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# Democracy & Education

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## Position and Power.

### A Book Review of *Reclaiming Democratic Education: Student and Teacher Activism and the Future of Education Policy*

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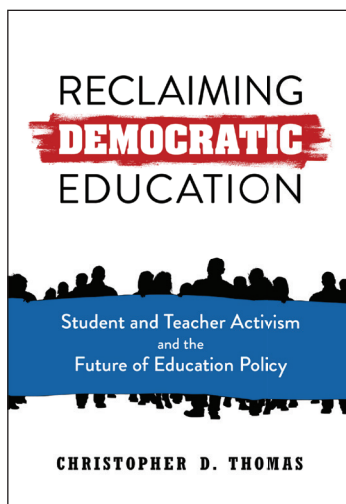
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Solidarity is an attitude of resistance, I suppose, or it should be.

—Christopher Hitchens

**A**S A FORMER teacher and community organizer, I have witnessed groups unite across their individual differences, forging coalitions strong enough to win fights that they would be unlikely to win on their own. As a labor organizer whose day-to-day work involves supporting workers building a wall-to-wall union, I understand the power of solidarity. In my experience, the most powerful voices, and the ones most capable of successfully challenging the course of educational policy at every level—local, state, and national—are those of students and teachers. As these two groups are also most directly impacted by educational policy decisions, it is critical that we understand how educational policy paradigms position and impact them. In *Reclaiming Democratic Education: Student and Teacher Activism and the Future of Education Policy*, Thomas (2022) reminds us of the rich history of student and teacher activism in the United States and urges us to embrace that history as we consider models for moving forward.

Throughout the first three chapters of his book, Thomas (2022) makes the case that historically, student activism and teacher activism share an important connectedness, noting that while the two groups have generally responded to different issues, they have consistently fought alongside and, in some cases, on behalf of the other. In Chapter 1, Thomas efficiently contextualizes



and presents his core arguments, and by page 13, he has provided a precise roadmap for the remainder of the book. The first chapter's extended hat tip to the student protests and teacher strikes of 2018 is appropriate given the grounding role they play throughout the book.

In Chapter 2, Thomas (2022) takes readers on a thorough historical exploration of student activism beginning with the first recorded protest in 1886 through the Parkland students' actions in 2018. He notes three

themes. First, student protesters throughout history adopted methods of other political groups active at the time and the students' actions were, therefore, contextualized within those groups. Second, although the students adopted methods of other groups, they were motivated by local decisions and actions that impacted them directly. Third, the public's reactions to student protests were mixed, which in Thomas's assessment aligns with conflicting conceptions of the purposes of education and schooling throughout history. In Chapter 3, Thomas presents a historical overview of teacher activism framed by three broader societal trends: professionalization of the teaching occupation, the ideological feminization of teaching, and the view of teaching as a public good that should take priority over individual professional well-being. Beginning in 1902 with what may be considered the

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first teacher strike up until the 2018 strikes, Thomas describes the rise of teachers' unions and highlights ideological and legal challenges teachers faced during decades of growth and expansion.

In Chapters 4 and 5, Thomas (2022) explores ideological, philosophical, and political tensions that have informed contemporary activism. He argues in Chapter 4 that a long-standing tradition of student and teacher activism demonstrates that "education for democratic citizenship has been—and continues to be—a dominant idea of American educational thought" (p. 51) and that there is philosophical justification for embracing democratic aims of education (Dewey, 1916/2012; Gutmann, 1987). He then goes on to describe the rise and eventual pervasiveness of the A Nation at Risk paradigm, which he argues has fundamentally undermined democratic aims of education by prioritizing economic values and practices. Thomas explores how school culture, student criminalization, pedagogy and curriculum, and school governance have all been deeply informed by neoliberalism. He argues that this reconfiguration has positioned students as "passive objects of policy" (p. 62) and teachers as "passive recipients of education policy" (p. 66) or "passive policy martyrs" (p. 67), making the 2018 teacher strikes and student protests even more impressive, having taken place within a policy climate that discourages such demonstrations of civic agency. In Chapter 5, Thomas submits three claims about how we should understand the 2018 teacher strikes and student protests. He argues that the 2018 activism should be understood as a reaction to, and a rejection of, the policy outcomes of the A Nation at Risk paradigm as well as a rejection of the ways students and teachers are positioned within the paradigm. Thomas also presents the argument that student and teacher activism was made possible, and supported by, "shadow spaces" that exist outside of the A Nation at Risk policy paradigm (Boyte & Finders, 2016).

