

# Politics and Patriotism in Education

*What does it mean to “teach patriotism”? Mr. Westheimer delineates two versions of patriotism that collide with each other when schools are expected to carry out that mandate.*

**BY JOEL WESTHEIMER**

IN NOVEMBER of 2001, less than two months after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, Nebraska’s state board of education approved a patriotism bill specifying content for the high school social studies curriculum in accordance with Nebraska’s 1949 Nebraska Americanism law. Social studies, the bill read, should include “instruction in . . . the superiority of the U.S. form of government, the dangers of communism and similar ideologies, the duties of citizenship, and appropriate patriotic exercises.” The board further specified that middle school instruction “should instill a love of country” and that the social studies curriculum should include “exploits and deeds of American heroes, singing patriotic songs, memorizing the Star Spangled Banner and America, and reverence for the flag.”<sup>1</sup>



**Jasper Johns 1954-55**

Nebraska was not alone. Within a few months, more than two dozen state legislatures introduced new bills or resurrected old ones aimed at either encouraging or mandating patriotic exercises for all students in schools. Seventeen states enacted new pledge laws or amended policies in the 2002-03 legislative sessions alone.<sup>2</sup> Since then more than a dozen additional states have signed on as well. Twenty-five states now require the pledge to be recited daily during the school day, and 35 require time to be set aside in school for the pledge.

The federal role in encouraging patriotic passion has been significant as well. On 12 October 2001, the White House, in collaboration with the politically conservative private group Celebration U.S.A., called on the nation’s 52 million schoolchildren to take part in a mass recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. Four days later, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution (404-0) urging schools to display the words “God Bless America” in an effort to reinforce national pride. In 2002, six months before the Iraq War, the federal government

and pride. These initiatives, President George W. Bush declared, would “improve students’ knowledge of American history, increase their civic involvement, and deepen their love for our great country.” To engender a sense of patriotism in young Americans, we must, Bush emphasized, teach our children that “America is a force for good in the world, bringing hope and freedom to other people.”<sup>3</sup> And the 2005 federal budget allocates \$120 million to grants that support the teaching of “traditional American History.” In addition, a campaign by the National Endowment for the Humanities seeks to fund the celebration of traditional “American heroes.”

The drive to engage students in patriotic instruction shows no sign of abating and, in fact, may be taking on new fervor. These efforts share at least two characteristics. First, as I detail below, the form of patriotism being pursued by many school boards, city and state legislatures, and the federal government is often monolithic, reflecting an “America-right-or-wrong” stance— what philosopher Martha Nussbaum warns is

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“perilously close to jingoism.”<sup>4</sup> Many educators have condemned these developments as a legislative assault on democratic values in the school curriculum. Second, few of these initiatives included teachers or local school administrators in their conception or development. The direction has come from on high — from the U.S. Department of Education, from local and state boards of education, and from politicians.

But the grassroots response has been far more complex. At the level of the classroom and the school, the efforts of individual teachers, students, principals, and community organizations paint a broad array of curricular responses to the calls for patriotic education. Many teachers and administrators have implemented mandatory policies, shunned controversy, and reinforced the America-is-righteous-in-her-cause message, just as the Bush Administration and politically conservative commentators have wanted. However, terrorism, war, and the threat of fundamentalist intolerance have sparked other educators’ commitments to teaching for democratic citizenship, the kind of citizenship that recognizes ambiguity and conflict, that sees human conditions and aspirations as complex and contested, and that embraces debate and deliberation as a cornerstone of patriotism and civic education. In the nation’s classrooms, patriotism is politically contested terrain.

#### **WHAT IS PATRIOTISM?**

It has often been said that the Inuit have many words to describe snow because one would be wholly inadequate to capture accurately the variety of frozen precipitation. Like snow, patriotism is a more nuanced idea than is immediately apparent. Political scientists, sociologists, and educators would do well to expand the roster of words used to describe the many attitudes, beliefs, and actions that are now called “patriotism.” So before we can talk about the politics of patriotism in schools, it makes sense to get clear on at least a few definitions.

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to delve deeply into the many forms of patriotic attitudes and actions, two umbrella categories of patriotism are worth brief exploration. Each is relevant to debates over curriculum and school policy, and each represents political positions that have implications for what students learn about patriotism, civic engagement, and democracy. I will be calling these two manifestations of patriotism *authoritarian* and *democratic*, and their distinctive characteristics are displayed in Table 1.

