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### Stemming the Tide Calvin's High-Water Mark and Teacher Resistance

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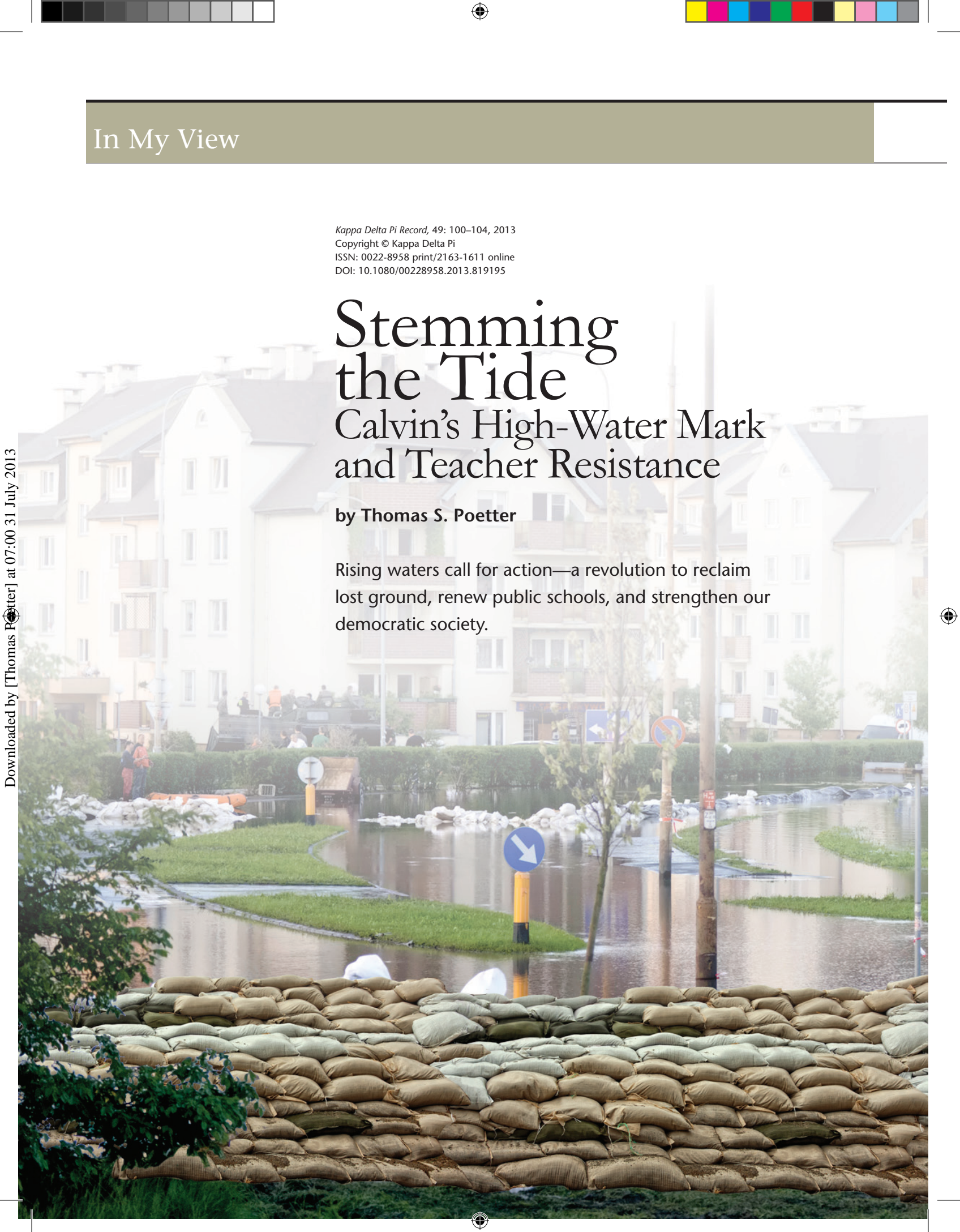
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# Stemming the Tide

## Calvin's High-Water Mark and Teacher Resistance

by Thomas S. Poetter

Rising waters call for action—a revolution to reclaim  
lost ground, renew public schools, and strengthen our  
democratic society.



