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From Reagan to Obama: Institutions, Relationships, and the Shrinking State

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Note

The following is a transcript of a talk given by Professor Fuller on March 12, 2010 at the U.C. Berkeley Graduate School of Education symposium: "The State of Public Education in California" organized by the Berkeley Review of Education.

I wanted to really present a very simple argument and get your reactions to this. It is a work in progress now and I have been mulling this over. I have been spending time in charter schools and veterans' organizations and different community groups around the country looking at the decentralization of government. And I want to provoke you a little bit and get you into a discussion.

The argument centers on a problem that we all face when we get up in the morning: what the hell difference does my work make? And how can it be more effective? Someone is trying to improve schools or the social life of kids and adolescents. I want to talk a little bit about the kinds of policy spaces that are being opened and closed in this country and the reasons behind that. And the argument is really that the way in which public spaces are being opened for school reform or narrowed is a broader story about the shrinking state and the diminishing capacity of central government to have enough taxes, to have a fiscal capacity, and to be efficacious on the ground. So, a lot of my work in the last fifteen years has been on decentralized policy regimes. As [one of the BRE editors] mentioned, I have a book on charter schools with Luis Huerta and with some students here. I recently did a book on preschools. I have long been fascinated by what happens on the ground as central states lose legitimacy and lose public authority.

So the starting question is: Where are the openings for improving the organization of schooling? And what are legitimate public spaces to actually try to improve schools or improve the lives of kids and young people? And then there is the *a priori* question, which is: Well, how, through political processes, are those spaces opened or closed? For example, why is it that we move from a certain optimism in the 60s about the role of the central state, expanding government, and expanding school reform actions to more of a diminished view of, well, let's sort of take it with market mechanisms, let's create a few more charter schools, let's move towards merit pay? What are the spaces that open or close over time, and what is the role of political action in broadening or narrowing those public spaces? And just a note going forward (and this is pretty obvious to a lot of you) but the opening and closing of those public spaces flows from raw political interests, raw

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economic interests, the interests of unions to expand membership, the interests of politicians to attract campaign contributions, and the unions of district superintendents to get an even better job than being in suburban Fresno.

There are a lot of raw interests. But there are also a lot of institutional beliefs, or what some people have called “scripts,” that is, (as David [Pearson] and Cynthia [Coburn]² were saying before), we have theories of action based on faith: that Reading First is going to work, or that rewarding teachers with merit pay is going to work, or that magnet schools or charter schools are going to work. We have systems of faith about these interventions. So the way in which public spaces open or close is not just a story about raw interests, it is also a story about belief systems, about systems of faith.

The role of the state has really changed quite dramatically in the lifetimes of those of us who are old enough to remember back in the 60s. From the postwar period through the 1970s there was an emphasis on expanding the state and emphasis on growing more schools, creating more forms of schooling, expanding community colleges, and experimenting with different forms of schooling like magnet schools or alternative schools. And there was really quite a period of optimism and a lot of public resources to expand public options, public projects. Now in the 60s, of course, this focused on civil rights and the integration of so-called “peripheral groups” into the mainstream. So the public project was not only about expanding education but about incorporating so-called “peripheral groups” on the edges of the mainstream. The “mainstream” of course being an increasingly suburban White population who pulled groups into that mainstream and used schools to socialize people in that common core. So the public spaces that opened up were focused on individual rights, civil rights, and social integration.

But of course, those public spaces in stages of political action began to diminish by the 1980s. And we can talk about the reasons for that. A lot of it was the concern that we have spent more and more money on education but test scores seemed to be pretty flat in the 1970s and 1980s. Then there was Richard Nixon who attempted in the late 1960s to disassemble. And then you had a search among sort of centrist democrats. OK, so here is this guy Bill Clinton sitting in Little Rock, saying, how can I be invigorating the Democratic Party in a way that does not go back to the 1960s, that defines more of a middle ground? The public spaces of Clinton, Richard Riley, other centrist governors opened up in the 80s in contradiction to Regan, were public spaces that talked about accountability, they talked about how we narrow learning objectives, how we think about human development in a thinner, less enriched kind of way because we had civil rights groups coming up the 80s saying if we are going to document the equality for courts, we need similar measures, we need more transparency, we need more standardized tests.

