director, the Reverend Dr. Michael Bell.

The Reverend Bell is Pastor of the St. John's African Methodist Episcopal Zion church in Wilson. St. John's has, for the past seven years, set itself to redevelop Wilson's struggling downtown and the housing projects that surround it. The St. John's Community Development Corporation, its non-profit arm, runs two major efforts. The first has purchased a major downtown building and begun to transform it into a commercial hub which also provides low-income housing. Revenue from that project aims to support St. John's "Save a Youth" projects, where young people receive vocational training, after-school programs, and unquestioning love.

The Save a Youth programs are housed in a former elementary school situated in one of Wilson's poorest public housing projects, leased to St. John's CDC by the school district. Every day, between 150 and 300 young people come to the school, where they receive snacks, mentoring, and a safe place until a parent or guardian retrieves them. St. John's CDC has just picked up a contract from the district to provide mentoring to suspended middle- and high-school students during the day as well.

As one might expect, young people in Save a Youth receive both love and correction. The combination of those things grows out of a particular sense of community borne from the churches that support the effort. That sense of community is based in treating youth as "persons" rather than "individuals." In using the term "person" I am again claiming a particular meaning of the word, one coming from recent work in sociology (Smith, *What is a Person?* 2010.) and theology (Root, *The Relational Pastor*, 2013). Smith's work is highly theoretical and complex—I will commend it but not cite it extensively in this section. But Root's gloss on it goes a long way towards explaining the power of St. John CDC's efforts to invigorate Wilson's neighborhoods by saving its young people.

Root approaches personhood in two steps. First, he distinguishes between individualism and personalism. Root writes, "Individualism is constructed around...seeing people as fundamentally rational animals that are loyal to what enhances or fulfills their individual self-interest. Individualism says you are your interests, where personalism says you are your relationships (Root, 48)." In particular, placing individualism at the core of one's philosophy leads people to focus on fulfilling the wants of individuals by providing them with objects. (Here, we might think of many education reform efforts that assume that the provision of certain

things—an iPad, say, or access to a summer camp or a scholarship, or an internship, or a job-- will fulfill an individual's needs or desires.)

Second, Root distinguishes between the types of interactions that flourish in an individualist setting and those that flourish in a relational setting. In individualism, interactions are transactional—you scratch my back and I will scratch yours (Root, 53). In personalism, interactions are built around empathetic relationships, those that treat others not in their roles (teacher, student) but in their relationships (friend, neighbor, brother).

The distinction between treating humans as individuals and as persons is essential for understanding the work of St. John's CDC. The young people involved in St. John's work cannot flourish in an individualist setting because they cannot guarantee that they will hold up their end of the transaction. Many of the young people in St. John's programs have nothing to give in return. Their performance in school can improve but it may never rise above average, their families will never be able to give back the value of the support they receive, their isolation from the riches of American society has, in fact, pushed them to the margins.

Treated as people whose relationships help define them, though, the youth in Save a Youth can become full participants in the community. Most of the youth in the program bring their relationships with them. They care for younger siblings, worry about an incarcerated parent, or love a grandparent or friend. And they seek meaningful relationships with the tutors and church members who serve in the program. Root describes these relationships as a form of "indwelling"—built not to "seek to influence someone's interest" (as in individualism), but to "share the other's place" (Root, 73)—with others. Indwelling relies on action and communication, rather than exchanges. And it assumes that persons are both spiritual (having the potential for transcendence) and broken (having the experience of weakness).

St. John CDC's efforts are too new for me to say that they will ultimately transform Wilson's neighborhoods. But it is certain that they have transformed people—young men who have moved from incarceration to leadership, children who have found for the first time loving relationships in after-school programs and the people who mentor them there. It is certain also that for poor neighborhoods, like those in Wilson, and for neighborhoods where access to wealth is limited by the social, political, and economic systems, as in Wilson, relational work bears significant hope. At its core, relational education is democratic, since it assumes both the potential of all people and the weakness of all people. And it argues that only in relationship can their efforts result in the improvement of people and the community.

Practical Wisdom, Low-Performing Schools, and the Hearne-Barton Partnership

Students from several schools attend St. John CDC's Save a Youth programs, so while neighborhoods, or streets, or homes may improve through the relationships built there, it is unlikely that schools will improve, at least as measured by test scores. Barton College, my employer, has built a partnership with Hearne Elementary, Wilson's lowest-performing school, to see if relationships between a college and a school can improve the school itself. Barton and Hearne (beneficiaries of a grant from the Golden Leaf Foundation), have committed, over a three year period, to reinvigorate Hearne Elementary.

The partnership is built on the fault-line between two competing conceptions of education. The first is that student scores on tests are the key determinant of a school's success (and that of its students). The second is that schools and the families who depend on them can be improved by the application of the wisdom of the teachers, administrators, and collaborators who care for them. This fault-line is one that every educator walks today. The status of the district, the measures of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, and the national efforts to

improve schooling all rely on improved test scores and the curricula that lead to them. But the actual on-the-ground difficulties, the commitments of the teachers and families, the real educational needs of students and the limits that exist in the real world all point to the need for *wisdom* in the pursuit of school improvement.

As in previous sections of this paper, the key term in this section—“wisdom”—carries a particular meaning. I am referring to the Greek term “phronesis” which is variously translated as “prudence” or “practical wisdom.” The term is central to Aristotle’s work, and there is a vast literature devoted to explicating the term, its meaning, and its implications. In my treatment, I am indebted particularly to Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe’s recent work *Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to Do the Right Thing* (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010).