#### **AUTHORITARIAN PATRIOTISM**

In a democracy, political scientist Douglas Lummis argues, patriotism reflects the love that brings a people together rather than the misguided love of institutions that dominate them. “Authoritarian patriotism,” he notes, “is a resigning of one’s will, right of choice, and need to understand to the authority; its emotional base is

gratitude for having been liberated from the burden of democratic responsibility.”<sup>5</sup> Authoritarian patriotism asks for unquestioning loyalty to a cause determined by a centralized leader or leading group. In his 1966 book, *Freedom and Order*, historian Henry Steele Commager observed, “Men in authority will always think that criticism of their policies is dangerous. They will always equate their policies with patriotism, and find criticism subversive.”<sup>6</sup> Authoritarian patriotism demands allegiance to the government’s cause and therefore opposes dissent. To say that authoritarian patriotism comes only from the ruling authority would be too simplistic, however. The social psychology of authoritarian patriotism (especially in a democracy) depends on a deliberate and complicit populace. Following September 11, an abundance of American flags and bumper stickers suddenly sprouted in virtually every city, suburb, town, and rural district in the country. While the flags signaled understandable solidarity in a time of crisis, other public expressions of national pride carried more worrisome messages. Fiercely nationalistic and jingoistic sentiments could be seen and heard in bumper stickers, news broadcasts, television, and politics. Schools were no exception, and students soon witnessed adults showcasing authoritarian responses to issues of enormous democratic importance.

For example, in 2004 more than 10,000 high schools, community colleges, and public libraries were mailed a free video called “Patriotism and You” by the Washington, D.C.-based group Committee for Citizen Awareness. The group boasts that the video has now been seen by 30 million children and adults nationwide. Teacher Bill Priest of Rock Bridge, Maryland, showed the video to his class as “an example of propaganda of a sort.”<sup>7</sup> Statements such as “Patriotism is respecting authority” and “We should manifest a unity of philosophy, especially in times of war” pervade the video. Priest wondered why nobody in the film talks about the right to express patriotic dissent. As this video and dozens of other recent initiatives that aim to teach patriotism illustrate, the primary characteristic of authoritarian patriotism is disdain for views that deviate from an official “patriotic” stance. And proponents of an authoritarian kind of patriotism have looked to the schools to help deliver a unified message and have sought to punish educators who allow or offer dissenting perspectives.

#### **DEMOCRATIC PATRIOTISM**

In a National Public Radio show titled “Teaching Patriotism in Time of War,” social historian Howard Zinn described eloquently a possible counterstance to authoritarian patriotism. “Patriotism,” he said, “means being true and loyal —not to the government, but to the principles which underlie democracy.”<sup>8</sup> Democratic patriotism aims to remain true to these principles. A few historical examples illustrate this position.

In 1950, Sen. Margaret Chase Smith (R-Me.) was the first member of Congress to publicly confront Sen. Joseph McCarthy (R-Wis.). She prepared a Declaration of Conscience urging her fellow senators to protect individual liberties and the ideals of freedom and democracy on which the United States was founded. As she presented the declaration, Sen. Smith said the following: “Those of us who shout the loudest about Americanism are all too frequently those who . . . ignore some of the basic principles of Americanism — the right to criticize, the right to hold unpopular beliefs, the right to protest, the right of independent thought.”<sup>9</sup>

Many educators, policy makers, and ordinary citizens have embraced a vision of patriotism that reflects these ideals about democracy and the duties of democratic citizens. When he sang Woodie Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land,” Pete Seeger expressed many patriotic sentiments about the United States, but when he appeared before McCarthy’s House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), he noted: “I have never done anything of any conspiratorial nature, and I resent very much and very deeply the implication . . . that in some way because my opinions may be different from yours . . . I am any less of an American than anybody else. I love my country very deeply.”<sup>10</sup>

African American actor, performer, and All-American football player Paul Robeson addressed HUAC in even starker terms: “You gentlemen . . . are the nonpatriots, and you are the un-Americans, and you ought to be ashamed of yourselves.”<sup>11</sup>

More recently, some citizens agreed with Attorney General John Ashcroft’s admonition that anyone who criticizes the government is giving “ammunition to America’s enemies” (a notably authoritarian patriotic position). Others saw things differently: dissent is important, and, as a popular march placard indicates, in a democratic nation, “Dissent Is Patriotic.”

