

**Government, Business, & Public Education:
The Attributes of *In Search of Excellence* in the Approach to
American Schooling**

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I, Adam Barish, certify that this essay is an original document, not previously submitted as a requirement for any other degree in any other university.

I further certify that the material herein has neither previously been published, nor written by any other person, except where due reference and acknowledgement has been recorded.

This essay does not exceed 6500 words.

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Introduction

In the 1980s, US President Ronald Reagan helped usher in the era of the aptly titled phenomenon, “Reaganomics.” Realistically this was not a phenomenon quite phenomenal enough to justify the specificity of the nomenclature, nor did it truly “usher in” an entirely new approach to macroeconomic policy. Reagan advocated many platforms in his executive role, most if not all prominently associated with the neo-conservative ideological movement. While the “New Right” is credited with establishing the need to “liberate the entrepreneur from misguided or oppressive government” (Ryan, 1993, p.302), this indefinitely married government policy to business sensibilities.

The US, perhaps more than most modern democracies, struggles with a significant identity crisis. On the one hand, it is engulfed by laissez-faire capitalism, a social structure wherein each individual is encouraged to enhance his or her merits for the opportunity to achieve the good life. On the opposing hand, it is in some respects (though not to the extent of most Western European societies) a welfare state engaged in a battle with its liberal consciousness to emphasize equality and define it according to the nation’s most conspicuous social divide: providing for those in need of opportunity at the expense of those who are not. Mass education – the means by which certain elements of social justice are distributed to the masses – is an unavoidable epicenter of political activity. The contemporary educational landscape, which is so irrevocably rooted to the neo-conservative policies of the 1980s, consistently inspires great ideologues and practitioners of otherwise differing perspectives to agree on one thing: the perceived pervasiveness of failure in the education system. This raises the possibility that attempts to identify solutions are not correctly identifying problems, or at least not in the most

appropriate way. As the neoliberal sociologist Fred L. Block submits, “we may no longer know what kind of society this is, but we do know that it is a market economy, and the best way to make a market economy work is through a minimum of government interference” (1990, p.3).

The emphasis on deregulation, praised and deplored in seemingly equal measure, continues to influence the modern political landscape. Neo-conservatism questions the boundaries of what constitutes public interest, blurring the “traditional distinction between a public sphere, which the state regulates, and a private sphere, which it must leave alone” (Nussbaum, 2003, p.39). Perceptions of the role of government have dissolved into widespread suspicion: government should be a last resort, and even then it is unlikely to make a positive impact. Since the global developments of the 1980s (the reach of Reagan and Thatcher extends quite far), temperatures remain indefinitely heated; in the context of America’s ongoing financial crisis the *New York Times* went as far as lamenting, “don’t count on government to do the obvious and urgent thing – intervene” (“The Next Fight Over Jobs,” 2011). Without earnest justification, supporting intervention comes at great cost in terms of political capital – sometimes, when navigating the waters of public policy, the only way to win is not to play.

The government’s responsibility to provide education is in practicable terms a given in the contemporary democratic state, but this does not prevent differences of opinion regarding the distribution of educational resources and opportunity. While the process of implementation is at the core of various perceived educational shortcomings, it is possible that the issues most clearly plaguing the system relate to misguided ideological standards and parameters. Neo-conservatism places its trust in businesses and the marketplace. In view of this, it may prove illuminating to better understand the nature of perceived best business practices, especially in the era during which these ideas began to achieve the status of a virtually unquestioned orthodoxy. My view

going into this inquiry was rooted in skepticism; I could list reason upon reason for remaining suspicious of business-oriented thinking in advancing public education. Yet these ideas have held prominence most especially since the Reagan administration and the emergence of neo-conservatism, and it is hard to deny the impact of intelligent business ideals on the history of successful American enterprise. Education is not a business – its aims are far too broad and diverse, its structure too complicated, and its product too abstract to adhere to sound business practices – but the prominence of these ideals in government at least demands a discussion over the extent to which they should and do apply to educational administration.

