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THE ME CURRICULUM:
HIGH-STAKES TESTING AND THE AMERICAN COVID-19 RESPONSE

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Abstract

American culture's emphasis on individualism has been identified by those directly engaged with fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and by popular cultural commentators as problematic in mustering the collective social consciousness and self-sacrifice necessary to mount a successful pandemic response. This concern is supported by emerging academic research which postulates a relationship between a culture's relative balance between individualism and collectivism and the success of its pandemic response. Big data analysis suggests an inverse relationship between individualistic cultural traits and success in pandemic mitigation. Although the relative advantages and disadvantages of American individualism have been debated since Tocqueville, a recent rise in the dominance of individualism within the American psyche has been noted by both sides of the political spectrum with conservative commentary expressing concern over radical individualism and more left-leaning commentary finding increasing acceptance of libertarian principles perilous to the common good. Paralleling this rise in individualism are neo-liberal efforts at education reform that culminated in No Child Left Behind and its successor Every Student

Succeeds. Such comprehensive neo-liberal reform efforts engender increased cultural individualism in three ways: by narrowing curriculum definitions and content to a core that excludes issues of citizenship; by increasing direct instruction that limits students' opportunities to engage with others in meaningful educational tasks; and most importantly, by creating an accountability superstructure based solely on decontextualized evaluations of isolated students, educators, and schools. The decades-long dominance of neo-liberal reform efforts create an educational environment which reinforces the cultural individualism hampering a successful American response to COVID-19.

Keywords: high-stakes testing, NCLB, ESSA, individualism, common good, COVID-19

THE ME CURRICULUM: HIGH-STAKES TESTING AND THE AMERICAN COVID-19 RESPONSE

Among the myriad reasons for the United States' worst public health response to infections and deaths per one million citizens to the COVID-19 pandemic among developed nations are specific cultural traits long documented as existing in the American psyche. Such cultural presuppositions provide the medium in which unproductive and dangerous political and social responses to a pandemic can flourish. For example, both the anti-intellectual (Hofstadter, 1964) and the anti-establishment (Horwitz, 2013) strains of American cultural thought provide foundation for the pervasive skepticism and occasional outright rejection of scientific fact that have been significant characteristics of the American COVID-19 response. Pre-existing in the American cultural consciousness, such anti-intellectualism and anti-establishments make the politically motivated undermining of scientific facts regarding the COVID-19 pandemic more palatable to many Americans just as they help make Americans more vulnerable than citizens of other developed countries to politically motivated climate science deniers (The Guardian, 2019).

Similarly, what has long been considered one of the more enduring and dominant American cultural traits undergirds a peculiarly American, and deadly, pandemic response pattern. Individualism has occupied the zenith of American cultural traits at least since Alexis

de Tocqueville (1969) commented on the highly egocentric and individualistic nature of Americans who "look after their own needs. … owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from any-body..." (pp. 506–508). The relative advantages and disadvantages of American individualism have been debated in the years after Tocqueville by cultural observers of all stripes and in ideological venues of all descriptions—social, political, economic, psychological, and religious—but what has rarely been challenged is the conclusion that American culture is highly individualistic. Given this nearly *a priori* notion of American individualism, it is not surprising that much of the initial cultural commentary on the American pandemic response references individualism as a mitigating circumstance in the unique issues surrounding America's lack of success in tamping down viral spread.

AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM AND THE COVID-19 RESPONSE

Proving those most directly involved in a cultural phenomenon often serve up the first insightful drafts of cultural commentary, Vanderbilt epidemiologist William Schaffner (2020) suggested early in the pandemic that the lack of a robust social coconsciousness among Americans was the distinguishing characteristic between the relative early successes of COVID-19 responses in Europe and Canada and the comparative failure of the United States' response. Schaffner attributed the low level of social consciousness among Americans to the individualistic bent of the American psyche, a tendency that limits the vison of the collective social good at the core of a robust social consciousness. Similarly, Amin Alipour (2020), an MD and PhD student working at Stanford Medical Center, compared the United States' initial response to the coronavirus pandemic with responses in other countries arguing the U.S. response was failing due to the highly individualistic nature of the American character, a trait that engendered a type of selfishness when it came to taking precautions to protect others. For both Schaffner and Alipour, the problem they identified as practicing medical workers toiling in the vanguard of a pandemic was not American individualism *per se* but rather an individualistic trait so dominant within the American psyche that it left little room for the expansion of

other traits such as the collective social consciousness and the personal sacrifice necessary for the successful amelioration of a pandemic.