Another look into history reveals a democratic vision of patriotism as well. Although millions of schoolchildren recite the Pledge of Allegiance every day, far fewer know much about its author. Francis Bellamy, author of the original 1892 pledge (which did not contain any reference to “God”), was highly critical of many trends of late-19th-century American life, most notably unrestrained capitalism and growing individualism. He wanted America to reflect basic democratic values, such as equality of opportunity, and he worked openly to have his country live up to its democratic ideals.

| TABLE 1: The Politics of Patriotism |  |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|
|                                     | Authoritarian Patriotism   | Democratic Patriotism  |
| Ideology                            | <p>Belief that one’s country is inherently superior to others.</p> <p>Primary allegiance to land, birthright, legal citizenship, and government’s cause.</p> <p>Non-questioning loyalty.</p> <p>Follow leaders reflexively, support them unconditionally.</p> <p>Blind to shortcomings and social discord within nation.</p> <p>Conformist; dissent seen as dangerous and destabilizing.</p> | <p>Belief that a nation’s ideals are worthy of admiration and respect.</p> <p>Primary allegiance to set of principles that underlie democracy.</p> <p>Questioning, critical, deliberative.</p> <p>Care for the people of society based on particular principles (eg., liberty, justice).</p> <p>Outspoken in condemnation of shortcomings, especially within nation.</p> <p>Respectful, even encouraging of dissent.</p> |
| Slogans                             | <p>My country, right or wrong.</p> <p>America: love it or leave it.</p>  | <p>Dissent is patriotic.</p> <p>You have the right to NOT remain silent.</p>   |
| Historical Example                  | <p>McCarthy Era House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) proceedings, which reinforced the idea that dissenting views are anti-American and unpatriotic.</p>  | <p>The fiercely patriotic testimony of Paul Robeson, Pete Seeger and others before HUAC admonishing the committee for straying from American principles of democracy and justice</p>   |
| Contemporary Example                | <p>Equating opposition to the war in Iraq with ‘hatred’ of America or support for terrorism.</p>   | <p>Reinforcing American principles of equality, justice, tolerance, and civil liberties, especially during national times of crisis.</p>   |

Was Bellamy patriotic? Of course, but his was not patriotism of the authoritarian kind. Indeed, many of America's national icons shared a democratic vision of patriotism. For instance, Emma Lazarus wrote the poem that became the inscription on the base of the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Katherine Lee Bates, an

English professor and poet at Wellesley College, wrote the lyrics to "America the Beautiful," including the words "America! America! God mend thine every flaw!" Bellamy, Lazarus, Bates, and many like-minded reformers throughout America's history asserted their patriotism by strongly proclaiming their beliefs in democratic values such as free speech, civil liberties, greater participation in politics, and social and economic equality.<sup>12</sup>

Caring about the substantive values that underlie American democracy is the hallmark of democratic patriotism. This does not mean that democratic patriots leave no room for symbolic displays of support and solidarity. Few would argue with the power of symbols. And the authors and composers mentioned above created the very symbols of American patriotism on which proponents of authoritarian patriotism rely. But democratic patriotism seeks to ensure that "liberty and justice for all" serves not only as a slogan for America but also as a guiding principle for policies, programs, and laws that affect Americans. To be a democratic patriot, then, one must be committed not only to the nation, its symbols, and its political leaders, but also to each of its citizens and their welfare. "This land is your land, this land is my land," "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," "Crown thy good with brotherhood" — for democratic patriots, these visions represent the ideal America, one worth working toward openly, reflectively, and passionately.

### **INCREASING AUTHORITARIAN PATRIOTISM IN SCHOOLS**

I have already detailed several district, state, and federal campaigns to promote one particular view of American history, one narrow view of U.S. involvement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and so on. There are others. Hundreds of schools, for example, now use the Library of Congress' new "Courage, Patriotism, Community" website. Advertised widely among educators, this website was founded "in celebration of the American spirit" and includes "patriotic melodies" and "stories from the Veterans History Project."<sup>13</sup> Despite a few prominently posted questions — such as "Does patriotism mean displaying the flag or practicing dissent or both?" — there is little material on the site that lends anything but a prowar, America-can-do-no-wrong vision of patriotism. Similarly, the Fordham Foundation produced a set of resources for teaching patriotism called *Terrorists, Despot, and Democracy: What Our Children Need to Know*, which, under the guise of teaching "indisputable

facts," presents storybook tales of "good" and "evil" in the world. But the smaller stories — those taking place in the nation's classrooms and individual schools — might portray more tangible causes for concern.