The influential 1982 text (and now a management training staple), *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies*, was released to critical acclaim for its analysis of management theory and has since become a bible for executives and business students. Authors Tom Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr. surveyed leading American companies and distilled eight attributes of successful business organization and management, all against the backdrop of the early Reagan administration. As a result they provide a fair number of litmus tests against which issues relating to the recent evolution of educational administrative theory and practice can be measured. This text analyzes only large-scale business enterprises (not small, e.g. progressive technology firms), meaning the scale of its arguments is at least comparable to that of an all-encompassing American government. I have identified three themes that group the observations of Peters and Waterman (“Trust,” “Leadership,” and “Direction”), and will examine education through these prisms before concluding with larger lessons for our educational future. If education, which was transformed to be more business-like in the 1980s, were meant to be so, it should follow that educational management and organization should display indications of business ‘input.’ This essay will focus on these indices (as defined by *In*

Search of Excellence) in the context of education and its political administration; in doing so it will assess their pertinence and value to reforming education in worthwhile directions.

Trust

Peters and Waterman argue that the fundamental tenet of a well-run business comes back to a question of trust. Trust, more than any administrative structure, has, they claim, the potential to facilitate and foster ever-greater success and innovation, and its ubiquity produces a higher quality of organizational culture. Trust manifests itself systematically within the framework of successful business enterprises and, unsurprisingly, several of the themes identified by Peters and Waterman.

Their first attribute speaks volumes: “*A bias for action.*” No inclination toward cautiousness or responsibility should inhibit an active pursuit of results. Developing trust is the only means by which large companies remain relevant and flexible. Without it, processes slow down dramatically as all elements are scrutinized to the point at which larger projects risk becoming obsolete before they are brought to market. Though Peters and Waterman warn cavalier, shoot-first-ask-questions-later approaches are similarly destructive, enterprise is only pioneering if it evolves in tandem with (and ideally helps shape) external progress. There is undeniable logic to a slow and conscientious inventive process, but there is a difference between being “analytical in [the] approach to decision making” and being “paralyzed by that” (1982, pp.13–4).

Government action is inhibited by financial constraints, but the more prevalent issue in the modern landscape is the fear of negative political ramifications. Polarization in the political sphere has played a significant role in stalling the advance of policy agendas. In this

environment creativity is sacrificed for feasibility, the superlative for the unremarkable. The recent failures of the American “Supercommittee” – which was established only after national representatives could not come to an agreement by standard political means over how to address the nation’s debt – surprised few; the US Congress is polling at an all-time low in part because neither side trusts the other. Streamlined structures are central to growth in business, but expanded governmental checks-and-balances have in many ways become tools of stagnation. This reality is not predicated upon a commitment to see that ground is gained but to see that it is not lost, or worse, that others do not gain it – it is about winning. The fate of education is inextricably attached to that of all governmental programs, and the unwillingness to compromise and to risk is fatal for innovation.

Businesses according to Peters and Waterman only thrive if they are innovative. Whether that innovation takes the form of product, marketing, structure, or any other of the innumerable variables associated with success, a degree of ingenuity is mandatory. Smart businesses enable employees to improve themselves and contribute to the operation. In this vein, a government that fosters innovation does not simply “create a sphere of noninterference,” but actually “design[s] the material and institutional environment [to] provide... the requisite affirmative support” (Nussbaum, 2003, p.55) for progress.

It is not a significant leap to discover that a central focus of this attitude is on people. While action is the only means for attaining results, people are responsible for that action and must feel secure in their endeavors. Peters and Waterman note that in addition to “their preference for action... excellent companies *live* their commitment to people” (1982, p.16). Individuals within strong companies assume their ideals, in exchange for which companies provide intellectual opportunities and personal safeguards. Three of the eight attributes deal

directly with this issue. The first of these – “*Productivity through people*” – is demonstrative of a larger identity. No technology or organizational scheme will ever be superior to the thinking capacity of enabled, critical employees, who are “the root source of quality and productivity gain.” To ensure this, its preceding attribute eliminates any doubt: “*Autonomy and entrepreneurship*.” Companies that adhere to these tenets not only respect the individual, but trust that individual to become a creative innovator and leader (1982, p.14).