The limited amount of emerging academic research connecting the American COVID-19 response to the privileging of individualism over collectivism supports the front line analysis of Schaffner and Aaipour. In one of the more comprehensive efforts to date, researchers from the University of Virginia and University of British Columbia used big data findings to argue cultural levels of individualism inversely correlate with the ability to adopt proven infection mitigating behaviors such as social distancing and mask wearing. More surprisingly, the researchers found that this inverse correlation is so sensitive and durable that it replicates itself at the macro and micro levels. Although the data findings were principally focused on the United States, the research suggests levels of relative correlation exist at approximately the same degree regardless of whether the examined culture is that of a community or a country. The correlation, in other words, between cultural individualism and the inability for culturally collective responses to the COVID-19 pandemic is so durable and precise that it can be seen at gradations of cultural size ranging from community to country. Regardless of how a culture is defined in terms of scope, the higher the level of individualism within the culture the more resistant members of the culture will be to adopting even the most benign and unobtrusive collective actions such as social distancing and mask wearing to combat an infectious pandemic (Bian, Li, Xu, & Foutz, 2020).

In addition to supporting anecdotal evidence from front line health workers, such big data findings mirror much of the initial popular culture commentary on the American COVID-19 response. Many of these first drafts of a cultural critique regarding the pandemic response link the American focus on libertarian individualism and the ensuing lack of a strong collective social consciousness to the United States failure to mount a successful response to the pandemic. Trying to explain the resistance to relatively small sacrifices and inconveniences such as social distancing and mask wearing, Linker (2020) argued feeding the politicization of common sense public health measures is an American individualism best summed up by resistance to authority, a "don't tread on me" mentality that leads to a solipsistic blindness. Whatever ben-

efits such individualism may accrue in other situations, in the face of a pandemic which requires broad collective response to public health directives for mitigation, this "don't tread on me" approach essentially becomes a "suicide pact" ironically linking isolated individuals to each other. (para. 6). The essayist and critic Meghan O'Rourke (2020) expanded on this perspective when she stated,

> Americans have allowed us to believe that the self, rather than the community, must do all the healing. COVID-19 is a stark reminder that the community, rather than the self, may be the first line of protection….No person is an island; the nation that believes in individuals more than it values community risks its own survival. (para. 12-13)

CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COLLECTIVE

The stark, existential consequences of personal death and societal collapse portrayed by Linker (2020) and O'Rourke (2020) hint at an evolution in the American relationship between the individual and the community since America's founding. At the beginning of the republic, Tocqueville (1969) portrayed the American perspective on individualism and the common good as a continuum on which Americans may tilt toward the individualistic pole but nevertheless accept the necessary tension between the individual and the community. The checks and balances between the three branches of government and particularly the power invested in an independent judiciary were indicators for Tocqueville that the founders were aware of the dangers of American individualism running amuck in the political realm. There was, in short, some recognition of the political and social consequences of leaning too hard into the individualism which would fire American territorial expansion and economic development.

More recently, a series of cultural critics have reflected both positively and negatively on the increasing individualism in American society. During the past fifty years, Tom Wolfe (1976) labeled baby boomers the "me generation" and the 1970s the "me decade" because of what he viewed as a movement in American society toward a more atomized form of individualism that spurned the tempered collectiv-

ism of previous generations; Christopher Lasch (1979) warned of the dangers of a "*Culture of Narcissism*" brought about by an unchecked individualism that veers toward solipsism; and Joel Stein (2013) doubled down on the more critical aspects of Wolfe's assessment of baby boomers by labeling millennials the "Me Generation." Today the notion of a metastasizing individualism is put forward by both right-leaning and left-of-center critics with the right warning of a radical individualism that encourages identity-based politics and ultimately provides for no common moral compass. From another political perspective, Michael Sandel (2020) suggested the concept of an individualized meritocracy has so overtaken the American consciousness that any notion of acting either pragmatically or morally on behalf of the common good has all but disappeared.