This move towards accountability and narrowing learning aims to market innovations. These public spaces were opened up by elements on the left not by the elements on the right. And of course, Bill Clinton was the guy who had the clever smarts to carve a middle ground from this. Clinton was also the first president to back charter schools with federal funds. So the left began to legitimate (Clinton was on the left by this

² Other presenters at the symposium included: California Superintendent Jack O’Connell, Professor Judith Warren Little, Professor Cristina Gonzalez (this issue), Professor Norton Grubb, Professor Linda Tredway, Superintendent of Oakland Unified School District Tony Smith, and U.C. Berkeley Chancellor Robert J. Birgeneau.

time) but there were these sort of progressive democrats that were backing market remedies, which opened up a whole new discourse somewhat outside but related to school vouchers, related to tuition tax credits. But the discourse became much more focused on individuals and markets; creating incentives for individuals, rewarding individual teachers, firing individual poor teachers, and the discourse was less collectively oriented and less pro-social and less integrationist, and more focused on rewarding individual behavior and individual action.

The spaces that are opened and closed have moved remarkably—really—in some of our lifetimes, and finally with No Child Left Behind [NCLB]. But NCLB really pushed out the discourse around accountability. That is, George Bush said, well if it works so well in Texas then we must take this model to the national level. So, we have accountability with a vengeance under NCLB. And it has yielded very little in results. We have seen some test score gains, especially urban areas in mathematics. But it has closed down other kinds of discourse and other kinds of conversations. What is interesting at the same time is that as there is highly centralized accountability from Washington for the last nine years, the credibility of local market innovations has continued to increase. And so now we no longer only have folks on the right arguing for the accountability of charter schools, vouchers in Florida and elsewhere, but we have elements on the left pushing heavily for market remedies. And we can talk about the reasons for that.

So, this portion is a short history, and I know that a lot of you know this already—it is the ways in which spaces are opened up for public conversations. What is a legitimate reform, what is an illegitimate reform, has really changed quite remarkably. And if you go to a superintendent and start talking about one of these first two points he or she will look at you like you are out of your mind. So things are stigmatized and things are legitimated, and those conversations have changed.

Now, why did they change? There are a couple sets of reasons. One is that new ideas and new ideologies come to have legitimacy and political popularity. The second set is that material conditions change and these things are not topologically related; I think they interact, but they can move somewhat independently. Certainly from an ideological standpoint, we have declining faith in government. There is this sort of rising cynicism over collective action. I call this “The Grateful Dead Syndrome”: you know you still see these guys following around the Grateful Dead and they are cynical about any authority and central action—whether they are right-wing nuts or left-wing nuts. And that sort of permeated in the popular culture, this sort of criticism of central authority. We have got rising faith in local actors, not unrelated to declining faith in professional expertise and central actors. This rising faith in local actors is not only right-wing market people; it is also a broad swath of NGOs, community action folks. If you look at school politics in Oakland, the movers and shakers around charters schools are Latino and Black church leaders. They are not Reagan Republicans. So this is sort of non-partisan faith in local action. And then we have changing ideologies about how to raise kids, the kinds of skills that we want our kids to have. In hard economic times, we all become sort of pragmatists, I think, and try to figure out how our kids can become stockbrokers because making it as a community organizer is not very lucrative. So, we have got these harder, pragmatic, narrower conceptions about how we are trying to socialize our kids.

And again, this is not a partisan issue; I think it is probably connected more to economic difficulties and America's recurring faith in being pragmatic. You know, the enlightenment is nice, but it does not restore economic growth; it does not guarantee jobs for our kids. So we have to be pragmatic about how define the development of human learning.

On the material side, we have got the declining national economy. I think what is interesting about America becoming a middle class nation is that it has come from our progressive instincts after World War II. That is, we invested heavily in places like the World Bank, the IMF, we continue to invest in international development and that spurred the rising middle class around the county. And now those counties that we helped to rebuild and helped to stimulate are out-winning us at our own game in terms of global capitalism.

As resources, wages, and capital are spread more equitably around the world, it tends to pull the U.S. down. So, just like the British Empire declined about 150 years ago, we are seeing this sort of incremental, detrimental decline in the American empire. In turn, the state has declining fiscal capacity; so if the state has declining fiscal capacity, it feeds into the popular opinion. So if these crazy guys in Sacramento, these crazy guys in Washington, do not know what they are doing anyway, they cannot be efficacious. Well, in part, they cannot be efficacious because they do not have the fiscal resources to make a difference on the ground.