An early review of *In Search of Excellence* divulges a noteworthy paradox: “We desperately need meaning in our lives and will sacrifice a great deal to institutions that will provide meaning for us. Yet we simultaneously need independence to feel as though we are in charge of our destinies, and have the ability to stick out” (Van de Ven, 1983, p.623). The solution to this puzzle is pursued within the business sphere, but its relevance to current public policy practice is questionable at best. Advocates for the “Race to the Top” program, part of the Obama administration’s education agenda, have succeeded within this paradigm (to an extent). “Race to the Top” offers individual states a large sum of what is most needed – money – if they are willing to submit a proposal demonstrating how they would use that money to advance education. The caveat, however, is intrinsic competition: due to the substantial totality of these financial packages, states compete against one another over the few pieces of a single pie. This form of competition rewards creativity and risk-taking, but it also solidifies a contradictory “we/they attitude” (Peters & Waterman, 1982, p.14) between the federal government that benevolently distributes (i.e. executives) and the state government that gratefully receives (i.e. employees).

A subscription to this ideological template mandates submission to a simple, humbling conclusion: most ideas will not come from the top. In institutions of great size, the vast majority

of those involved will not hold positions at the highest echelons. Within this structure leadership can dictate the terms of forward motion, ignorant of the innumerable variables that multiply and diversify as they descend the hierarchical ladder. Alternatively, leaders can take advantage of the brainpower at their disposal, in this case multiplying and diversifying intellectual property. To maximize this potential, earnest communication – *listening* – is paramount. As the philosopher John Dewey writes, “Communication is a process of sharing experience till it becomes a common possession” (Dewey, 1916, p.9). Yet more than respectful communication is necessary for both governments and businesses to process the best ideas. If innovation is the aspiration, management of the working environment will determine the outcome. The third people-based attribute – “*Simultaneous loose-tight properties*” – is indicative of the status of trust in a business organization. Though a central ideal to which all employees can ally is indispensable (“tight”), outside of this sphere flexibility is a more valuable commodity (“loose”). Overregulation and micromanagement inhibit the freedom of intellectual pursuit. All efforts aimed at “structuring innovative groups... annihilates them” (Van de Ven, 1983, p.623), as this lack of trust in individuals undermines the boldness to think creatively, the opportunity to attempt experimentally, and the desire to contribute positively.

The education system is in itself a misnomer, for across the US there are distinct education systems at every governmental tier. These distinctions at state and federal levels confirm a salient political truth: localities (e.g. school boards, district officials) are generally not trusted. Last year in the state of Arizona, economic issues resulted in more control for the state Superintendent of Education; so vast was this expanded power that numerous district superintendent positions were abolished. Failing to capitalize on the wealth of brainpower (there are many thousands of educational professionals in the state) in favor of individuals in removed

positions of leadership ensures fewer ideas are conceived, and even fewer discussed. In Arizona's model, educational innovation is encouraged so minimally that it begs questions pertaining to whether policy makers have put their hearts into the pursuit of it. This is not for lack of effort or quality of ideas – certainly it is this generation that has seen the emergence of charter schooling as a viable take on public education (a subject to be explored later) – but if the development of a trusting educational paradigm were a priority, it would be a priority.