In New Mexico, five teachers were recently suspended or disciplined for promoting discussion among students about the Iraq War and for expressing, among a range of views, antiwar sentiments. One teacher refused to remove art posters created by students that reflected their views on the war and was suspended without pay. Alan Cooper, a teacher from Albuquerque, was suspended for refusing to remove student-designed posters that his principal labeled "not sufficiently prowar." Two other teachers, Rio Grande High School's Carmelita Roybal and Albuquerque High School's Ken Tabish, were suspended and docked 2-4 day's pay for posting signs about the war, at least one of which opposed military action. And a teacher at Highland Hills School was placed on administrative leave because she refused to remove a flier from her wall advertising a peace rally. Each of these schools posts military recruitment posters and photographs of soldiers in Iraq.<sup>14</sup>

In West Virginia, high school student Katie Sierra was suspended for wearing a T-shirt with a rewritten version of the pledge on it: "I pledge the grievance to the flag" it began. And it ended, "With liberty and justice for some, not all." Some of her classmates at Sissonville High School told reporters that they intended to give Katie a taste of "West Virginia justice." The school's principal, Forrest Mann, suspended Katie for three days and forbade her to wear the controversial shirt, saying that her behavior was "disrupting school activity." Indeed, at least one of Katie's classmates felt that the shirt disrupted her studies, writing that Katie's actions "greatly saddened me and brought tears to my eyes. I watched as a young lady was permitted to walk down the hallways of Sissonville High School wearing a T-shirt that spoke against American patriotism." No students were disciplined for wearing shirts emblazoned with the American flag.<sup>15</sup>

In Broomfield, Colorado, 17-year-old David Dial was suspended for posting fliers advertising an "International Student Anti-War Day of Action." He noted that it was "just a peaceful protest against the war in Iraq," adding that his suspension was hypocritical given the fanfare at the school surrounding new curricula that promoted student civic and political involvement.<sup>16</sup>

But perhaps two of the most interesting cases involve the Patriot Act. In the first case, a Florida teacher handed out to his students copies of a quotation: "They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety." He asked students to interpret this statement in light of current events. (The class had previously studied the circumstances surrounding the internment of Japanese Americans during

World War II.) After discussing the implications of the quotation, the teacher asked the class whether anyone knew who wrote it. When none guessed correctly, he showed them an overhead slide that included the name and a drawing of its author: Benjamin Franklin. They then discussed the intentions of the nation's Founders, constitutional protections, and so on. This teacher was supported by parents but was disciplined by the principal for straying from the mandated civics curriculum standards. A letter of reprimand remains in his personnel file.

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## Telling students that history has one interpretation reflects an approach to teaching love of country that too easily succumbs to authoritarianism.

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The second case might be apocryphal, but this story (and many others like it) has been circulating among teachers, professors of education, and concerned parents. I have been unable to find solid documentation, but I include it here to demonstrate the degree to which these stories invoke teachers' and the public's sense that, in the current climate of intimidation, dissent in the context of civic education is subject to repression and regulation.

The story goes roughly thus: A New York State high school teacher was reprimanded for having his students examine historical comparisons of crisis times in U.S. history. He introduced students to the Alien and Sedition acts of 1798 and the Sedition Act of 1918. The earlier acts allowed President John Adams to arrest, imprison, and deport "dangerous" immigrants on suspicion of "treasonable or secret machinations against the government" and to suppress freedom of the press. The more recent act restricted criticism of the government, the Constitution, and the military. Pairing these acts with the text of today's Patriot Act, he asked students to assess the three time periods and argue for the justice or injustice of each law. Several parents complained that the teacher was not encouraging patriotism, and the principal instructed the teacher to discontinue the lesson.

