ENQUIRY
free thought and discourse



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Will the Kids Be Alright? Creating Change in Baltimore's Public School System

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In the musical "Hairspray," set in Baltimore, Tracy Turnblad proudly sings: "Good morning, Baltimore! Every day is an open door." In reality, this sentiment is far from the truth. Baltimore has one of the worst-performing school districts in the country; in 2016, no student tested as proficient in math in one-third of its high schools. The impoverished state of its inner city raises questions about the level of education spending. Baltimore actually spends almost $1.4 billion annually on education, translating to roughly $16,000 per pupil. Despite the hefty investments in its public schools, city officials are still not held accountable for their management of education spending. The three major changes that should be made to Baltimore schools are: implementing strict accountability measures, adopting "need equalization," and promoting stronger teacher-student relationships. Adopting these three changes would help to improve the school system by tackling the problems stemming from the city's poor leadership.

Despite the large sums of money that go toward improving public schools, the city can't even begin to fix its educational infrastructure. Although the state of Maryland funds 93 percent of Baltimore's school construction costs, facilities needing maintenance repair generally receive either faulty repairs or none at all. The effect on students is tremendous, since both situations worsen the classroom experience. For example, Baltimore's chronic problem with failing boilers has caused numerous school closures. The city's leadership must be held accountable in managing the distribution of maintenance funds; students should never miss a day of learning for something as preventable as bad or no repair.

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Problems with accountability in education spending are not new and extend beyond Baltimore. Newark, New Jersey received a $100 million education grant but spent most of the money on factors unrelated to direct improvement of its school system, including outside firms and consultants. If they were held accountable for the money flow, Newark leaders could possibly have invested more in initiatives directly benefiting children, such as extracurricular activities and professional development for teachers. Leadership that spends loads of money just to produce failed results inevitably requires increased accountability measures.

Implementing "need equalization," meaning the state would ensure that schools receive a minimum level of funding, in Baltimore's system is essential in order to create more opportunity for educationally disadvantaged students. Lower-income areas are not necessarily unable to fund education; in fact, most city schools spend more than the statewide average (partially accounted for in costs of

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Free Speech and Corporations

By ERIC FISCHER
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The recent large-scale protests in Hong Kong, sparked by a proposed bill allowing Hong Kong to extradite people to mainland China, has led to a reexamination of political speech by American corporations and individuals. Recent capitulations by companies in the face of Chinese criticisms have exposed the reality that political speech by American corporations is not value-based, but rather tends to be a business decision based on the perceived political leanings of customers or the powerful.

As a quick refresher: in the midst of the Hong Kong demonstrations Daryl Morey, general manager of the Houston Rockets, tweeted a brief message in support of the protesters. Though the tweet was quickly deleted, the damage to the franchise in China was done. The Rockets' fan base there (especially large because of Yao Ming's career in Houston) reacted in fury. Prominent Chinese citizens spoke out against Morey and the NBA, and major Chinese sponsors pulled their sponsorships of the Rockets. NBA Commissioner Adam Silver has attempted to mend fences, so far with little success. Other firms have also run afoul of Chinese politics, with Nike removing a line of sneakers from China after its designer voiced support for the Hong Kong protesters.

Political speech by business enterprises has long been a topic of public discussion, but the debate has intensified after NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick began kneeling during the national anthem to protest police brutality. In the uproar that followed, individuals and companies had to walk a fine line between supporting Kaepernick and keeping silent. A few firms, notably Nike and the NBA, went all-in on social justice, branding themselves as socially liberal and as standing up for these values as a business. In doing so, they made the

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living). Baltimore, being one of these cities, could benefit greatly by investing in "compensatory education." This approach is a way to tackle the problem of "vertical inequity," the inherent disadvantages outside of anyone's control. Vertical inequity runs rampant in Baltimore, as inner-city youth lack the almost innumerable educational resources their suburban peers enjoy. Its public schools are, in effect, extensions of the troubled neighborhoods they serve; problems from home carry into school, affecting students' ability to learn. Compensatory education would refocus funding to improve or create enriching programs, such as counseling services and special reading programs. Offering these programs to children will help them to escape the realities at home and will also help them to enjoy going to school a lot more.

Promoting better teacher-student relationships will aid in the effort to improve Baltimore's dismally low test scores. Pressured to meet No Child Left Behind (NCLB) standards, teachers there mainly resorted to passing students on to the next grade regardless of academic performance. In Baltimore's impoverished inner city, where children face daily struggles with gang violence, drug addiction, and unstable homes, teachers need to view them as people rather than statistics. Strengthening teacher-student relationships requires teachers to pay more attention to the formative effects of their teaching. They need to understand the value in receiving feedback on what is happening in their classrooms, because it can greatly increase student achievement. When students feel like their voices matter, the likelihood they will contribute to their own learning grows. Creating relationships with students facilitates the exchange of feedback between teacher and student, thus helping students feel more confident and secure, improving their chances to succeed in the classroom.

Together, the three changes I have mentioned can transform Baltimore's educational landscape. They reflect an acknowledgement that education reform requires multifaceted approaches in attacking what in Baltimore's case are systemic problems plaguing the school system. These problems are worsened by incompetent city leadership that must be held accountable. Once there is accountability throughout Baltimore's leadership, implementation of need equalization and the promotion of teacher-student relationships will be much easier to undertake.

FREE SPEECH AND . . . cont.

calculation that either a certain line of political speech is beneficial to their businesses, or many of their customers, employees, or other stakeholders demand these political stances regardless of a possible negative business impact.

But oh, how the mighty have fallen. Given the opportunity to take a corporate stand for very similar values in China and the United States, Nike, the NBA, and other firms have blinked. The NBA and many of its stars walked back Morey's comments, while Nike pulled a controversial line of sneakers from Chinese stores. To be crystal clear, these firms have happily advertised themselves as against police brutality in the U.S., but remained docile when watching shocking images of police officers beating and shooting protesters in Hong Kong. How do we resolve this contradiction?

The hypocrisy shown by these firms suggests that business considerations play a significant role in deciding what a company's values and positions are. It is much easier for firms to espouse a potentially controversial political opinion in a nation which guarantees the freedom of speech, and minimal government interference in a business, than in an authoritarian nation where the whims of one ruler can quickly sink years of a firm's market positioning. This should also make us question whether corporations hold the values they say they do, or if almost all of their political speech is simply an attempt at branding to appeal to a perceived audience. In Nike's case, the company clearly does not "believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything," as their ads with Kaepernick are meant to suggest.

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A perfect solution is nearly impossible. One start, however, would be for firms to minimize their political speech in the first place, especially since it is highly unlikely that a business's employees and customers all share the same views. Instead of frequent political statements of their own, businesses should grant their employees wide latitude to engage in political speech. This would reduce criticisms that they are flaunting values for marketing purposes, and keep the company or sports league focused on producing high-quality products or teams as efficiently as possible, not appealing to people by lining up with the latest political trend. (Striking the right balance in regard to an authoritarian state, like China, is more difficult.) Morey tweeted as an individual, but his employer has received the brunt of criticism for what he said. If business enterprises were consistently apolitical organizations that let employees engage in political speech, this could help to prevent the kind of economic pain felt by the NBA right now. Although it wouldn't solve every conflict that is involved when conflicting sets of liberties collide, it should help to foster a healthy norm of attributing political speech only to individuals, not their employers.

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CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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#ChangeForBaltimore

2. *Free Speech and Corporations*
#FreeSpeechCorporations