America represents itself as an enterprising nation; the fabric of its creed emphasizes an adventurous will to try. Yet it is a relatively safe assumption to suggest a mutual lack of trust in education between providers and provided. This seemingly basic relationship is trapped within a far more complex model, one beyond the simple sales-customer archetype and rife with middlemen, poor communication, and distance. Regardless of the significant obstacles inherent in connecting a large national body to separate states, regions, counties, and towns, there is also the unclear chain of command from government to schools to students and parents. A lack of trust harbors entrenched competition; school officials are plagued with duality, asked to serve as agents of government policy and as advocates of community needs. Laying such ambiguities over the present educational hierarchy inexorably hampers or delays progress, implementation, and evolution. American education cannot support innovation if the relationship between government leadership and educational advocates is adversarial. No business could reasonably be considered solvent if a description of this nature were routine. Governments, like businesses, must enable those involved at every level to contribute, necessitating superior communication than that which presently exists. With that in mind, quality communication may not be possible across all strata of the current educational construct. This explains a great deal; it may be human nature to distrust what is not understood.

Leadership

Regardless of organizational emphasis on the value of individuals, cohesion is achieved, argue Peters and Waterman, through all-encompassing vision. While this vision is subject to revision to align with external evolution and internal dialogue, it derives power from its origin: the voice of leadership. In the preceding section, one of the attributes (“*Simultaneous loose-tight properties*”) was mentioned without a full explanation of its meaning. The “looseness” of this value is predicated on trust, ensuring that individuals at all levels of a company are empowered to harness their autonomy. Yet this “looseness” would lack value without its counterpart. The “tight” properties of a business define its essential qualities, for true leaders are “fanatic[al]” about the “core values they hold dear” (1982, p.15). These centralizing themes permeate all facets of a successful company. The education profession – teachers, administrators, and policy makers – is filled with leaders who advocate for improved schooling opportunity, yet there is little consensus among them over how to realize this ideal.

The smartest business leaders are relentless in their evaluation of the customer. They “learn from the people they serve” and listen “intently and regularly” (1982, p.14). A business cannot operate successfully if it does not, as the next attribute clarifies, remain “*Close to the customer.*” In this arena, government is a victim of its own devices. If the customers of education are students, then the relationship grows vastly more complex. Parents and school officials invoke the same paternalistic liberal attitudes in identifying the best interests of their children as government officials retain for communities. Children are not deemed fit to vote, nor are they deemed fit to decide where, how, and how long they will be educated. Is it possible that government feels the same way about localities and individuals as parents feel about their children? “*I know best.*” Additionally, the distinct levels of government – federal, state, and

local – create a frustrating web of disparity and incongruity. The distance between communities and appropriate officials becomes increasingly more difficult to overcome at each ascending rung of the power ladder. In combination, the task of knowing the customer is left to middlemen and researchers, neither of whom can compensate for a leadership that, despite best intentions, is unavoidably out of touch. Customer communication is what ensures that businesses do not become irrelevant in the marketplace. The government’s distance from individuals keeps it from consistently serving the people’s needs. Educational administrators, like business executives, are forced to look at the whole to determine success. In business this may lead to losing some customers to gain more, but in governing it produces a class of individuals that simply are not reached, merely “parts of a large collectivity that is making progress, rather than as separate people with separate entitlements.” Never truer was the associated maxim, “if the nation is doing well, you must be doing well” (Nussbaum, 2010, p.22).

The overarching limitation of management is thus familiarity. Leaders cannot blindly navigate the complexity of an uncertain future; the familiarity with the customer is only one component of a leader’s responsibility to informed decision making. Foremost, the charted course of an institution must bear in mind the product, without which a business is merely a clubhouse. The product defines the identity of a business in terms of its structure, market, and purpose. Logic shows that financial success generally follows “those companies that stay reasonably close to businesses they know” (Peters & Waterman, 1982, p.15). Executives are entrusted to maintain the focus of a company’s endeavors – “*Stick to the knitting.*” The inherent problem facing educational leaders is in determining what the “knitting” is. When education is justified as a means of increasing GDP – though this connection is already dubious – success can only be defined holistically, which negates the value of situational development. Put more

plainly, education is too complex an idea to comprehensively manage. Research and observation both point to the plethora of social variables whose influence on educational concerns is inescapable. It is entirely possible that the very nature of public education is too diverse a business model for government to reasonably understand all the facets of the “knitting.” Equally concerning is the previously mentioned distance between leaders and their customers, for if those in power are removed from the individual (public sphere), there is likely a corollary distance between them and the assembly line (private sphere). The more educational administrators struggle to isolate the many socio-parasitic variables that feed on school reform, the more the actual product of public education is obscured. No company would describe this as solvent, and no leader can compensate for these structural failures.