Having proposed that students' and teachers' activism demonstrates a rejection of the A Nation at Risk paradigm, Thomas (2022) lays the groundwork for introducing, in Chapter 6, an alternative paradigm that he calls "Education for Citizenship" (p. 96). The paradigm's guiding value is equality, and its primary aim of education is preparation for citizenship. According to Thomas, "in sum, an Education for Citizenship paradigm would privilege the democratic goals of education to prepare students to be active and effective participants within our democratic society" (p. 99), and he describes how the paradigm "repositions students and teachers as co-creators of educational policy rather than the passive recipients of it" (p. 99). In the final chapter of the book, Thomas brings readers up-to-date on student and teacher activism since 2018 that further supports his recommendation that we consider an alternative paradigm for public education. He highlights students' activism that builds upon their protests of 2018 as well as more recent activism focused on local mask mandates and pandemic response, climate change, police brutality, discriminatory killings, and police presence in schools.

Overall, Thomas's (2022) project is a worthy one. As school began this fall, fewer of my former public school colleagues returned to the classroom, many of them citing increasing

pressures and diminishing satisfaction in their work. I sent my son to first grade at our zoned public school and have already had to restrain myself from sending lengthy emails criticizing the curricula, various behavior-controlling apps being used in the classroom, and the degree to which test results and assessments are already showing up in reports home. Thomas speaks to the mother, teacher, organizer, and citizen in me, and I can imagine others will feel spoken to as well.

Sadly, the decision-makers, legislators, and other folks in positional authority are the ones who need to heed Thomas's (2022) call, and I am not so optimistic that they will act upon it. I am discouraged by a seeming reemergence of individualistic ideology about public education and increasing rhetoric positioning parents against teachers, principals, and local school boards in decisions about their children's education. Thomas's final chapter would have benefited from some attention to the weaponization of parents in public education. In my home state of Virginia, the current governor ran a successful campaign on a "parents first" education platform (Stratford & Montelarro, 2021) and on day one of his term signed several executive orders delivering on his campaign promises, including one to end the teaching of divisive topics and another to empower parents in decisions about their children's education (<https://www.governor.virginia.gov>).

Additionally, and largely informed by my own experience, I am not convinced that teachers and students know that what they are demonstrating against is a pervasive paradigm. When talking to teachers and students, they are primarily acting, if they take action at all, in response to what they perceive to be a hyper-local decision or policy. For example, in my local school division, there has been recent mobilizing against a scripted reading and math curricula adopted a couple years back by the division. Rather than understand this as part of a systemic narrowing of curricula and control of teachers' work, most teachers just want the local school board to grant them some wiggle room to incorporate their favorite read-alouds for lessons.

All that being said, I do remain hopeful. News of widespread labor fights and worker wins give me immense hope. In Virginia, up until recently, there was barely any hope for seeing collective bargaining in our future, but for now, local decision-making bodies can enter into collective bargaining agreements with most public sector employees and several collective bargaining resolutions have already passed. Richmond Public Schools, where I taught for a decade, was the first district to reinstate collective bargaining in the state (Snow, 2022). I still believe that when we fight, we win. When teachers and students stand together, they win, as they have shown us time and again. I appreciate Thomas (2022) reminding me that the struggle to reclaim democratic education is certainly worth fighting for.

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