### **PATRIOTISM AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR POLITICS**

Much of the rationale behind the cases of teachers being reprimanded in schools rests on the idea that patriotism, especially where public schools are concerned, should remain above partisan politics. Dissent, rather than being viewed as an essential component of democratic deliberation, is seen as a threat to patriotism. Indeed, in this view, "politics" is something unseemly and best left to mudslinging candidates for public office: being political is tantamount to devaluing the public good for personal or party gain. Education, in this way of thinking, should not advance "politics" but rather should reinforce some

unified notion of truth that supports — without dissent — officially accepted positions.

For example, Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.), a former U.S. secretary of education under President Reagan, introduced the American History and Civics Education Act in March 2003 to teach "key persons, the key events, the key ideas, and the key documents that shape [our] democratic heritage."<sup>17</sup> According to Sen. Alexander, this legislation would put civics back in its "rightful place in our schools, so our children can grow up learning what it means to be an American."<sup>18</sup>

These efforts by the Congress and by conservative members of the Bush Administration have been applauded by those who view education primarily as a means of conveying to American youths and young adults a monolithic set of important historical facts combined with a sense of civic unity, duty, and national pride. Reaching back to a 1950s-style understanding of the American past and the workings of American society, Sen. Alexander and like-minded politicians suggest that Americans, despite diverse backgrounds and cultures, all share a unified American creed or a common set of beliefs and that these beliefs are easily identifiable. Explicitly borrowing from consensus historian Richard Hofstadter, Sen. Alexander believes that "it has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies but to be one."<sup>19</sup>

Telling students that history has one interpretation (and that interpretation is that the U.S. is pretty much always right and moral and just in its actions) reflects an approach to teaching love of country that too easily succumbs to authoritarianism. Yet teaching this one unified creed — especially in the wake of the September 11 attacks — is rarely viewed as being political. "Being political" is an accusation most often reserved for exploring views that are unpopular — the kind of views, not surprisingly, that come from critical, reflective, and democratic forms of patriotic teaching.

In many schools throughout the U.S., this tendency to cast patriotism and politics as opposites runs especially deep. So strong are the anti-politics politics of schooling that even mundane efforts at teaching for democratic understandings, efforts that aim to encourage discussion around controversial topics, for example, are often deemed indoctrination. After a teacher allowed students to recite an antiwar poem they had written during a school assembly, one parent argued in a parents' forum, "We live in the USA, so singing a patriotic song isn't inappropriate. But politics has no place in the school."<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, after the National Education Association developed lessons plans about the events of September 11, politicians, policy makers, and some parents worried that the curriculum — titled "Tolerance in Times of Trial" — did not paint a positive enough picture of U.S.

involvement in world affairs. Conservative political commentator and talk show host Laura Ingraham attacked the curriculum as indoctrination, warning that the lessons encouraged students to “discuss instances of American intolerance.” Curricular materials developed by the Los Angeles-based Center for Civic Education that included discussion of controversial issues in multiculturalism, diversity, and protection of the environment drew similar criticism. And we are already seeing evidence of attacks on curriculum about the social, economic, and political implications of Hurricane Katrina.<sup>21</sup>

### **POLITICS IS NOT A DIRTY WORD**

But politics is not a four-letter word. Patriotism, if it is to reflect democratic ideals, needs politics. In a lecture on citizenship in the 21st century, Harry Boyte, co-director of the University of Minnesota’s Center for Democracy and Citizenship, argued that politics is the way people with different values and from different backgrounds can “work together to solve problems and create common things of value.”<sup>22</sup> In this view, politics is the process by which citizens with varied interests and opinions negotiate differences and clarify places where values conflict. Boyte cited *In Defense of Politics* by Bernard Crick in calling politics “a great and civilizing activity.” For Boyte, accepting the importance of politics is to strive for deliberation and a plurality of views rather than a unified perspective on history, foreign policy, or domestic affairs. For those seeking to instill democratic patriotism, “being political” means embracing the kind of controversy and ideological sparring that is the engine of progress in a democracy and that gives education social meaning. The idea that “bringing politics into it” (now said disdainfully) is a pedagogically questionable act is, perhaps, the biggest threat to engaging students in discussions about what it means to be patriotic in a democratic nation.

It is precisely this aspect of politics with which educators wrestle. While many, like Boyte, see education as an opportunity to teach the critical and deliberative skills that are consistent with democratic patriotism and enable students to participate effectively in contentious public debates, others are uncomfortable with approaches to teaching that encourage dissent and critique of current policies. For example, the events of the Iraq War and the ongoing “reconstruction” have led policy makers and educators who favor authoritarian patriotism to prefer celebrating what President Bush has repeatedly called “the rightness of our cause.”