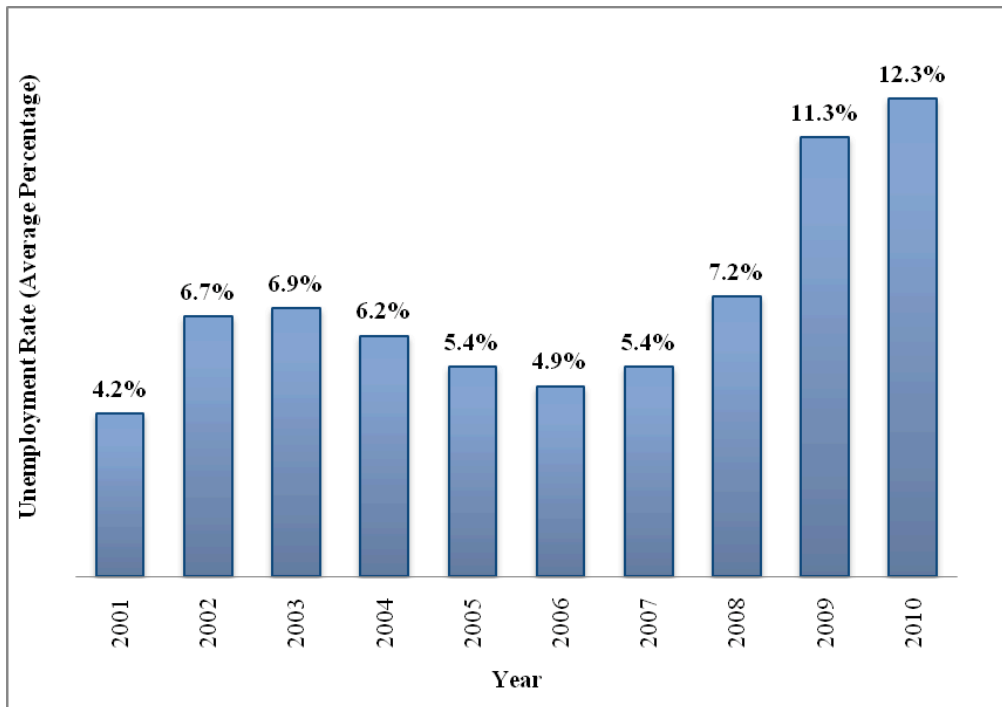


Figure 1. Unemployment Rate (Average Percentage through the last ten years). Data Source: Adapted from Employment Development Department of the State of California (2011).

As the state struggles with that, and you talk to politicians about how it is going to work, how do we show our voters we can make a difference in welfare reform or charter schools or whatever? The state sort of flails around trying to look efficacious. And I think one reason why accountability has this lasting political appeal is that it is this efficacious rhetoric. You know, we in Sacramento and Washington push standardized testing, we can push tougher accountability, we can dole out tough love to the teachers' union and see test scores going up a little bit. So, it is this rush to look efficacious, I think, because the state is faced with this decline in fiscal capacity and declining faith that central government can make much of a difference. What would a talk at the Graduate School of Education be without a couple of graphs? So here is graph number one (see Figure 1), just rising unemployment in California.

Nothing new, except that it is going from a historical low in 2001 of about 4.2 percent to a high of 12.3 percent in a matter of ten years. Is this temporary? Is this a structural shift? Is it the nature of work and employment in the U.S. vis-à-vis the global economy? We will find out in the next five to ten years. But there is something going on in terms of the structure of work around the world that may affect our economic vitality and that is the vitality of central governments.

This is just a simple graph on California's own state spending in K-12 education (see Figure 2). These are non-inflation adjusted dollars, just current dollars since fiscal year 2005. As Gray Davis was being booted out and Arnold Schwarzenegger was coming in, we were spending about 33 billion dollars a year in K-12. It actually went up under Arnold to about 40.5 billion dollars. And then it has dropped down with the great recession to just around 32 billion. And budget analysts are suggesting that we are probably in a steady state situation in the current year if unemployment is stable and employment starts to pick up. Again, is this a temporary decline or is it a long-term trend in terms of the state government's ability to support the public project of education?

