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## 1 – NOTES ON EDUCATION

The problem America faces is that its urban school districts perform inadequately compared with their suburban counterparts, and its suburban districts generally perform inadequately compared with their international counterparts. The domestic achievement gap means that the floor for student performance in America is too low, and the international achievement gap signals that the same is true of the ceiling. America's weakest school districts are failing their students and the nation, and so are many of America's strongest.

So [writes](#) Arthur Levine, president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation.

The domestic gap means that too many poor, urban and rural youngsters of color lack the education necessary to obtain jobs that can support a family in an information economy in which low-end jobs are disappearing. This hurts the US economically, exacerbates social divisions, and endangers our democratic society by leaving citizens without the requisite knowledge to participate effectively.

The international gap, meanwhile, hurts the ability of American children to obtain the best jobs in a global economy requiring higher levels of skills and knowledge. This economy prizes expertise in math, science, engineering, technology, language and critical thinking. But nearly 30 years after the alarming federal report "A Nation at Risk," writes Levine, not one major urban district has been turned around, and many of our suburban school districts are losing ground.

What to do? A Hollywood drama released in September last year, *Won't Back Down*, offers

an alternative. It tells the story of two parents (one a teacher) determined to transform their children's failing school in the face of opposition from administrators, teachers and unions. The protagonists face apathy and intransigence at every turn.

R.J. Moeller reviews the film at [pjmedia.com](http://pjmedia.com):

This is a really well-made, well-acted, well-crafted piece of cinema, a compelling story about the crisis in education. Set in the inner city of Pittsburgh, *Won't Back Down* chronicles two mothers' seemingly Sisyphean task of taking on the teachers' unions.

The lead character is Jamie Fitzpatrick, a feisty single mom who works multiple jobs to provide for her young daughter, a 2nd grade student at John Adams Elementary who suffers from dyslexia. Nona Alberts is a world-weary teacher at the same school who wallows in a toxic mixture of disgust and mounting guilt over a broken system and her own second-best effort in the classroom.

Neither woman is perfect, but both desperately want the quintessential American dream for their kids: a dynamic education that will lead to better lives than their own. There is also a conflicted union boss who serves as the on-screen voice of the average American who sees and hears about the failures of public education, but isn't quite sure how to remedy it.

There is much more to *Won't Back Down* than its artistic merits. The film offers the viewer, voter and taxpayer a bipartisan opportunity to consider

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how to implement change for the better in this society. This is especially true when one considers how much of an impact a single documentary – *Waiting for Superman* – had on raising the level of awareness of the education system’s flaws in the general population two years ago.

Reforming education is a cause that should unite all Americans. Who does not want to see every child equipped with the tools needed to be a self-sufficient, productive member of society? Who doesn’t want kids given skills that enable them to provide for a family someday? There is general agreement that the system is broken. Politics will always play a role as positions such as school board chairman are voted on.

Yet there are key steps that must be taken prior to those auxiliary decisions made at the ballot box. Between here and there a complete overhaul of the way we do public education is needed at the local, state, and federal level.

## 2 – CULTURAL TRENDS

Roger Kimball is author of *Tenured Radicals* and *The Long March*; his latest book is [The Fortunes of Permanence: Culture and Anarchy in an Age of Amnesia](#)

Victor Davis Hanson reviews the book at [pjmedia.com](#), excerpted here:

For Kimball, the culprits for our decline are obvious and fall roughly into a few categories: cultural relativism, or the all-encompassing idea that there are no longer any permanent or absolute criteria by which we might assess anything as either excellent or poor; multiculturalism, the doctrine that non-Western cultures cannot be judged by Western values and therefore are exempt from the sort of censure that is routinely employed by Western critics in reference to their own societies; utopianism, the notion that man is perfectible with proper training, plenty of

This type of monumental change requires some consensus-building.

Michelle Rhee, former chancellor of the DC public schools and founder/CEO of Students First, was, for all intents and purposes, the star of *Waiting for Superman*, and one of the key inspirations for *Won’t Back Down*. She is also a committed liberal Democrat. She has taken flack from her “side” because she has dared to challenge one of the most sacred of cows of the American Left: public-sector unions. Yet she’s also received considerable support from her “side” because millions of Americans across the political spectrum have grown fed up with the status quo.

*Won’t Back Down* works as a movie and touches a national nerve – as such it has the potential to be a cultural catalyst. It is a fine film; the fact it has the potential to change some hearts and minds along the way only adds to its appeal.

money, and a coercive enough government run by enlightened elites; and liberal elitism that results when large numbers of well-off Westerners are able to divorce themselves from, and thus are ignorant about, the grubby mechanisms that account for their wealth, and so can indulge in ideas whose pernicious cargoes have no direct consequences to themselves.

In all these pathologies, Kimball sees the common denominator of enforced radical egalitarianism, or the human impulse to make us all the same, which for many trumps the desire for liberty and individualism.

*The Fortunes of Permanence* is named after its first essay, which reviews what has been lost by reminding us of how diverse thinkers variously understood the fragility of culture – the tenuous

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and centuries-long effort to elevate us above our savage natures. The survival of culture is never a sure thing. No more is its defeat. Our acknowledgment of those twin facts, to the extent that we manage it, is one important sign of our strength.