The successful company would be required to simplify, to return to the business of making a familiar product for a familiar customer. The task of sifting through the minutiae to determine priorities is the central responsibility of an executive, but the application of such clear management science is not fully conducive to the educational art:

[Education] is not about results in the next quarter but about discoveries that may take – and last – decades or even centuries. Neither the abiding questions of humanistic inquiry nor the winding path of scientific research that leads ultimately to innovation and discovery can be neatly fitted within a predictable budget and timetable.
(Faust, 2009)

Public education may not be about simplicity or instant gratification, but that does not alter the reality: these are the expectations increasingly held of it by politicians, and under their influence, by parents. Arguably, the product that education sells – the purpose for teaching – is the instillation of thinking processes. The manner through which such an abstract product can be communicated to an individual, let alone to the masses, will always encounter a degree of abstract organization.

There is, simply put, more to consider in distributing education than in distributing the tangible or the easily quantifiable. Quality leadership plays a pivotal role in any collective endeavor, and it is important to note that the business-minded, prototypical “strong leader... ha[s]... a lot to do with making [a] company excellent in the first place” (Peters & Waterman, 1982, p.26). Education, however, does not represent the idea of a single person, whose vision then supersedes all others in charting a course. Neo-conservatives typically assume that “schools [can] compensate for society, so long, of course, as the appropriate leadership [is] in place” (Halsey, et al, 1997, p.22). However, the diversity of issues that education is meant to overcome necessitates multiple leaders; multiple leaders, by definition, prevent the existence of a singular unifying vision and its associated organizational structure; and the lack of unification presents a compelling challenge to overcome given the distrust that pervades the education body. Education is blessed with caring leaders, but cursed with almost as many visions.

Direction

Business and government both represent agencies of action. Stagnation is deemed regressive; business and government, ideally, seek to be as influential upon as they are influenced by the environments in which they operate. Both should be reflexive in considering the state of affairs that envelops them and forward thinking in their attempts to alter it. The variables that influence these decisions help paint a holistic picture of an organization’s philosophy and determine its relevance and fate. Direction may seem like an inevitability, but pursuing goals aimed at progress is a choice to be made and remade daily.

The “fanatical” adherence to a company’s core values – as elucidated in the explanation for “*Simultaneous loose-tight properties*” – emphasizes the means to a high priority end. Many

of the previously established tenets come back to the central pillar of values. Regarding *trust*, company values are at the heart of “developed cultures;” regarding *leadership*, Peters and Waterman remark, “the real role of the chief executive is to manage the values of the organization” (1982, p.26). In light of this essay’s purpose to understand business principles as they apply to education policy, a discussion of values is unavoidable. If the evidence were not clear enough, the next attribute leaves no doubt about this: companies are to be “*Hands-on, value driven.*” Adherence to this principle mandates that leadership remains in touch with production. If your business is a restaurant, you are in the kitchen, at the tables, and behind the bar. While this should not consume all the time of business leaders, values cannot retain their meaning without a consistent appreciation for and oversight of the actual practicalities of the company.