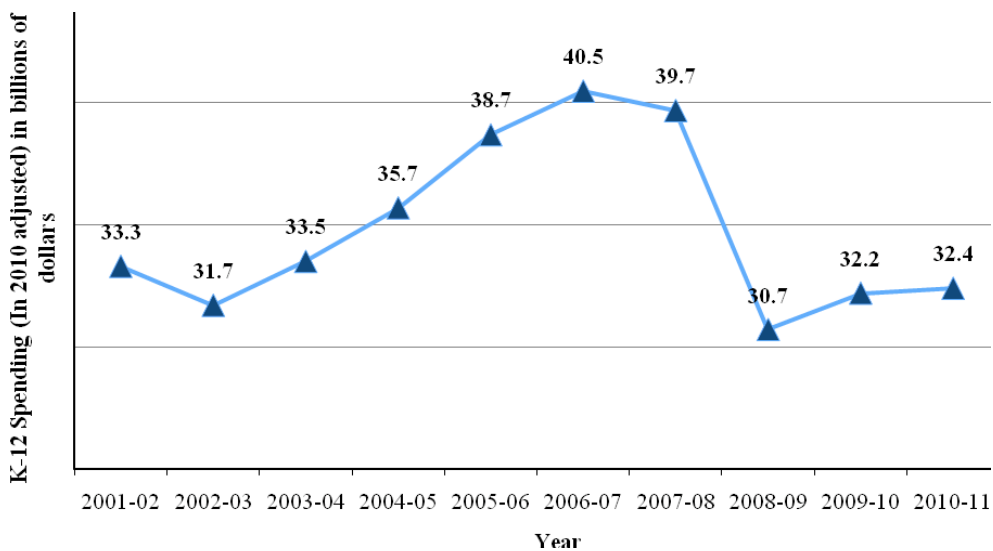


Figure 2. California Spending in K-12 Schools (in 2010 Adjusted) in Billions of Dollars.

Frustrated voters have continuing skepticism over the role of government and the role of public activities in our society. This just came out last week in the California Field Poll. They are trying to tackle this issue of how we fix the state budget. Should we lower the two-thirds requirement for the state legislature to pass the budget? Should we have a constitutional convention? We have got some serious structural impediments in Sacramento where we have got to really think about money and budgeting for public projects in the state. So the Field Poll asks, “do you think we should fix the budget through spending cuts only?” and half of the respondents said, “yes, we can fix this problem,” even though we have cut K-12 spending by almost one-fifth since 2004. Half the voters have this skeptical view that these guys are just kind of nutty, they are not taking the bull by the horns, and they can fix their own problem through additional spending cuts. The other option is “fix the budget though a combination of cuts and tax increases.” And only less than 30% said “yes.”

We have got a legislature that is almost two thirds from the Democratic Party, we have a governor who is hard to figure out politically, we have a population that is deeply skeptical about new taxes even to return to the level of public finance that we had a few years ago. And “do we need to change the state constitution”? For those of you who do not religiously read the *San Francisco Chronicle*, which takes religion some mornings to read it, you can be one of two Republicans that say legislature holds up the entire state budget. This has happened most years in the past decade. Even though Republicans are a minority party, even though Democrats are just two or three votes short of the two-third majority, because you have to have a two-third vote, two or three guys or gals can hold up the entire state apparatus. So there have been two or three groups now trying to get a ballot initiative to call a Constitutional Convention. And when the Field Poll people asked this population of California, “Do you think we have to have a Constitutional Convention?” one in five said “yes.” And three quarters said we do not need a convention, these guys are just nutty up there, they should just solve their own problems, even though we cannot really do it without a constitutional change in my opinion.

Declining fiscal capacity, maybe temporary, maybe long-term, maybe long, economic turns, and low – maybe declining – public faith in centralized government and in public projects. So before we reach out and get a beer or have a gin and tonic, let me offer a couple of hopeful notes here, and things that I have been trying to look into. One is the conversation that is opened up, and the Obama administration is adding to this in maybe positive, maybe negative ways, but the conversation that has opened up has three kinds of ingredients. One is this faith in organizational innovation. We can build or adapt existing schools to create more excelling kinds of school institutions. We saw this in the 70s a lot: the notion that we can build alternative schools, we can pursue alternative forms of instruction, we can read Summerhill School [a British boarding school] and have quality crazy schools. There was a real optimism during the 70s about alternative education, alternative schools. We are seeing a return to that faith in innovation, oftentimes coming from the foundation community, like the Gates folks, oftentimes coming from modern business people who support education and think that schools can innovate just like Apple Computers can innovate. So, real faith in innovation.

