

Beyond the Missiles or Music Debate: Re-thinking Local Education Foundations

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Emily Cuatto has raised a topic that is quite important for anyone interested in making public schools better places for all students. In her essay, on Local Education Foundations (LEFs) and the problems of allowing private funding for public schools, she asks us to consider the ethics of using private money to fund public educational ventures. Suspicious of LEFs that raise private money to support public school programs, personnel, and projects, Cuatto worries that the solicitation and use of private money in public schools encourages public officials responsible for funding schools to “shirk their responsibility” in anticipation that private donors will take up the slack. In addition, she believes that such practices inherently create a wider gulf between the haves and have-nots in public education, creating even broader disparity in school funding.

Cuatto’s argument pulls us back into a seemingly intractable problem that has been haunting educators, families and lawmakers for generations, particularly in school districts where factors such as race, economic status, and community development vie for equal prominence. Cuatto’s call for us to think about the role of these organizations in ethical terms is certainly timely — especially in light of President Bush’s call for eighty billion dollars of the federal budget be set aside to tear down and rebuild Iraq, a decision that will certainly impact the allocation (and/or availability) of other federal and state dollars for domestic or social programs.

Thus, I have great sympathy for the argument Cuatto puts forth, for as she states, “since public education is funded publicly, the public must support it not just for private interests, but as a public good. Citizens of a liberal democracy should understand that like national defense, the post office, and highways, education is a necessary part of the process of sustaining democratic life.” I was recently in a metropolitan high school that could not afford hot water for its culinary arts program, nor more than fifty texts for its library. Indeed, our society pays a high price when we systematically disenfranchise, in the language of the U.S. Supreme court, “certain classes of our citizenry.” Cuatto’s critique of under-funded schools is, unfortunately, sadly, accurate; still, I wonder if there is another way to think about this problem.

However passionate and appealing the moral argument against LEFs, I find myself unable to think of this problem only in terms of whether or not Local Education Foundations should exist, but how to think about the morality of LEFs. Indeed, Cuatto frames her resistance to LEFs based on liberal democratic principles, a stance that inherently invites multiplistic interpretation. My response is framed around three points that problematize Cuatto’s assertions. First, with regard to LEFs, it is important to discern what “public good” is being served by these fund-raising initiatives. I ask the question: is it possible that these efforts do, in fact, operate in

such fashion that the aims of democratic life are being served, albeit in unusual ways? Second, given the eternal tensions within a democracy, is it useful to construct LEFs as fundamentally flawed? Might these organizations be re-conceptualized to provide another avenue for practicing democracy? Third, while resistance to LEFs has moral legs to stand upon, is it generative to discern the source of our displeasure with these organizations?

Cuatto asserts that LEFs benefit public schools, and even in the worst case scenario, they rarely *hurt* schools. Yet, she believes LEFs do not serve a public good, suggesting that private donations obscure the responsibility of the state. Legislative policy, however, is rarely a game of guesswork as legislators have a clear idea of the impulses that guide their decision. Might governmental decisions to fund programs other than education (anti-terrorism, prescription drug benefits, or anti-sprawl initiatives), alternatively, be representative of competition for resources among state residents? Thus, can the label of “obstructionist” be fairly attached to these foundations? In thinking about arguments of fairness as they intersect with the democratic aims of education, Amy Gutmann believes that,

Democratic standards require neither that the “inputs” nor the “outcomes” of education be equalized. We need not spend the same amount on every child’s education nor produce equal educational results among children or groups of children. The democratic interpretation of equal educational opportunity requires instead that all educable children learn enough to participate effectively in the democratic process. It also authorizes democratic communities to determine the nature of schooling.¹

Here, Gutmann deflates the emphasis on issues of fairness and equity by distilling what it is exactly that public schools contribute to the public good: that children learn enough to participate fully in matters of public life. The idea of “participation” is important to this discussion, for it shifts Cuatto’s project from notions of fairness and equity as a “public good” to that of participation as a public good. Such a shift, I believe, creates a mechanism to reexplore the reasonableness of Local Education Foundations. For example, I am reminded of an educator-friend in Philadelphia who lived and worked in a multi-ethnic community striving to improve the local elementary school. In this example, the “private” interest of parents was to improve the “public school” (meaning, the support of a multi-dimensional community of persons fully present and engaged in the life of that school community). These parents sought outside funding to preserve the public good in their community, that is, to create a school curriculum that encouraged the *participation* of each demographic group within the school. Parents valued the multicultural life of that community. They understood the separatist politics of race and class, and wanted to use external funds to debunk those stratifying patterns. Their efforts were so deeply democratic that parents recognized that a neighboring school was ill-equipped to do its own fund-raising, and agreed to share their largess with this less-affluent, neighborhood school. For these parents, seeking funds from external, private sources enabled them to not rely on a standardized definition of “public funds equals public good,” but to use their resources to insure that the public good — robust, cross-cultural participation — was protected. They used private impulses to do public work, as opposed to the examples Cuatto surfaces that used private funds for essentially private purposes.

This leads to my second point. Schooling in a capitalist, democratic society is inherently a project of competing interests. While the capitalist aspect of the equation amplifies the problem, the democratic aspect holds our hope for reconciliation. Gutmann's notion of "authorizing democratic communities" is the location for the promise of remedy, even if not immediate. Thinking of the notion of deliberative democracy, it is clear that LEFs can have the affect of empowering parents to act — as the Philadelphia case study suggests — in intentional and collaborative ways to address a public problem. While LEFs can and often do signal the parochial interests of a faction of society, they need not be structured in that way. If re-envisioned as intentional communities that address public concerns, they might well become instrumental in not only anesthetizing discriminatory funding practices, but creating a powerful, empowering democratic communities.

Finally, it should be considered if our ethical distaste for LEFs is, actually, political displeasure masquerading as an ethical dilemma. The inequality of school funding has been tested in our courts (with sad results for impoverished schools) and debated vigorously within school boards and legislative bodies. As such, is the distasteful decision of spending money for missiles rather than music teachers a reflection of mis-placed political priorities on the part of governing bodies, or, is it a matter broadening the minds of decision-makers about how they should think about this matter? If we believe the problem is a moral issue concerning the common good, I ask, along with Gutmann, are there alternative "common goods" for which we should be striving (that is, participation)? Or, if the concern is political, might our outrage be better suited in advocating a liberalizing argument to end the disenfranchisement of the less-empowered? Or, does the solution lie in an admixture of both?

I think of the question Cuatto invokes as an appetizer that causes me to think more carefully about the complexity of school funding issues, and the alternative remedies that might speak to the pernicious inequalities that differential funding creates. But, I am now hungry for the entrée. Is it the ideology behind LEFs — taking care of my kind; unfair competition for resources; and so forth — that Cuatto finds so distasteful, or is there a larger issue? Maybe my persisting hunger is a reflection that LEFs are but a slice of the problem, for the construct from which it emerges can be argued to likewise feed ideologies that support oppressive practices (like academic tracking) that keep the disenfranchised from pursuing their own projects. In pursuing a remedy, however, it seems important to not automatically construct LEFs as a "tale of systematic oppression," but, as the Philadelphia example suggests, another opportunity for our communities to revision themselves, and, realistically, go about practicing the ideals of a deliberative democracy. As Dewey suggested, schools are not preparation for the real world, they *are* the real world. By reconceptualizing LEFs in terms that extend beyond their problematic status, they might develop a capacity to serve broader aims, if only to help parents and children articulate the struggle of being successful in a capitalistic democracy.

1. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), 171.