In light of such cultural analysis suggesting the growing individualism of Americans, many of the failures of America's COVID-19 response can be viewed as adding to the notion that the continuum between individuals and community has been replaced by political and social fault lines where the tension Tocqueville referenced has given way to antagonism. No longer a pole whose benefits and drawbacks are to be balanced against an opposing pole, American individualism, as Linker (2020) described, has become an absolute where any type of rational balancing of benefits is viewed as an attack on the principle of individualism itself. In this world of absolutes, to sacrifice an inch of individualism for the good of the community is tantamount to sacrificing all of it. If nothing else, such a perspective explains the overt hostility of at least one-third of Americans to wearing a couple millimeters of cloth over their nose and mouth when in public places. "Don't Tread on Me" has gone from the battle flag of the first American Navy at war with an oppressive foreign state to a symbol of the primacy of absolute individualism even in the face of a pandemic where small inconveniences to save lives are dismissed as threats to each and every freedom enjoyed by Americans.

Precisely how and when this transformation from continuum to fault line, from tension to antagonism, occurred is unclear. Certainly, such antagonism was not dominant during World War II when residents on the East and West Coasts were asked to turn their lights off

at night in the unlikely event the lights would be used to target attacks by German and Japanese submarines. Few if any individuals objected at the time that they had the absolute right to leave their lights on and that any directive to do so was unconstitutional. Similarly, even after 9/11, there was broad, albeit sometimes grudging, acceptance certain individual freedoms would need to be curtailed to protect the common good. Few took their frustration over having to remove shoes for airport security checkpoints to the extreme of claiming they had an individual right to proceed fully shod through security and any attempt to mandate otherwise was the first step on the slippery slope of losing all their individual freedoms. More importantly, the fight against the Patriots Act's curtailment of certain freedoms of individual privacy that was led by groups such as the ACLU was not argued on the basis of an absolutism which suggested that any abridgement of individual freedom was an assault on all freedoms. Rather the argument was structured around how best to balance national security with individual privacy.

Whether the Trump-inspired political rhetoric swirling around America's COVID-19 response has created or simply exposed a pre-existing absolutism regarding the American notion of individualism is somewhat of a moot point. Regardless of the rhetoric, the attempt at COVID-19 mitigation has elicited a much broader swath of the public who not only tacitly accept but proudly proclaim an absolute notion of individualism as their constitutional birth right. In light of this development, an important question for educators becomes to what extent recent educational practices have fostered the rise of a concept of individualism that regards appeals to a common good as antagonistic to all individual freedoms. Amid all the political, social, and economic reasons COVID-19 may have amplified both the number and the intensity of voices proclaiming, "Don't Tread on Me," the issue for educators is whether schools have participated in this growth of an individualism that appears to turn its back on any concept of the common good. In short, the question for schools is to what extent is there an implicit or explicit "me curriculum" that has participated in the rise of a contemporary version of American individualism which overwhelms even the smallest appeals to the collective good. Particularly for educators

who have influence over curriculum practices, such as teacher educators and public school administrators, the inquiry into whether current American educational practices share some responsibility for a deteriorating relationship between the individual and the collective needs to be examined in the light of recent public school curriculum developments.

EDUCATION POLICY AND THE RISE OF ANTAGONISTIC INDIVIDUALISM

Perhaps the most consequential change in American educational practices during the past several decades is the linking of public education policies and practices to high-stakes accountability testing. Born out of a neo-liberal attempt to reform public institutions by applying corporate practices of objective evaluation metrics to school performance, accountability testing has loomed over public school practices and reforms since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001. This type of testing for the purposes of school and teacher evaluation had its beginning in the 1990s when selected states begin experimenting with testing students as a means of assigning performance designations such as "school of excellence" or "school of distinction." Often teachers and administrators in high scoring schools would receive higher bonus or raises than their peers in other schools.

In 2001, these state experiments in performance-based accountability testing were codified nationally with the bi-partisan passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Using federal funds to schools as leverage, NCLB required states to test students annually in reading and math and publish the results. Far more importantly, the results were plugged into a formula where the previous carrots for high performing school personnel were replaced by sticks for lower performing schools. Rather than larger raises for schools in which students tested well, NCLB and its 2015 adopted successor, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), threatened personnel in lower testing schools with transfer or dismissal. The stakes for educators, thus, became, at least professionally, existential. Consequently, whatever progressive pedagogical practices, technological innovations, or structural changes schools may have engaged in since 2001, ultimately such changes have all been judged by the degree to which student test scores have

increased or decreased. Accountability testing has, thus, dominated what goes on in schools in ways few other developments in American curriculum history have. By operationally, if not rhetorically, reducing educational objectives to a set of measurable metrics, high-stakes testing has calcified educational reform into various attempts at methodically curing the failings of public education without addressing larger issues such as the social and emotional impact of schooling

