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Without Quality Public Education, There Is No Future for Democracy

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Not long ago, California public education was an international beacon of excellence. Through much of the 20th century, Californians were committed to quality public elementary and secondary schools and an accessible multi-tiered system of higher education—from guaranteed access to community college for every high school graduate, to great research universities and professional schools.

After decades of demonstrating that this was possible—that there could be affordable mass access to high quality education—California began to unravel its own accomplishment. The 1978 passage of Prop 13 marked the

beginning of this unraveling, pitching our elementary and secondary schools into the downward decline that today finds teachers facing overcrowded classrooms, insufficient books and supplies, inadequate compensation and lay-offs, and throwing a spectacularly successful higher education system into the mud.

This devastation of our public education and the rest of our public sector is not the consequence of our state being poor. Certainly we have suffered from the recession, the financial meltdown, the collapse in housing wealth, unemployment, and the foreclosure crisis. But California still generates nearly one sixth of U.S. Gross Domestic Product, and were it a nation unto itself, our GDP would place us among the top 10 nations in the world.

Wendy Brown is the Heller Professor of Political Science and co-chair of the UC Berkeley Faculty Association. She was among the more than 200 Berkeley faculty members who traveled to Sacramento on March 4th where she gave this address on the capitol steps during the “Educate the State” rally.

California, rich in resources, rich in human talent, rich in industries, and very rich in the rich, can afford a first-rate education system. But our quagmired political system (minority rule), antitax political culture, upside-down state budget priorities, and the configuring of higher education itself on the model of a business have demoted public education to the status of a failing discount store.

Indeed, there is more at stake here than the loss of a great system of education, than the madness of permitting oil wealth, real estate wealth, Silicon Valley wealth, banking wealth, Hollywood wealth, agribusiness wealth, and prisons to grow ever larger while starving our schools. There is more at stake than the madness of cutting the fuel to the economic engine that generated so much innovation and capacity in California during the last century. It is also the case that there can be no democracy without an educated citizenry.

Without quality public education, we the people cannot know, handle, let alone check the powers that govern us. Without quality public education, there can be no substance to the promise of equality and freedom, no possibility of developing and realizing individual capacities, no possibility of children overcoming disadvantage or of teens reaching for the stars, no possibility of being a people guiding their own destiny or of individuals choosing their own course. Above all, there is no possibility of being a self-governing people, a democracy.

As the world grows more complex and integrated and the media grows ever more sophisticated and powerful in shaping events and ideas, what maintains democracy is not the technical instruction into which resource-starved schools are rapidly retreating. It is not the reduction of high school to two years, college to three and only vocational training for the many, but the kind of education through which future citizens learn to understand and engage the complexities of this world.

For democracy to survive, let alone thrive, the people must be able to know and analyze the powers organizing our lives. The people must be able to reflect on the perils and possibilities of our time and develop considered views about how to navigate them. The people must be able to analyze written and oral arguments, journalistic accounts, images and sound bites—distinguishing the reasonable from the sensational, the serious from the simplistic, the well-founded from the fatuous.

If such capacities have always been important to democratic citizenship, our increasingly complex world demands them all the more, and quality public education is the key to their acquisition. Without quality public education in our future, there is no future for democracy.

Without quality public education in our future, we face a huge divide between the educated and uneducated, corresponding to a divide between the rich and the poor and

magnifying the power of the former and the powerlessness of the latter. This is plutocracy, not democracy.

Without quality public education in our future, we face a populace taught only the skills needed for work, ill-equipped to understand or participate in civic and political life. This is corporate oligarchy, not democracy.

Without quality public education in our future, we face a people manipulable through their frustrations, mobilizable through false enemies and false promises. This is the dangerous material of democracy's opposite—despotism if not fascism.

So California's disinvestment in education not only entrenches and deepens inequalities, not only breaks the promise of opportunity for every able student, not only chokes the engine of invention and achievement that built California's 20th century glory. It destroys the fundament of democracy itself—an educated citizenry capable of thoughtful analysis and informed judgment.

California must recommit to first-class K-12 education and the California Master Plan for higher education. We must come to our senses, quickly, about preserving the most esteemed public university system in the world. And we must do so not only because education is what lifts people from poverty, equalizes opportunities, reduces crime and violence, builds bright individual and collective futures, but because education makes democracy real.

Educate the state. Sí se puede.