The classroom dramas described above illustrate the intensity with which battles over controversial issues in the classroom can be waged. Yet there are dozens, perhaps hundreds, of curricular efforts that deliberately engage “politics” as a healthy embodiment of the diversity of opinions, motivations, and goals that make up democratic patriotism.

### **TEACHING DEMOCRATIC PATRIOTISM**

Many valuable debates about patriotism do not take as their starting point the question “Should patriotic instruction be apolitical or political, obedient or critical?” Rather, they begin with questions such as “Whose politics do these education programs reflect and why?” or “Which citizens benefit from particular policies and programs and which do not?” Such programs aim toward democratic patriotism.

Initiatives that emphasize a vision of democratic patriotism tend to come from nongovernmental education organizations, small groups of curriculum writers, and individual teachers rather than from textbook companies or district, state, and federal education departments. As Operation Iraqi Freedom began in March 2003, Oregon teacher Sandra Childs asked students to consider the relationship between patriotism and the First Amendment, using the words of Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) as a starting point: “The time for debate is over.” A school in Chicago reorganized its interdisciplinary curriculum around the theme of competing national concerns for civil liberties and safety. Some efforts encompass an entire school as the vision is infused into nearly every aspect of the curriculum, extracurricular activities, and even the physical space. I briefly describe two such programs here, but I encourage readers to search out others.<sup>23</sup>

*El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice.* The El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice is located in Brooklyn’s Williamsburg neighborhood.<sup>24</sup> It was established in 1993 by El Puente (“The Bridge”), a community organization, in partnership with the New York City Board of Education. The academy is academically successful (a 90% graduation rate in an area where schools usually see 50% of their students graduate in four years). But what makes the school especially compelling is its firm commitment to reverse the cycles of poverty and violence for all community residents. It teaches “love of country” by teaching caring for the country’s inhabitants. The curriculum, organization, and staff embody a living vision of democratic patriotism at work.

One of the concerns of both El Puente, the organization, and El Puente, the academy, is the health of the community. Williamsburg and nearby Bushwick are called the “lead belt” and the “asthma belt” by public health researchers. As Héctor Calderón, El Puente’s principal, declares, “Williamsburg reads like a ‘Who’s Who of Environmental Hazards.’”<sup>25</sup> Students at El Puente study these toxic presences not only because they are concerned about the health of the natural environment, but also because these hazards directly affect the health of the community. Science and math classes survey the community in order to chart levels of asthma and provide extra services to those families affected by the disease. One

year, students and staff became intrigued when they found that Puerto Ricans had a higher incidence of asthma than Dominicans. They wondered if Dominicans had natural remedies not used by Puerto Ricans. Their report became the first by a community organization to be published in a medical journal. Another group of students successfully battled against a proposed 55-story incinerator that was to be built in the neighborhood (which is already burdened with a low-level nuclear waste disposal plant, a nuclear power plant, and an underground oil spill). While math and science classes measured and graphed levels of toxicity, a humanities class produced a documentary on their findings.

That all men (and women) are created equal is indeed a self-evident truth to these urban students; furthermore, that all members of their community are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is also self-evident in their curriculum. For El Puento students, patriotism means love of American ideals, whether that entails supporting current social and economic policies or critiquing them.

*La Escuela Fratney Two-Way Bilingual Elementary School.*

A spiral notebook always accessible in Bob Peterson's elementary class is labeled "Questions That We Have." Peterson is one of many teachers at La Escuela Fratney, which opened in Milwaukee in 1988 and is Wisconsin's only two-way bilingual elementary school. All of its 380 students begin their schooling in their dominant language (English or Spanish) and by grade 3, they have begun reading in a second language. Rita Tenorio, teacher and co-founder of Fratney, explains that the school's mission includes preparing students "to play a conscious and active role in society," thereby enabling them to be active citizens who can participate in democratic forums for change and social betterment.