It is also convenient because it does not cost much money. You can sell it without re-appropriations. So if you could buy charter schools in L.A.—we are doing this work in

L.A. and hand off about 30 schools in L.A., charter operations and nonprofits, and even teachers groups—you can hand off the schools to other kinds of groups but it does not cost the state more money to run the schools. And in fact, the corporate lobbies and the modern pro-education lobbies would argue that you can save money through efficiency; you can have the same results at charters at less cost. It is convenient in that sense.

This is not rising your spirits, is it? The other part of the conversation is that we need to hold teachers accountable. That is, the individual effort, the individual capacity of teachers, needs to be fixed. And this, politically, makes sense because the structural stones of institution recede into the background. Nobody talks about the structure of school, nobody talks about stratification of the system, nobody talks about finance inequalities. As long as you can focus public attention on, sort of, pruning the bad apples and hiring stronger teachers, the discourse is focused on individual teachers. So that is yet another example of individualizing this policy discourse as opposed to the 60s and the 70s when there is much more conversation about the structure of the system, inequalities as inherent in the system. Now, you could have a healthy argument about the role of the unions in this, and whether the unions are a force of change or a conservative force. It is an important conversation. But my point is that the focus is on the individual teachers, not on deeper structuring concerns within the institution.

And finally the conversation—and you have seen this last week with the Obama folks announcing this new draft of national curriculum standards—a focus on prime conceptions of learning, a focus on building a more efficient system. Now, we can make different interpretations; one interpretation is that it is definitively not market informed, it is central government-led informed, so in that sense, the exception in the Obama platform so far. It is saying the central government should come in, wedge the states, work with curriculum agencies, work with subject matter specialists, and write common sense standards. Because now we have 50 different standards, we have 50 different definitions of what efficient student performance looks like, and Arne Duncan and the Department of Education come in saying that we need strong national standards like many other countries have put in place. So, in that sense, I can see this as progressive because it is not a market-oriented strategy, it is structural central government strategy. On the other hand, it is sort of a barrier in the sense that we want to squeeze more efficiency out of the system, and the way to get more efficient is that everybody is pulling towards the same learning objectives. And narrowing those learning objectives, making them simpler and transparent for everybody, we'll see more performance out of the system.

Now, again, that is a good thing. Civil rights activists like this approach because they have very transparent comparable indicators of student performance; they can go into court and convince judges that kids in Mississippi are going to learn as much as kids in Massachusetts. On the other hand, what does it do for how we think about human development and how we are nurturing kids and the kinds of young adults we want to produce in a very diverse and pluralistic society? And it has been driven by those ideas; it has been driven by the state and the central government that is struggling to look efficacious. Because if the results of your work, through the eyes of the central government politician, if the results of your work are very, very difficult to determine, you want to do something where the results are palpable and clearly observed and the way to do that is to create a more efficient school system.

I do want to say the problem of the new discourse around individual teachers and the new discourse about marketability of charter schools has the effect of making deeper structural problems invisible. Because the big one you forget is the rising levels of family poverty. Now, I think what is interesting about the Obama administration is that they are talking about poverty around health care reform, so there is recognition of the drive that family poverty has in people's lives and on the national economy. But outside of the reform, there is no conversation around family poverty in the Obama administration. It is Clinton-esque. Because as Clinton was trying to re-center the Democratic Party, he did not want to talk about anything that seemed too far left: He wanted to talk about fixing schools, fixing public institutions that have real class appeal. So I think it is important that the new discourse we are seeing, which has been legitimated in the last ten years, has the convenient advantage of not talking about deeper structural causes underlying achievement gaps in important forums.

Again, I would emphasize that this is not necessarily a "good guys vs. bad guys" story. In fact, in my own work, I get more confused on who I think the "good guys" and the "bad guys" are. Because in my work, the left are pushing this new discourse: civil rights activists, progressive labor leaders, people who feel that we really need to take our best shot at improving public education and not start talking about things like family poverty or deeper structural problems. So this is a bipartisan discourse that is developing. Another point is that the advisors to Reagan and the advisors to Obama are situated in very similar material political conditions: The country is deeply divided politically, the country is facing economic decline. How do you weave a moderate path through these conditions? And the adaptations, the remedies, are actually quite similar as well, with the exception of the national standards. I do not think the Reagan White House would have ever pushed national standards, he would not have pushed a billion dollars of stimulus aid, so there are notable differences. But as we go forward, the discourse around markets, charter schools, merit pay, digging outperforming schools, reconstituting school—these are ideas that came out of modern Republican circles in the 1970s.