In a brief epilogue to the volume, Kimball seems to sum up of his worldview with homage to the Anglo-American tradition of individualism, skepticism, and self-reliance. And while the forces of collectivism and big-government paternalism

have been on the march in the Anglosphere, Kimball sees hope, both in the reaction of the populist Tea Party movement and the popular unease with what Britain has become.

If the West is the last hope of the endangered planet, then the last hope of the West is the English-speaking peoples who have best resisted the siren songs of utopian totalitarianism that on nearly three occasions in the twentieth century nearly destroyed civilization itself.

### 3 – WORK NOT WELFARE

Work, not welfare, uplifts the poor. So writes Peter Cove, founder of America Works (the first for-profit welfare-to-work company in America) in his essay “What I Learned in the Poverty War,” in [City Journal](#). An excerpt:

Nearly half a century ago, I dropped out of graduate school and enlisted as a foot soldier in America’s War on Poverty. Today, I’m still on the front lines, working to move people out of dependency and into employment. But with an important difference: I’ve become fed up with the useless policies that I once supported, and I’m trying to change the strategy of our bogged-down army.

We know for certain that income transfers, the preferred tactic of generations of liberals, have utterly failed to end poverty. My firsthand experience with welfare clients has shown me why: being on the dole encourages dependency. Working at a real job, by contrast, is the surest way for a person to climb out of poverty. Accordingly, the surest way for the government to fight poverty is to eliminate cash assistance almost entirely and offer jobs instead. ...

America Works staked its survival on the proposition that welfare clients, properly motivated and helped with a limited amount of technical assistance, could be successful at getting and

holding jobs. Our typical contract with a welfare department stipulates that we don’t get paid our full fee until we place a client in a job and the client then completes a successful probationary period of four months. This arrangement motivates our trainers and employment specialists to perform well: they understand that if they are unsuccessful with job placements, America Works will fail, and they’ll be out of a job.

Our experience has confirmed that the main obstacles preventing welfare clients from finding and retaining jobs are a lack of connections and gaps in interpersonal skills. Extended education and training programs are unnecessary, time-consuming diversions; clients with shaky self-confidence are best served by early success in getting a job, not by long periods of preparation. Our weeklong training sessions are narrowly focused on the attributes and skills needed to land an entry-level job. Our trainers work with clients on the basics, such as maintaining a businesslike personal appearance, speaking properly, preparing a résumé, and showing up on time. Clients quickly learn that success depends on self-discipline and their own motivation and effort.

In the past 27 years, America Works has placed more than 250,000 poor people, with an average

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of five to six years on the rolls, in private-sector jobs, with an average starting wage of \$10 per hour plus benefits. In our New York program, to take one example, more than half of these new workers were still on the job after 180 days. The employers that we have worked with include prestigious companies, such as Time Warner, Cablevision, Aramark, JCPenney, and American Building Maintenance Industries. Most of these employers keep coming back, asking for more of our referrals. ...

The success of welfare reform is widely acknowledged. Far less widely acknowledged is that the nation still has a tremendous work problem. In 2010, the latest year for which we have census data, a full 66% of poor people older than 15 did not work – a total of 21 million individuals. That isn't just a consequence of the economic crisis: in 2007, the number was 16 million individuals, or 64% of poor people older than 15. Nor does it imply a situation in which one parent works while the other raises the kids, since in 2010, 35% of all poor families had no working members at all. Though welfare reform succeeded in getting many poor people into jobs, millions remain on welfare today, to say nothing of such programs as Medicaid, public housing, and food stamps. And welfare reform itself has come under attack recently, with the Obama administration issuing waivers that free states from complying with the law's work requirements.

My experience with long-term welfare clients has led me to propose a radical solution: that we abolish *all* cash welfare, as well as food and housing assistance – except for the elderly and the physically and mentally disabled – in order to move from a dependency culture to one of work-first. This recommendation may sound impractical at a time of high unemployment. But the work-first principle can easily be implemented even in a down economy, as America Works proved by getting jobs for more than 500 ex-convicts in Detroit

– a local economy with 14% unemployment – in the past two years. After all, despite the economic downturn, more than 3 million jobs per year go unfilled in the United States.

The federal government would use the huge savings from eliminating welfare to create or subsidize private-sector jobs, sending money to companies to reduce the cost of hiring and paying new workers. The government could also create programs similar to those run by the Depression-era Works Progress Administration, paying workers to build parks, refurbish bridges, clean streets, and so forth. The workers' wages would pay for the basics – food, clothing, and shelter.

Jobs can't replace all welfare and poverty programs. There will always be some people who are emotionally or physically unable to work and who require government assistance. But even the so-called deserving dependents should be more carefully scrutinized. In the last ten years, the number of newly enrolled recipients of SSDI, a federal benefits program that provides aid to disabled people who can't achieve gainful employment, has risen 44%. That suggests that many people are abusing the system.

In public policy, we should deduce our theory from practice. Unfortunately, most people in the business of helping the poor turn that principle upside down, proposing theories first and then basing programs on them. Such people will surely oppose my proposals.

Can we finally confront the problem of entrenched poverty and dependency and make the difficult choices necessary to fix it? The cynic in me sees little chance that the public would seriously consider my proposals. But my optimistic side, the one shaped by finding jobs for supposedly unemployable welfare recipients, holds out hope that the nation's fiscal crisis will allow serious consideration of policies that were once unthinkable. Stranger things have happened in America.