

Democratic Commitment to Schools

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Focusing on the topic of school crime, Stephen Short argues that democratic theory is more efficacious than judicial interpretation of the constitution in promoting what he calls the "democratic balance" in America's schools. This balance refers to the schools' function, as Short casts it, of supporting individual autonomy while also cultivating individual responsibility to respect decisions that embody the will of the majority. To respect such decisions, Short implies, need not mean agreeing with them nor remaining silent about them. But it does mean not willfully rejecting them and deciding, for example, to sport a firearm in school simply because one feels like doing so.

Short shows convincingly that purely judicial guidelines may not be up to the task of promoting the democratic balance. For example, such guidelines can legitimate expelling for a full year a student caught with a weapon on school grounds. In the absence of any alternative educational program (a point to which I return), this act will deprive the individual of an opportunity to understand the limits of his or her autonomy. Short does not argue that we abandon a judicial function in addressing school crime. Rather, he modifies judicial guidelines through the use of the theoretical concept of the democratic balance. He shows how the modified criteria can help in evaluating and, if necessary, in reformulating disciplinary policies to place them in harmony with the democratic purposes of schools.

I find Short's argument both timely and important. Given the alarmist nature of much contemporary talk about school crime -- "Take Back the Schools," thunders Albert Shanker in a recent column¹ -- and given what Short calls a "new era" of governmental intervention, it behooves those who deal with the problem to heighten their political awareness of what is at stake. Short offers no blueprints for action; there is no primer here for how to respond to the often bewildering array of disciplinary problems that take place in schools. But Short does provide an approach to thinking about how to respond. This approach takes a broad and long-term view of outcomes. It calls upon all who govern today's schools to adopt a proactive and visionary posture. Such a stance can assist them in moving from a mode of simply putting out fires, as it were, to conceiving the problem of school crime as part of a larger democratic educational agenda.

In seeking to develop this stance, however, a concerned educator could legitimately raise some difficult questions. Among the most pertinent, given Short's argument, would be these: What should Americans reasonably expect of their schools? How might schools promote the democratic balance while also fulfilling other obligations such as academic instruction? How do the democratic purposes of schools relate to those of other institutions in society? In the remainder of this response, I will spell out these questions more fully.

Short expects a great deal from schools. For example, he is troubled by the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 because it authorizes schools to expel a student caught with a weapon for a minimum of a year. In effect, Short tells us, this gives schools the right "to shirk their fundamental responsibility to provide a balanced democratic education" to each student. Earlier, he writes that schools which expel students for bringing onto school grounds hand-grenades are thereby "excluding" such individuals from "having the opportunity to develop the skills necessary for full democratic

participation." At all times, Short argues, school people "*must*" (emphasis supplied) ask themselves if their actions "optimize" the democratic education of every student.

These and other strong demands are understandable in light of Short's argument regarding the centrality of the democratic balance. However, a sympathetic, democratic-minded school administrator might reply as follows. "I agree," she might say, "that democratic purposes must outweigh purely legalistic or bureaucratic procedure. You are right that some acts which my colleagues and I might perceive, at first glance, as a disruption might, at second glance, be an opportunity for some valuable lessons for us all. I try to remember to give such advice to my teachers. I urge them not to adhere blindly to their curricular plans, but to pay close attention to how students are responding, because it is through students' responses that a teacher can truly draw them into the educational life of the classroom. Your paper helps me remember and think about why I proffer such advice in the first place."

"But how far must we go to accommodate an individual who willfully flaunts school policy regarding things like weapons? What if I create special in-house programs for such an offender; what if I am able to squeeze funds from the central office to hire a specially trained counselor; what if I take pains to contact and work with the boy's parents; and what if all such interventions fail? What if the young man returns one day with yet another weapon? Am I "shirking" my democratic responsibility to expel him at this point? When does the expenditure of time and resources for a small number of such individuals outweigh the educational needs of the bulk of my students? Many would argue that I should devote my limited resources to our academic functions, not to providing one opportunity after another for repeat offenders to 'develop the skills necessary for full democratic participation.'"

"Moreover," the administrator might go on to say, "what does the promotion of individual autonomy in schools mean in practice? Is a student who brings a gun into my school exercising autonomy and personal agency, or is he simply acting blindly? When and how do I decide that this individual has made a rational and deliberate choice to place himself outside the community that is my school? If this person deliberately rejects the role of student -- a role that the school and society have created to enable him to develop and grow -- why must those trained to work with the young within the terms of that role suddenly take on broader responsibilities? In brief, might not your argument place me in the position of having to make the 'hasty decisions' you and I deplore precisely because it charges me with rescuing offending students while also meeting the many other duties society expects me to fulfill?"

This is not the voice of a school administrator who is at the end of her rope, nor who is operating in an alarmist frame of mind. She is asking what is expected of her school, and, by extension, what is expected of all our schools. I would hazard the guess that one reason she would take Short's argument so seriously is the sense of forgiveness, compassion, and inclusiveness that underlies it. Those are qualities that will strike a chord in any dedicated educator. Short's paper expresses a kind of caring for the lost and the bitter, for those who have fallen off the path. This tone contrasts with the punitive words sometimes heard in today's public discussions of students. A message emitted by Short's paper says: "Let he who is without authoritarian inclinations cast the first stone." But in a democracy, with its messy, uneven, and slow processes, none of us can pick up that stone. If a democracy is a way of life that "sustains itself," as Short claims -- rather than "being" sustained by an enlightened elite, by sheer legalism, or by luck -- then every individual must play his or her part, or the polity may itself fall off the path. To meet this challenge, no individual should be placed beyond the pale.

However, returning to the predicament of our school administrator, this posture can lead one to forget to balance compassion for each individual with solicitude for those whom society charges with educating very large numbers of individuals. Short can help this administrator, and others like her, by extending his discussion in at least two directions: (1) by addressing the relationship between promoting the democratic balance and promoting other educational aims such as literacy and

numeracy, and (2) by elucidating the functions of other institutions in society with respect to the democratic balance. I will touch briefly upon the second of these.

Short is concerned that trying to solve the problem of school crime too quickly may "jeopardiz[e] our democratic institutions." But the only institutions we hear about in the paper are schools, and this creates an unbalanced account. As I have suggested, it is an account that, taken on its own, places a disproportionately large burden on school people. Here is where we can benefit from considering a more encompassing democratic theory, one that informs us how other social institutions might help promote the democratic balance. Such an expanded vision might alert us to what other institutions could do to respond to this school administrator's legitimate concerns; or, it might provide the grounds for creating new institutions that would focus on educating young people who reject the democratic claims made upon them by their schools. In either case, we would be on the way toward meeting the objective of providing a democratic education to every young person, while also allowing school people to fulfill their many other obligations.

Short has taken some meaningful steps toward tackling a contemporary problem that untold thousands of school administrators, teachers, counselors, parents, and students find troubling and of immediate concern. The critical eye and the democratic commitment that are wedded together in his paper offer helpful language to these men, women, and children, who wish for nothing more than a safe and supportive environment in which to pursue the always difficult work of teaching and learning. I hope Short will assist them by continuing to develop his project.

1. Albert Shanker, "Take Back the Schools," *New York Times*, Sunday, 26 Feb. 1995, sec. 5.