Though these principles may work effectively within a for-profit business, they do not translate fully to educational governance. A business pays employees, provides benefits, and sets parameters for what is relevant to its interests, but it is able to do this because businesses are insular institutions, their goals are narrow, and their prime measure of effectiveness is profitability. They are restricted enterprises, only reaching as far as the limits that leaders outline to define their values. Government, however, is not a limited enterprise; it oversees the full spectrum of a civilization. Consider the following: Western democracies may be opposed to poverty (a simple platitude), but the impoverished, defined by some measure of relative wealth, represent a substantial population within these systems. A business might see this as a failed project and cut its losses; perhaps the business overextended beyond familiar production. By contrast, government cannot legitimately declare the poor to be outside of its purview simply because its expertise has fallen short of a solution. Determining what policies to adopt in response to poverty remains an issue on the governmental radar screen because in a democracy

there is no alternative. A more specific example of the insulation of business is in employment: if the pairing between business and employee is not a good match of values, the employee can quit (or get fired) and search for another job. A national labor market exists outside and independent of the responsibilities of a single business. A democratic government does not enjoy such luxuries.

In modern democracies the nation does not in certain senses exist independently of government, and if government changes so too does the nation. When values conflict in American government, citizens can protest or vote for a new approach. In business, for employees to fundamentally disagree with authority is to part ways. The democratic ideal allows all citizens the right to be included within the limits of representative democracy; the employee only shares this right within a company if doing so does not inhibit large-scale goals as determined by authority. Businesses are not beholden to the same standard because of their insulation. Within the rank-and-file staff of a business, employees have little choice but to submit to the overarching values implemented across the structural spectrum. The professional identity of these individuals can be encapsulated within a split paradigm, emphasizing both adherence to larger ideals and the realization of personal autonomy: “Organizations hire a heterogeneous work force, but want homogeneous values” (Van de Ven, 1983, p.623).

There is no similar required submission associated with American citizenship; in fact criticism is, in a sense, encouraged. Nussbaum argues in *Not For Profit* that critical pedagogy (in the mold of Socratic ideals) teaches certain essential values of American citizenship. Students learn through questioning and are encouraged to view their world with reasonable skepticism. This contrasts starkly with what was just noted to describe business; any initial reflexivity that both government and business exhibit when formulating values ends, at least for

business, once these values are determined. At that point there is no more judgment or debate, and businesses expect employee commitment to those ideals. They may enable limited creative experimentation, but they are not pluralists when it comes to the spine of the organizational body. Business empires are not sustainable without a very significant degree of conformity, a fact illustrated by the consequences of plurality in the formulation and application of education policy.

The American government, as the *de facto* source of policy implementation, has to define certain overarching “ends” to American schooling. Business ends with respect to efficiency are not internally controversial: sales, and high sales are proof of success. But ends in education are much more diverse; in the place of conformity is often fierce debate over which should be prioritized. Government is in some cases forced to establish an edict to apply ends within education, which explains the high value that governments – with concern for economic performance as well as intrinsic educational values – place on standardized testing. Regardless of whether standardized testing assesses each of the many diverse goals in education (which it does not), educational institutions are increasingly enslaved by it because instrumental views mandate feedback in some comparable, standardized form. The dominant values that are weighted most heavily in these standardized assessments, and the very structure of this apparatus, align with the dominant values of the era during which it was established in its modern form: the Reagan administration. However, Reagan America’s pro-business values reach beyond efforts to fit education into a model with something like an annual “sales” report. In light of the cultural hold of these values and our current economic circumstances (highlighting ‘employability’ concerns), it is indicative that business majors now make up the largest group of college graduates. Expansion in this one arena mandates contraction in another: for example, the

nature of assessment is actually pushing many students out of the sciences despite efforts to achieve the opposite effect (Drew, 2011). Instead, America is producing a profusion of business trainees who, Nussbaum might suggest, are not prepared to be critical (i.e. of the very values that shaped them).