Schwartz and Sharpe write with a particular concern in mind—that the emergence of rules-based systems in medicine, law, and education is de-skilling and de-moralizing those professions. That demoralization has damaged the ability of doctors, lawyers, and teachers to act with wisdom. In Schwartz and Sharpe’s formulation, the imposition of rules (and incentives for following them) threaten the moral skill and moral will of professionals, which emerge from long experience and the freedom to be empathetic to those they serve. As a result, those professionals face the quandary of abandoning their accumulated wisdom (much of which is the result of local knowledge, or *metis*) in order to conform to the new system, or resisting the system at the risk of their careers and the well-being of those whom they serve—a behavior that Schwartz and Sharpe refer to as acting like a “canny outlaw.”

This quandary is of particular difficulty for teachers and administrators at low-performing schools. It is, after all, standardized scores and measures that have defined those schools as low-performing, and it is only the improvement of those scores that will remove them from that

status. What is more, low-performing schools struggle to attract strong teachers, and teacher turnover at low-performing schools is high. And since teacher evaluation is increasingly linked to student achievement, the pressure to raise scores or find ways to teach more high-achieving students is significant.

Hearne Elementary faces all of those challenges. Ninety-five percent of its students receive free or reduced-cost lunch, ninety-seven percent are students of color. Only fourteen percent of its students read at grade level; thirteen percent are at grade level in math (NC School Report Cards, “Margaret Hearne Elementary,” 2012). The Barton-Hearne partnership, then, has a triple challenge—to support teachers and administrators, to strengthen their teaching, and to improve student achievement.

Many districts with schools in similar situations have chosen to use highly scripted curricula that drive at specific curricular outcomes. Our partnership has chosen instead to focus on strengthening classroom climate, improve the instructional skills of teachers, and to enhance the learning resources available to parents—or put another way, to enhance the wisdom of the school, its students, and their parents. Perhaps more important, though, the partnership has made it possible for faculty and students from outside of the School of Education to bring their wisdom to the school. Nursing faculty and students provide health screening, Barton’ student government recruits college students to mentor elementary school students. And Barton’s President and Superintendent Bulson have committed to turning Hearne into a quality elementary school.

This is not to say that all is well. Student test scores declined slightly this year. Teacher performance and satisfaction ebb and flow. The spectre of poor test performance hangs over the school. And the stress of administrating the school provide unrelenting pressure on the school’s

administration. In this setting it is difficult to build a system that develops both the experience and empathy of teachers, and thus their wisdom. Or put in the language of the previous section, standardized tests and school rankings have turned much of the educational context at Hearne into one that focuses on transactions between individuals instead of relationships between persons. The effort of our partnership is to see if by building broad, cross-disciplinary support for the school, teachers can be freed up to focus on personal relationships with the young people who call Hearne school, and by so doing, reassert their wisdom.

Invigorating Schools by Invigorating Local Democracy, and Vice Versa

Let me close by returning to where I began. We live in a time where trust in national and large-scale institutions is shaky at best, but where trust remains for local and small-scale institutions. This is a civic crisis, and given the national drives for educational reform, an educational crisis as well.

In response I have argued that certain civic orientations—love of place, local knowledge, relational interactions, and the development of wisdom—can flourish in the “local first” environment, because they have local or particularistic roots. And I have argued also that such orientations can help improve schooling by responding effectively to certain common educational challenges—the relationship between charter schools and the public school system, the role of community input in shaping schools, the invigoration of neighborhoods, and the challenge of improving low-performing schools.

In this closing section, I am to do two more things. First, I want to suggest that teachers, administrators, and community members can enhance these orientations by making significant but minor changes in their current work. Love of the home place grows, for example, where students learn local history as well as national history, where connections across generations are

intentional, and where schools and communities consistently foster meaningful traditions. Local knowledge emerges out of stronger oikophilia, and out of places in the curriculum where craft is taught consistently over time. This is yet another argument on behalf of music, art, and shop—all of which help young people produce things that build craftsmanship. Relational interactions happen in many schools by nature, and can happen more if districts will commit to hiring more counselors and making parent/teacher conferences more about conferring and less about handing back papers. Wisdom will grow where it is valued, and where schools resist making rules for every occasion. And all of these orientations will grow when they are identified as central to the work of schools and communities, not as luxuries to be jettisoned in the face of budget challenges and external mandates.

Second, I want to make explicit something that is implicit throughout this paper. The sorts of local civic improvements I am advocating are conservative, not in a political sense, but in a cultural sense. They are inspired by Edmund Burke more than by Thomas Paine (to borrow Yuval Levin's formulation in *The Great Debate* (Levin, 2013).) They build from what already exists, favor tradition, aim to develop meaningful connections across the generations, grow out of experience, and are humble about their ultimate prospects. This last point is worth some emphasis. I do not imagine that the development of oikophilia, for example, will resolve the question of choice in public education, or that freeing teachers to be wise will bring American students to the level of their Finnish or Singaporean counterparts, or that the flourishing of all four orientations will make the Wilson County Public Schools the equal of those in Greenwich, Connecticut. I do believe, though, that these four orientations can make the lived experience of people better, in that they connect them more meaningfully to each other and to the places they

live. In a world where disconnection is endemic, these are not small things. They are worth fighting for.

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