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# Democracy & Education

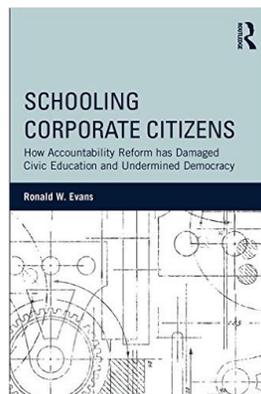
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## How History Shows the Damage Done by Corporate Influence on Education

A Book Review of *Schooling Corporate Citizens: How Accountability Reform Has Damaged Civic Education and Undermined Democracy*

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**A**CCOUNTABILITY-BASED REFORM HAS permeated conversations about educational policy and curriculum since the passage of No Child Left Behind. What is the impact of the accountability movement on schools, students, and the relationship between the educational system and democracy? These questions are at the root of Ronald W. Evans's (2015) *Schooling Corporate Citizens: How Accountability Reform has Damaged Civic Education and Undermined Democracy* (100 Key Points). Evans theorized that the accountability movement is motivated by the desires of corporate interests and their lobbies to educate a compliant, efficient workforce. He argued that accountability has undermined civic education in particular, as well as social studies education more broadly. Beginning with a historical perspective on accountability measures and proceeding with political and economic analyses of how these reforms have taken shape over the last three decades, Evans provided a measured examination of how corporate interests have become an increasingly powerful force in shaping the national curriculum. Evans warned that a democratic education must continue to take social studies seriously and must above all attend to the relationship

between educational methods and the development of an engaged, critical citizenry.

Evans (2015) began his book by asking a few framing questions: "What is happening to citizenship education in America? Why the rush to accountability in schools? How should educators and concerned citizens respond" (p. 4)? He answered these questions by arguing that the influence of big business, coupled with neoconservative politics and the ostensible inextricability of religion and government in the United States, has brought the accountability movement to fruition. After framing these overarching questions and ideas, Evans proceeded chronologically. He began with the passage of the ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act) under President Lyndon B. Johnson and proceeded through each subsequent presidential administration,

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looking in turn at how educational policy and curriculum evolved during that time period. Evans concluded with a questioning but, I believe, wrongly optimistic assessment of the Common Core and a look at how accountability measures have impacted specifically social studies education, with the underlying assumption that here we can find answers to the connection between U.S. education and the future of American democracy. In his introduction, Evans was upfront that he has “been skeptical of the standards and accountability movement from the start” (p. 7); however, in the text, he relied on archival, legislative, and balanced secondary sources in an effort to mitigate his instinctual reactions and provide a balanced view.

A major strength of Evans’s (2015) text is the comprehensive and strikingly lucid nature of his chronological overview of accountability-based reforms. Clear about the fact that the 1980s are often cited as the beginning of the standards movement, Evans looked back to the popularity of human capital theory in the 1950s and ’60s, the 1971 Powell Memo oriented toward galvanizing the involvement of the business community in education, and the formation of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) in 1973, among other turning points, as leading to the culture that supported the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, with its resultant hysteria. Evans’s writing is such that someone largely unfamiliar with the history of American educational policy could achieve a solid grasp on both the legislative and the cultural landmarks impacting upon this history. At the same time, he offered an astute and nuanced analysis so that those familiar with the more concrete elements of the history are offered a set of assumptions to question and a synthesis of material derived from a variety of sources and perspectives. Describing the multicultural education movement of the 1980s and ’90s, he addressed both popular and scholarly aspects of the debate:

*Supporters of multicultural education asserted that the perspectives of persons of color, women and the working class had been excluded from the study of history, literature, and the humanities . . . The crux of the debate centered on [Arthur M.] Schlesinger’s assertion that we were once ‘united’ as a nation. (pp. 71–73)*

Evans (2015) also offered a strong indictment of the nature of corporate influences on schools and especially on education for democratic ends. This comes through with particular clarity in chapters three and five, when he described the social studies wars and the nearly toxic impact that accountability-based reforms have had on social studies education. “The standards movement,” he wrote, “through imposition of a technology of testing, seemed to freeze out the possibility of alternative approaches to social studies aimed at creating a thoughtful citizenry” (p. 172). Evans’s argument is unique in that he showed a nearly linear relationship between corporate backing of and influence on particular curricula and the diminishment of social studies content as well as teaching methodologies oriented toward critical thinking in the strong sense or open-ended inquiry. Taubman (2009) has similarly pointed to the damage done to education by increasing corporate involvement, stating that “there is overwhelming

evidence of the intrusion into education of for-profit corporations” (p. 105). Evans’s decision to focus on social studies is particularly important since various other indictments of accountability-based reform have already taken the strategies to task for their dehumanizing of teachers and students, their numerically based assessment, and their negative impact on relationships in schools, classrooms, and communities, as well as their dilution of curricula in literacy and math. The impact of accountability-based reforms on social studies, however, gets at a terrifying political and economic motivation of the reforms, which Evans articulated: the cultivation of a docile, acritical workforce, and the education of a citizenry oriented primarily toward serving corporate interests. Evans described the way the “social studies wars” have led to a sense that “teaching in social studies is haunted by ghosts of what might have been” (p. 1). Indeed, this notion of hauntedness is recurrent in Evans’s text; he described a “tone of confrontation” between corporate interests and those of citizens and educators “that would haunt the process [of curriculum creation] for a long time” (p. 102). He argued that in fact education of “the twenty-first century is haunted by ghosts” (p. 255), such as those of Smith and Friedman, whose economically oriented arguments continue to color the way education gets viewed in the United States. The discourse of hauntedness is fascinating for the sense of mourning and disturbance it evokes; Regenspan (2014) suggested that “the current neoliberal agenda denies . . . hauntedness . . . of how knowledge of social injustice is effectively repressed in this era” (p. xxvi). It was via his painstaking examination of history that Evans resisted this disturbing denial with its resultant failure to mourn.

Evans’s (2015) analysis of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) raised more questions than he answered in describing the current state of the standards movement, and perhaps this was how he intended it—after all, it is true that the Common Core are relatively new. Still, perhaps in his effort to retain a sense of hope or possibility, Evans seemed wrongly charitable (or at least open) to the Common Core. Despite their focus on career readiness, he lauded the Common Core for bringing a focus on social studies back into the national conversation for the way they “have shifted greater emphasis to the learning process” (p. 263). It is curious and perhaps telling that Evans felt compelled to end on even a vaguely optimistic note when there is in fact little evidence that the CCSS are going to move education away from the corporate interests and goals Evans so compellingly and intensely derided throughout much of his text. In fact, as Onosko (2011) has argued, the tremendous standardization suggested by the CCSS might remind us that “lurking in the background is plan B: the privatization of our educational system should . . . nationalized, centralized, standardized reform effort fail” (p. 10). Onosko (2014) has also pointed out that “only 6 of the 604 language arts standards have any civics-related content” (p. 3), and of course, with high-stakes testing only addressing math and language arts, it therefore becomes near impossible to credit the Common Core with helping the social studies. It is not, as Evans implied, too soon to say that in relation to the CCSS, the corporate takeover of our schools and the related downfall of the social studies are actually even more robust and terrifying than Evans would have it.

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