To some extent any individual can write a public policy program, but a solvent and practical policy has to consider cost, expert insight, local variability, and a wealth of other issues. The introduction of a national policy is an intrinsically top-to-bottom affair, wherein the larger government dictates to localities, but “policies from ‘above’ are not the only constraints and influences upon institutional practice” (Ball, 1994, pp.19, 24). The wealth of legislation aimed at improving education can lead to a range of unforeseen and sometimes dysfunctional consequences. Often, for example, state and federal laws are not only incompatible, but contradictory. This can unintentionally empower local officials with the freedom to choose whether to adhere to federal legislation, state legislation, or – knowing at least one overlord body will automatically be dissatisfied – neither (Kimbrough & Hill, 1981). These “interpretational responses” to policies “may lead to a neglect of the pervasive effect of institutional reconfiguration” (Ball, 1994, p.25). As policies are independently interpreted at various levels, national policies may subsequently be rendered significantly more toothless. The ensuing conflict between differing levels of government can then contribute to the expansion of staff at all echelons – for oversight, research, management, and so on – which can itself have further dysfunctional effects. From this confusion it becomes apparent that the American education system as a whole does not, cannot, and arguably should not adhere to the final attribute from Peters and Waterman: “*Simple form, lean staff.*”

Conclusion

There are too many variables to pretend that any written piece can unequivocally measure the relationship between business methods and educational policy practice. Even so, there are few issues that bear more importance to this inquiry than the role of market ideology. The long-lasting conflict between advocates of both government and the free market essentially comes down to whether the government can better facilitate the needs of citizens or whether the market, as expressed through consumer choices, is better suited. Realistic ideologues on either side recognize the value in a relationship between these two forces, but differ in the limitations of this relationship. Arguments against both are easy to make, but rather than succumb to the same histrionics let us consider the influence of free market ideology on pro-business attitudes in government.

A free market education was once a difficult concept to grasp. American education, in its initial stages, was never intended to encompass all it does now both in terms of who is educated and what they learn. Existing social disparities bolstered the status of private schools, and the divide between public and private schools remains significant. Yet in this it is hard to locate the free market at work *within* the education system. *Without*, it is surely visible, in that those who have more can provide more for their children (in this case, pay for private school). But the government-run education system is not responsible for the management of aptly termed private schools. However, in the last generation the emergence of school choice within the public sphere has given shape to the idea of free market education. As standardized assessment (the equivalent of sales reports) increases in importance, so too has the demand for schools that can achieve premium results (make money). Where there is great demand, there are new ideas for the supply.

Though I do believe there is value in, for instance, the charter school movement, there is a lesson from business that is not appropriately applied in this context. Charter schools, as with business enterprises, emerged partly because there was a market for what was perceived as a better product than the standard public school. However, standard public schools are still essential to the functioning of the government and the teaching of millions of children. Charter schools serve the affirmative purpose of a willingness on the part of government to think innovatively, but in fact the majority of American charter schools continue to perform at or below their standard counterparts. This, in conjunction with the natural independence of charter schools, excuses the government from providing affirmative solutions for standard public schools. Building capability, according to Peters and Waterman, requires more than “the simple converse of describing and understanding what’s not working, just as designing a good bridge takes more than understanding why some bridges fail” (1982, p.12). The government does not describe what is wrong with standard public schools by making something else entirely (which also requires that money be redistributed away from standard schools). It begs the question: do American education leaders know what product they are selling?

Applying business ideals to public education is not necessarily analogous to putting a square peg in a round hole, but it is at least putting a square peg in an amorphous, undefined hole. The key principle of the truly free market is the customer’s freedom to invest in whichever way he or she deems best. This freedom represents a nice idea, but is limited in that there is no choice regarding *whether* to invest; the customer has to in order to survive. Even living at the bare minimum requires food, clothing, and a place to sleep. This freedom then, already limited, provides choice in *where* the customer buys. It follows logically that government is reasonable in requiring children to attend school – this merely pertains to survival. But expanding choice

for parents to decide where they would like to invest is a more complicated issue, albeit a reasonable expectation in capitalist America.