Given the subjugation of educational practices to high-stakes testing during the past two decades, any role schools may have played in growing the antagonistic individualism evidenced by the American COVID-19 response shares a connection with the accountability procedures of NCLB and ESSA. There are several areas where such connections are evident. The most obvious is in the changes high-stakes testing has brought, albeit inadvertently, to everyday classroom practices. One of the more dramatic classroom developments that followed in the wake of the original adoption of NCLB in 2001 was the growth in the amount of time students were engaged in direct instruction as opposed to other instruction techniques. Mason (2010) suggested that in response to the necessity of producing higher test scores, teachers' classroom instructional techniques shifted toward more direct instruction such as lectures, worksheets, and skill-based training. Such a shift allowed teachers to focus more directly on the content and skills deemed necessary for students to test well. It also allowed teachers to cover more content in similar amounts of time, thereby, at least theoretically reducing the chance students would encounter test material not covered in their classes. At its most extreme, direct instruction devolved into teaching to the test which Nichols and Berliner (2005) suggested early in the accountability movement as being one of the more ominous consequences of NCLB. Tanner (2013), Levitt (2017), and Bloom and Van Slyke-Briggs (2019) all expressed concerns over the growth and consequences of direct instruction in the form of teaching to the test. Tanner (2013) even went as far as to suggest that high-stakes testing had in the span of two decades turned teaching practices on their head. "Once regarded as professional malpractice, **teaching**-to-the **test** is now a 'best practice', with deleterious consequences for the school curriculum, and in making decisions on pupil placement,

teacher tenure and school evaluation" (Tanner, 2013, p. 4). According to Barrett (2009), such a value displacement within teaching methods facilitated by high-stakes testing presented many teachers with a demoralizing ethical quandary where they were forced to choose between teaching for test results and teaching for long term learning.

While the consequences for teachers of increasing direct instruction and teaching to the test are readily identifiable, the effects on students are somewhat less obvious. One of the reasons for this is that student effects are often created not by direct instruction itself but by what direct instruction displaces in the classroom. As Musoleno and White (2010) and Ferguson-Patrick (2018) demonstrated, methodologies such as direct instruction that are induced by an environment of high-stakes testing tend to enter the classroom at the expense of more cooperative learning experiences such as group work, peer learning, and inquiry-based projects. Satterfield (2019) took this development to its logical conclusion in arguing that in an era of high-stakes testing, it is exponentially harder to create a sense of community in the classroom and, therefore, more difficult to use students' classroom experiences as a means to teach civic engagement and democracy.

Such insights point toward a parallel between recent educational trends and the growth in antagonistic individualism uncovered in the COVID-19 response. By increasing direct instruction at the expense of more cooperative learning practices, high-stakes testing ensures students have far fewer opportunities to engage authentically with others. Creating a sense of community in classrooms, thus, becomes increasingly harder as students have fewer opportunities to experience the balancing of collective and individual interests essential for learning how to participate cooperatively in social settings. The loss of such opportunities means students emerge from their classrooms conceptually less able to place their actions in a social context and pragmatically more likely to sever their individual behavior from any goal that extends beyond their identities. The decrease in cooperative learning experiences, in essence, helps create students who are less socialized, particularly in regard to the ability to act on the basis of a common good.

Even if a straight line cannot be drawn between the loss of cooperative learning opportunities and an increase in the amount and intensity of expressions of antagonistic individualism, students who have less experience in reconciling individual and community interests are at the very least more susceptible to social suggestion and political rhetoric that hold wearing face coverings in a pandemic is an existential threat to individualism which must be resisted at all costs. A similar indirect manner in which accountability testing may enhance antagonistic individualism is through one of the psychological effects high-stakes testing has on students. As Saeki, Pendergast, and Segool (2015), Whitney and Candelaria (2017), and Wuthrich, Jagiello, and Azzi (2020) documented, high-stakes testing is correlated with increased school related stress and anxiety at all grade levels. This is particularly true with the accountability testing associated with NCLB and ESSA where students experience not only the normal performance stress related to testing but also the perceived stress of their teachers and principals whose performance evaluations and professional livelihoods are dependent upon how well students perform on the tests. The numerous practice tests, the pre-test school assemblies, and the constant exhortations scream to students that they are responsible not only for their personal performances but also for the performance of their schools and teachers.