Peterson, who is founding editor of *Rethinking Schools* and the 1995 Wisconsin Elementary Teacher of the Year, placed the notebook prominently at the front of the classroom on 12 September 2001, after a fifth-grader pointed out the window and asked, "What would you do if terrorists were outside our school and tried to bomb us?" Peterson's notebook, relatively ordinary in ordinary times, appeared extraordinary at a time when unreflective patriotic gestures commonly associated with authoritarian patriotism abounded. Recall President Bush's admonition to both the world and to U.S. citizens that "you are either with us or you are with the terrorists" or White House

Press Secretary Ari Fleischer's dire warning to Americans to "watch what they say and watch what they do."<sup>26</sup> It was in these times that Escuela Fratney teachers felt especially compelled to teach the kind of patriotic commitments that reflected such American ideals as freedom of speech, social justice, equality, and the importance of tolerating dissenting opinions.

Using a curriculum Peterson developed for *Rethinking Schools* focused on 9/11, terrorism, and democracy, teachers at Escuela Fratney encouraged students to ask tough questions, to explore many varied news sources, and to share their fears, hopes, and dreams about America. For example, after reading a poem by Lucille Clifton titled "We and They," students responded through stories, poems, and discussion. One student wrote her own poem, "We are From America," about what ordinary citizens of the United States think about ordinary citizens

of Afghanistan and vice versa: "We are from America / they are from Afghanistan / We are rich to them / they are poor to us," and so on. Another class discussed the history and meaning of the Pledge of Allegiance. Through exercises like these students learn a kind of patriotism that gives space to thoughtful reflection and that honors the ideals of democracy on which the United States was founded. Ironically, Peterson's curriculum may do more to teach students "traditional" history and the Founding Fathers' ideals than those lessons suggested by Lamar Alexander and his colleagues. The curriculum won the Clarke

Center's national competition for innovative ways to teach 9/11 in the classroom (elementary division). Classroom activities and assignments at La Escuela demonstrate that teaching a commitment to these ideals is not facile. La Escuela Fratney puts its mission into practice by encouraging teaching that makes clear the connections between students' lives and the outside world, between their communities and the larger national community, and between the concerns of our nation and the global concerns of all nations.

**CONCLUSION**

There is evidence that many students are learning the lessons of authoritarian patriotism well. A poll of California high school students found that 43% of seniors, having completed courses in U.S. history and U.S. government, either agreed with or were neutral toward the statement "It is un-American to criticize this country" (see the article by Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh in this special section, page XXX). Another poll shows that a majority of students nationwide have some ideals



consistent with democratic patriotism (and this is probably due in no small part to the efforts of individual teachers and administrators), but a sizeable minority (28%) believe that those who attend a protest against U.S. military involvement in Iraq are “unpatriotic.”<sup>27</sup>

In a climate of increasingly authoritarian patriotism, dissent grows ever more scarce. But a democratic public is best served by a democratic form of patriotism. To ensure the strength of our democratic institutions and to foster a democratic patriotism that is loyal to the American ideals of equality, compassion, and justice, adults must struggle with difficult policy debates in all available democratic arenas. Trying to forge a national consensus in any other way or on any other grounds (especially through attempts at authoritarian patriotism) is what leads to troubled waters. And students need to learn about these contentious debates with which adults struggle and prepare to take up their parts in them. To serve the public interest in democracy and to reinforce a democratic kind of patriotism, educators will need to embrace rather than deny controversy.

Langston Hughes, in his 1936 poem “Let America Be America Again,” speaks of the gap between a rhetorical patriotism rooted only in symbolic gestures and love of the American ideals of liberty and equality:

O, let my land be a land where Liberty  
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,  
But opportunity is real, and life is free,  
Equality is in the air we breathe.

That’s the best kind of patriotism we can hope for.

<sup>1</sup> Board Minutes. Nebraska State Board of Education, 1-2 November 2001 (revised following 7 December meeting).  
<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Piscatelli. “Pledge of Allegiance.” State Notes: Character and Civic Education. Education Commission of the States, 2003.  
<sup>3</sup> “President Introduces History and Civic Education Initiatives,” remarks of the President on Teaching American History and Civic Education Initiative, 17 September 2002, www.whitehouse.gov.  
<sup>4</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Beacon Press, 2002), p. 29.  
<sup>5</sup> Lummis, C. Douglas. 1996. *Radical Democracy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. p. 37.  
<sup>6</sup> Commager, Henry Steele. 1966. *Freedom and Order: A commentary on the American political scene*. New York: G. Braziller. p. 117  
<sup>7</sup> See <http://archive.columbiatribune.com/2005/feb/20050201news003.asp>.  
<sup>8</sup> NPR, “Citizen Student: Teaching Patriotism in Time of War,” 6 February 2003.  
<sup>9</sup> Cited in Nat Hentoff, “The Patriotism Enforcers: Miseducating the Young on Freedom,” *Village Voice*, 2-8 January 2002.  
<sup>10</sup> U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Un-American Activities, Investigation of Communist Activities, New York Area (Entertainment): Hearings, 84th Congress, 18 August 1955.  
<sup>11</sup> U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Un-American Activities, Investigation of the Unauthorized Use of U.S.