Businesses compete for property and financial gain, and the value of this competition is innovation, as all competitors seek out more advanced ideas to stay ahead. There are several variables to consider as we apply this to educational policy. The first, which has already been clarified, is that while innovation demands trust within a simplified administrative structure, few of these words apply to the current American educational monolith. The second is that government is not in competition with itself in the public sphere, so it does not provide a wealth of choices for parents. This is exacerbated by the third reason – competition necessarily results in lesser success or failure for some enterprises, though the enterprises in this case are schools and the cost is in units of children. The competitive market does not encourage all schools to share best practices, yet the idealism of certain educational leaders identifies this sharing as vital to broader success. Here we arrive at the most basic conflict: we are funding both sides of the war. We want competition and innovation, which arguably requires a degree of privatization – this is our neo-conservative side. But we also want to unite under one open banner as a means of promoting social justice, which minimizes competition as a factor of progress – this is our liberal democratic side. As long as we maintain this educational personality disorder, we cannot expect to make significant progress.

Laissez-faire capitalism in American markets prevails as an accepted creed almost as much as the idea of democracy. The US could not abandon a democratic government; there is an intrinsic good to this model, despite its faults. In the current struggle over the handling of America's debt, members of the Reaganomics-inspired Republican Party support few ideas more passionately than an absolute unwillingness to raise taxes on corporations and the wealthiest

Americans (for full disclosure, I disagree with this). But in the context of education, there is a larger idea to be distilled from this stance. Neo-conservatism, financially and governmentally, generally supports deregulation. This is a fact that proponents and opponents would both readily identify with this ideology. Belief in deregulation of the financial markets may not be a widely held belief on Main Street, but there is a street in lower Manhattan that differs – and it controls the financial fate of the nation. The influence of Wall Street is pervasive; it is one thing to believe that business ought to be reasonably liberated from governmental regulation, but an entirely different thing to believe that government ought to be liberated from its own regulation (consider Halsey, et al, p.24). If American government aims to educate all fairly, then accepting the failures of some students and schools becomes unconscionable. Given this, a model that centers on competition is at least dramatically flawed if not fundamentally misguided. If this is the case, then the process by which we pursue quality educational opportunity for all will require more stringent regulation than the oversight of free markets. The American government should follow the business savvy of Peters and Waterman, who would advise a system that does not simply keep from interfering, but that actively enables.

Over the course of Reagan's presidency, political causes arguably overshadowed economic goals in a shift toward 'cultural rightism' (Ball, 1994, p.7). The New Right's questions over regulation are still where this debate reaches its epicenter, and it necessitates an argument over whether American education should be allowed to falter in certain areas as long as it structurally fits the ideological bill. The government sphere and the business sphere are apart from one another. Is education apart from government? Are governmental leaders merely overseers of the distribution of education? The virtue of "negative liberty" – that government should stay out of the way – has been the accepted ideal for several decades, but especially since

the 1980s. This is a long evolution from the progressive, hands-on, trust-busting days of American business policy under Teddy Roosevelt. Yet even in the days of Roosevelt, government and business stood apart from one another, challenging their opponent to innovate and predict the course of innovation. By contrast, public education cannot be removed from the government's agenda because it *is* the government's agenda.

Even if the government cannot wholly account in the economic sense for who its educational customers are, what they want, or what the product is, government will be responsible for public education because there is no politically practicable alternative that exists within a contemporary assessment of reality. Furthermore I believe government should be in charge and has the potential to lead masterfully. But while business (and the attributes from *In Search of Excellence*) provides a number of lessons for American education – simplified structures, enabled work forces, and centralized ideals – individual businesses are still insular entities without responsibility to a bigger picture. Public education is simultaneously many different things, struggling to manage diverse and somewhat incongruent educational goals. We must therefore recognize that this diversity means education is not a business, nor can it be managed entirely like one. There is nothing simple about the widespread communication of knowledge. If it is understood that “schools are but one influence on the growing mind and heart of the child” (Nussbaum, 2010, pp.44–5), then adopting a large-scale attitude that does not factor in these challenges limits the positive power and scope of what government must do for students.

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