Such perceived responsibility is a stressor that exponentially increases anxiety levels in the majority of students, and as Murphey (2019) explained testing anxiety is highly correlated with feelings of isolation among students. This increased sense of isolation in turn gives rise to heightened perceptions of individualism among students and ultimately creates a more individualistically oriented society. Murphey's mitigation suggestion for the increases in isolation and individualization because of testing is the use of social or group testing; unfortunately, this type of testing is considered antithetical to the standardized testing necessary for the performance evaluations associated with NCLB and ESSA. Left without any mitigating effect, students exposed to the isolation producing anxiety associated with high-stakes testing, thus, become more open to conceptions of individualism that veer to the absolute. Rather than recognizing the individual acts in a social context, individual actions come to be viewed as isolated events

with little if any relationship to a collective goal. The collective good is viewed simply as an amalgamation of individual actions as opposed to a value that goes beyond the specifics of the individual. Such a conception mirrors that of high-stakes accountability testing where individual student scores are plugged into algorithms to generate the performance indicators which determine school, teacher, and administrator evaluations. There is no added value, no gestalt that applies to the collective good with accountability testing; this lesson is learned by students and taken with them as they exit school and participate in society at large. The phenomenology of high-stakes testing, in short, teaches students there is no value to the collective that extends beyond the individual and, thus, no imperative, moral or pragmatic, to sacrifice individual autonomy to the common good. The notion of following non-intrusive public health guidelines that may not benefit them personally is, thus, for many of these students as alien as the concept of non-quantifiable learning is to the proponents of high-stakes testing.

In expanding the amount of direct instruction in classrooms and increasing the isolation producing anxiety of testing, NCLB and ESSA indirectly seed the ground for greater conflict between individual desires and collective needs and, in doing so, promote the rising antagonistic individualism seen in the American COVID response. Beyond such indirect causation, however, there is also at least one way in which high-stakes testing can be viewed as having a direct impact on eroding an understanding of the continuum between individual actions and the common good. One of the first unintended consequences of NCLB to be recognized was the narrowing of school curricula. Initially, such narrowing was expressed as a streamlining of what was taught and a redistribution of time allotted to different subjects. Cawelti (2006), for instance, argued that the primary side effect of NCLB was a "skewed curriculum" caused by a significant increase in instructional time devoted to math and reading, the subjects whose test scores are mandated by NCLB to be calculated in the determination of school performance. To support his claim that this increase overly skews the curriculum toward reading and math, Cawelti cited a 2006 Center on Educational Policy study that found 71% of school districts nationwide had either eliminated or significantly reduced instructional time in at

least one subject and allocated that time to reading and/or math instruction. Jennings and Rentner (2006) cited similar statistics but went on to add that 60% of districts nationwide and 97% of districts in high poverty areas had mandated specific increases in time devoted to reading suggesting that school curricula in low incomes areas were even more skewed than school curricula in other areas. Ravitch and Cortese (2009) used a comparative curricula perspective to argue that NCLB, by focusing on basic skills, had exacerbated the disparity between the breadth and depth of what other industrialized nations teach their students and what students are taught in the United States. An already narrow curriculum by international standards of content and subjects taught had, in effect, been made narrower by NCLB. Even unabashed supporters of NCLB such as Reville (2007) accepted NCLB's role in the narrowing of school curricula and used this fact in arguing for an extension of the time students spend in school.

Other than arts education, perhaps no area of the public school curriculum has seen more downsizing for the purpose of increasing tests scores in reading and math than has civic education. In citing studies that demonstrated the extent to which civics education had been incorporated into other areas of the curriculum or eliminated altogether, Sparks (2005), Rothstein and Jacobsen (2009), and Chadband (2013) all concluded the downsizing of civic education was directly connected to the onset of high-stakes testing. Chadband added another aspect to the notion of civic education in decline when she cited a Tufts University study showing the lack of basic civic knowledge public school graduates possess; for her, the study's conclusion suggested even when time and curriculum space were given to civic education, educators and students did not perceive it as important and as vital to learn as subjects tested by NCLB. Thus, both in curricula time and standing, high-stakes testing trivialized civic education. Once heir to Dewey's and the progressive era's linking of schooling and democracy, civics courses survived in schools through various post World War II reforms of the curriculum until the effort and time they required were replaced by the necessity to raise reading and math scores.