OK, I leave you with a little bit of good news in my opinion. I think that there are spaces that are opening up; I think that there are some spaces that unfortunately are closing down, but there are spaces that are opening up with this reform discourse. Some of you, some students are working on these arenas; I think that these are really live possibilities. And I think they are hopeful possibilities. Whether they pack a punch in terms of closing achievement gaps, or narrowing finance inequalities, I think remains to be seen. But I think they are useful ways to think about how we get up every morning to think about how we position our own work.

First of all, I think there is the lively conversation of deregulation of school finance, giving local educators greater control. This, compared to the centralization that we see in No Child Left Behind [NCLB] and other highly centralized policies, is getting people like Tony Smith [Superintendent of the Oakland Unified School District and fellow symposium speaker], and other school superintendents, to have more flexibility on the ground. Sacramento just recently squished together about five billion dollars in 45 different programs in a big block grant to school districts. And I think if we believe that people on the ground are a little closer to the problems, will have some good ideas about remedies, I think giving local actors and school superintendents, union leaders, school

principals, with authority over those dollars, maybe you can fend. It is really a theory of action that we need to test and we need to study. The Obama administration has a very similar thing that controls the consolidation of the 18 programs into bigger block grants. So I think that is useful. Now the decentralization movement mostly applies to broader areas in governance—we mentioned the L.A. story here, which I have just been writing about for the last few months. An L.A. shift where Latino activists and Mayor Villaraigosa pushed the school board to begin handing off the 251 schools, about a third of all the schools in L.A. Unified, to charter operators, nonprofits, union leaders, and teacher coalitions of teachers on the ground. This is a very exciting experiment: It is decentralization pushed by progressive forces, not by conservatives. Although conservatives are certainly bankrolling a lot of the rallies and capitalizing the movement, most of the energy on the ground is from left or left-of-center activists situated in community agencies.

We had this experiment, say with the community control of schools in New York back in the early 60s. We've seen this impulse for neighborhood control of schools in Chicago over the past three decades. Tony Bryk has a wonderful book out evaluating for 20 years the effects of grass roots democracy in schools. So I do not want to be pollyanna-ish about this, but I do think this is going to be a bigger experiment than we have ever had in terms of grass roots decentralization, in terms of community control of schools. And how activists on the ground deal with that responsibility—that will be super interesting. Another thing in L.A. is that the charter school lobby pushed this; the charter school lobby has put money to campaigns to upset and really throw out the pro-union school workers. But when push came to shove, it was the NGO; the teacher groups won most of the schools in the first round, not the charter school movement, so the grass roots politics are really complicated and unpredictable, and I think potentially exciting.

Just two other points and I'll close—let's get into a conversation. One is, I think, I hope that the decentralization conversation gets us down to sort of the nitty-gritty of teacher-student relationships, teacher-teacher relationships—what motivates people inside schools to work cooperatively. A lot of the decentralization discussion has been policy talk, has been about the mechanics of who is to exercise control. Some charter schools—I've been working in one charter school in the outer Mission District—in which teachers are rethinking relationships, or how teachers work together, how teachers listen to adolescents, how teachers give adolescents more voice, how teachers introduce crazy notions of politics and empowerment in classroom conversations. This does not necessarily have to be a left-of-center pedagogical reform. But I do think that the decentralization conversation is only powerful if it starts getting people thinking about these new kinds of relationships inside schools and unless you are already working on this kind of angle, there is a lot of work to get done.

And finally, I think that conversation about innovation reform is getting really more focused on this cusp between families and schools. Of course, this thing has been around for a half century as well, but if you look at what the Obama administration is doing in terms of the rapidly expanding preschool programs; in the health care bill, if it gets through, there is a lot of new money for home visiting programs, for programming practices, for prenatal practices, we have a lot of conversation which is foundational around Beacon schools. Jeff Vincent's here [pointing at audience], and his center up the

hill in urban planning spends all their time getting city planners together with school administrators to figure out how schools can become stronger centers of communities. So I think this is a far more hopeful note, that other than seeing schools as a sealed off penitentiaries where we stash kids, seeing them more as opening up to the community, serving families, and really supporting the NGO communities and activism as a final hopeful space. So I'll stop there and we can talk a little bit.

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