Passports, 84<sup>th</sup> Congress, Part 3, 12 June 1956, in Eric Bentley, ed., *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings Before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), p. 770.  
<sup>12</sup> Many of the examples cited here can be found in Peter Dreier and Dick Flacks, “Patriotism and Progressivism,” *Peace Review*, 15:4, 2003, p. 399.  
<sup>13</sup> See [www.loc.gov/today/pr/2003/03-095.html](http://www.loc.gov/today/pr/2003/03-095.html)  
<sup>14</sup> *Freedom Under Fire: Dissent in Post-9/11 America* (New York: American Civil Liberties Union, 2003); and Kathleen Kennedy Manzo, “Teachers Grapple with Wartime Role,” *Education Week*, 20 March 2003, p. 27.  
<sup>15</sup> “W. Va. Student Suspended for Starting Anti-war Club: School Says Fliers Disrupted Educational Environment,” *Student Press Law Center Report*, Winter 2002, p. 7.  
<sup>16</sup> Chris Frates, “High School Junior Suspended After Posting Anti-war Fliers,” *Denver Post*, 28 February 2003. 2003.  
<sup>17</sup> National Coalition for History, “Senator Alexander’s ‘American History and Civics Education’ Bill Passes Senate,” *Washington Update*, 27 June 2003.  
<sup>18</sup> “Senator Alexander’s American History and Civics Bill Passes Senate Unanimously,” press release, Sen. Alexander’s office, 20 June 2003.  
<sup>19</sup> Hofstadter is quoted by Sen. Alexander in “Remarks of Senator Lamar Alexander on the Introduction of His Bill: The American History and Civics Education Act,” 4 March 2003.  
<sup>20</sup> “Beware Leftists in Our Schools!!!,” anonymous parent posting, Southern Maryland Online chat forum, 2003, forums.somd.com.  
<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Bree Picower’s curriculum, “An Unnatural Disaster,” which asks students to consider the interlocking causes of the extensive damage of Katrina and its aftermath, especially for the African American population of New Orleans (www.nycore.org); and “Washin’ Away,” Ian McFeat’s mock trial activity for Rethinking Schools (www.rethinkingschools.org) that asks students to explore the roles various people and contexts played in the Katrina tragedy. For contrast, see the MindOH Foundation’s Hurricane Katrina resources that include, for example, “Thinking It Through: Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?” (mindohfoundation.org/hurricanekatrina.htm).  
<sup>22</sup> Harry C. Boyte, “A Different Kind of Politics: John Dewey and the Meaning of Citizenship in the 21st Century,” Dewey Lecture, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1 November 2002, p. 11.  
<sup>23</sup> Some resources for getting started in seeking such programs include Rethinking Schools (www.rethinkingschools.org); American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning (www.historymatters.gmu.edu). Educators for Social Responsibility (www.esrnational.org); *New York Times* lessons (www.nytimes.com/learning); and Teaching for Change (www.teachingforchange.org).  
<sup>24</sup> Karen Suurtamm, project director for Democratic Dialogue (www.democraticdialogue.com), did the lion’s share of research for and writing of the descriptions of El Puente Academy and La Escuela Fratney Elementary School.  
<sup>25</sup> “When Small Is Beautiful: An Interview with Héctor Calderón by Catherine Capellaro.” *Rethinking Schools*, Summer 2005.  
<sup>26</sup> Bill Carter and Felicity Barringer, “In Patriotic Time, Dissent Is Muted,” *New York Times*, 28 September 2001.  
<sup>27</sup> Dennis Gilbert. March 2003. Hamilton College Patriotism Poll. Eleven Key Findings. Appendix, page 7, question #17. <http://www.hamilton.edu/Levitt/surveys/patriotism/patriotismrep ort.pdf>