THE IMPACT OF NCLB AND ESSA ON DEMOCRACY

Viewed from a Deweyian perspective, the disengagement of public school curricula from meaningful civic education signifies more than simply another curriculum content area downsizing in the service of NCLB and ESSA. Drawing on Dewey's notion of teaching democracy by creating democratic classrooms, Kurth-Schai (2014) lamented the loss of opportunities for cooperative learning and community building both inside and outside classrooms due to the narrow performance requirements of high-stakes testing. Such lost opportunities meant far more than the loss of content knowledge for Kurth-Schai (2014); they also meant the loss of "Dewey's vision of public education as the path toward experiencing democracy as a way of life" (p. 421). Similarly, Satterfield (2019) stated despite, however, well-intended accountability testing associated with NCLB and ESSA might be, it remained undeniable high-stakes testing had limited teachers' opportunities to pursue collaborative and democratic teaching practices with their students, thus, leading to discouragement among teachers and disengagement among students. For Satterfield, this situation is directly attributable to the inherent conflict of the educational theories undergirding standardized testing and the theories that support collaborative and democratic learning environments. This impact is most acute in social studies areas including civic education where the methodology of teaching is often used as a primary means of teaching content; fewer opportunities for students to engage collaboratively and democratically in their classrooms means the less they learn skills necessary for a functioning democracy, regardless of their mastery of the content needed to enhance test performance. At the onset of the NCLB and ESSA era, Berman (2004) provided historical context for what high-stakes testing could mean for the relationship between civics classrooms and democracy. "The national education agenda focus on standards, testing, and accountability puts schools at risk of forgetting that preserving and promoting a democratic society was the founding precept of our public education system." (Berman, 2004, p. 8). Disengagement from the content of civic education as well as the collaborative methods often used to teach this content can only promote disengagement from democracy itself.

With all these studies, the implication is that if educational practices are subject to the judgement of high-stakes test performance, there will remain limited possibilities for progressive educational practices in general and democracy enhancing civic education. On a macro level, such a limitation means schools will be handicapped in promoting the engaged learning experiences necessary for students to become fully functioning participants in a democracy. The declining percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds who vote are an obvious testament to this limitation. High-stakes testing, however, has even more pernicious effects on democracy at the localized level of the individual. As Tocqueville (1969) noted, any democracy at its core depends upon continually negotiating a delicate, perhaps unsustainable balance between the individual and the collective. Too much individualism and democracy dies the death of a thousand cuts, unable to muster the collective action needed to sustain itself. Too much collectivism subsumes the individual into the collective to the point of making the concept of individualism moot. Both these extremes for Tocqueville bend back upon themselves to end ultimately in authoritarianism or totalitarianism.

To avoid such extremes, a democratic society requires each citizen to balance individual desires with the common good. Unlike authoritarianism or totalitarianism where a despot or the state determine an individual's relationship to the collective, democracy relies on each individual to negotiate a personal relationship to the collective. One of Tocqueville's (1969) great insights was that the crux of freedom in a democracy lies in each individual's ability to comprehend rationally and choose freely the necessity of a common good. Dewey, above all others, understood the burden such an insight placed on education in a democratic society. Student citizens must learn to think independently and yet choose to cooperate socially. For Dewey, the only way to achieve this is for classrooms to be filled with inquiry and collaboration. To the extent they are not, the democracy American classrooms were created to help sustain is put at risk.

Many of the unintended consequences of NCLB and ESSA mandated high-stakes testing do not terminate in themselves but rather have effects that trickle into even more unintended areas. The documented narrowing of curricula, the growth of direct teaching method-

ologies, and the ensuing reduction of collaborative learning associated with the onset of NCLB all contribute to a pedagogical environment where it is difficult to provide students the experiences they need to function in a democracy. Specifically, learning to strike a balance between individual desires and the common good by expanding one's universe of obligation, the extent to which one individual feels responsible for others, becomes increasing difficult as civic education is gutted while collaborative classroom experiences and inquiry-based learning are diminished (Berman 2004). That one-third of Americans presently proudly proclaim their universes of obligation do not extend to the simple acts of wearing surgical masks or social distancing when in public places suggests a failure of American education, regardless of what the test metrics indicate. The stakes of high-stakes testing, in short, may be higher than commonly presumed.

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