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**Joel Shatzky**

English Professor

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## Educating for Democracy

For my first entry in the Huffington Post, I'd like to address an issue that has been rarely discussed in current public debates concerning problems in the public schools: their role in promoting a democratic society. A fuller account of my views can be found in my article, "Educating for Democracy" in the Winter *Jewish Currents*, in which I argue that to maintain a healthy democratic society students need to be educated in basic principals of democracy including critical thinking. I believe this should be a central concern for improving our present system of public education. However, when one hears about education in the public realm, "global competition" and "accountability" have become buzz words that crowd out other vital issues. The importance of preparing students to be active participants in a democratic society seems to be a subject conspicuously absent from public discussion; but not in the academic world where it is of great concern.

Joel Westheimer, Professor of Education at the University of Ottawa, in an article on educating for democracy, observed:

. . . The high stakes testing mandated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has . . . pushed to the margins education efforts that challenge students to grapple with tough questions about society and the world. In a recent study by the Center on Education Policy, 71 percent of districts reported cutting back time for other subjects -- social studies in particular -- to make more space for reading and math instruction. . . . As historian David McCullough told a U.S. Senate committee . . . , because of NCLB, 'history is being put on the back burner or taken off the stove altogether in many or most schools.' An increasing number of students are getting little to no education about how government works, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the evolution of social movements, and U.S. and world history" (*Independent Schools*, "No Child Left Thinking," Spring, 2008).

The Founding Fathers believed that in order to prevent a dictatorship from arising in the newly established United States, its citizens would be obliged to inform themselves of the vital issues confronting the country. They would also need the reasoning powers to distinguish truth from lies and thus be able to make rational decisions on what policies to support and whom to vote for. Thomas Jefferson expressed the importance of an informed electorate when he said:

Our liberty cannot be guarded but by the freedom of the press, nor that be limited without danger of losing it.

But in order for the press to have a positive impact on citizens' opinions, the electorate must have the ability

to read and think critically.

An informed citizenry needs to balance what is best for its own self-interests with the "greater good": what is best for the health of the country as a whole. Thinking with this perspective stems from a solid, democratically-centered education. But it is not the direction in which public education seems to be moving. We face the danger of a future American citizenry which is no longer equipped to analyze political issues rationally, unaware of what "democracy" even means.

Westheimer has made the distinction among three kinds of citizenship: Personally responsible citizens -- "honest, law-abiding members of the community"; Participatory Citizens -- those who "take leadership positions within established systems and community structures"; and Social Justice-Oriented Citizens, who "question and change established systems and structures when they produce patterns of injustice over time" The critical thinking necessary for citizens to actively promote healthy changes in our society, he insists, are not developed in a test-oriented system; only status quo thinking is emphasized in the short-sighted perspective endorsed by educational leaders like Arne Duncan in which the expansion of charter schools is advocated as a serious remedy for profound pedagogical issues.

The vitriolic political rhetoric evident today is reason to be concerned about the state of American governance. The public is either disgusted or amused by the juvenile behavior of our politicians, but there is little insistence from them that reasoned and civil discourse be restored in the political arena. This should be cause for alarm.

We **should** be alarmed when so much of the debate over health care reform descends into lies, misinformation, and exaggerated claims most notably from the right.

We **should** be alarmed that as a result of the cynical political manipulation of a vital issue there has been a rise in the public's skepticism about the severe changes in the earth's climate. This "no nothing" attitude provides the electorate with a rationale to avoid or deny its obligation toward future generations. Where do we see concerned citizens in significant numbers demonstrating or vigorously lobbying their representatives to think and act in the long term rather than the immediate future? These trends of ignorance and avoidance, I believe, will become even more pronounced if our educational system continues to produce a citizenry unskilled in democratic traditions and practices.

While the present emphasis on testing in schools to determine educational excellence crowds out the teaching of the skills of good citizenship, I wonder: how will we be able to sustain our democratic society if the capacity to read carefully and widely, the need to balance self-interest with the common good, and the necessary intellectual curiosity to learn new things that might challenge old beliefs are no longer a vital part of our children's education?

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