Many scholars have revealed the present-day school reform movement in the United States as a great sham (e.g., Bracey, 2009; Engel, 2009; McNeil, 2000; Pinar, 2012; Schniedewind & Sapon-Shevin, 2012; Tienken & Orlich, 2013). These scholars are among the many critics of what is being done to kill public schooling through (1) standardizing the curriculum; (2) teaching to high-stakes tests; (3) holding teachers “accountable” for conditions outside their control by using new evaluation schemes that tie student test scores to “merit”; and (4) punishing so-called “failing” schools by closing or outsourcing them to corporate interests.

The reformers, mainly politicians and wealthy pundits with their corporate backers, are quickly weakening public schools. Essentially, the reformers are stealing from the public the heart of democracy: thriving public schools. The public schools make up the only system able to provide large-scale educational opportunities for the development of a learned citizenry capable of pursuing a life of liberty and happiness.

### Standardized Schools

The practice of standardization seems to have been on a nonstop march through our schools since 2002. Herein lies the rub: Not every

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student needs the same things! Classrooms should be rich places for intellectual activity, creativity, imagination, and wonder. Furthermore, choice, a critical aspect of a democratic life, has been almost completely removed from the classroom for both students and teachers. In many cases, teachers can't help but do what they're told to do, and often regress in their work, taking the path of least resistance to satisfy the boss and other powers that be. If test scores are going to be the one and only judge of educational worth, why jeopardize any stake you have in the enterprise? Teach to the test; students might score better, and all will be well. Right?

### From Words to Actions

Early in the last decade, I was inspired to loosen myself from my perch, where I was merely railing against the machine from the ivory tower. I heard four magnates of the field of curriculum studies—John Goodlad, Maxine Greene, Eliot Eisner, and Madeline Grumet—answer the following question at a symposium during the 2001 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in Seattle: “What would John Dewey have to say about the rise of high-stakes testing and the standardization of the curriculum?” Among many answers given and ideas shared, Goodlad reflected that Dewey “would be so disappointed that so many of us have done so little to stem the tide.” So I did what scholars do and began to write. At the urging of my conscience, colleagues, and students, I wrote articles and books about the threat

posed by these rampant cancers of standardization, surveillance, and high-stakes testing (Poetter, 2006, 2012).

By 2008 I faced a growing, personal disdain for the current state of things. Veteran teachers brought to my graduate classes endless stories of compromise and demise as they fought lesson-by-lesson and test-by-test against the powers that be. With their jobs on the line, these powers—mainly principals, curriculum directors, and superintendents—were similarly co-opted by the system and unable to take any sort of moral, educational stand. So they worked purposefully to keep passionate and capable teachers aligned with the scheduled scripts for instruction, which had been written by others for them to read in class. This is what teaching had become, the teachers said. But did it have to be that way?

### Teaching with Autonomy

In response, as a university partner with an area school district, I was able to arrange a unique opportunity to teach a section of Grade 9 English at the high school during spring 2008. I wondered whether it was still possible to be creative in the current standardized environment. What I found was that teachers at the high school encouraged me to develop my own lessons, to teach and focus on what I thought the students needed and what I thought was best for them to be learning. The English department of the high school provided a curriculum outline filled with topics and themes and readings and such, but I merely found this helpful, not restrictive.

## In My View

When push came to shove, and I had to enter my standards/goals for my lessons and course syllabus online, I simply cut and pasted the relevant standards for the 9th grade into that box as an experiment. As far as I know it never got checked, I never had to submit other formal lesson plans, and I was allowed to teach as I saw fit, based on what I knew and what I thought the students assigned to me knew and were interested in knowing. Literally, I was allowed to teach instead of sentenced to follow someone else's script.

This experience confirmed a strong hunch I had at the start of that semester: In some places, especially in high schools where a significant margin of students commonly pass the standardized graduation tests, teachers, for the most part, can still teach without the omnipresent surveillance of the standards and hawking supervisors. In a few words, many high school teachers around the country, at least in 2008, still had at least some minimal flexibility and a range of autonomous decision-making ability within the system. That is, they could cover the standards without teaching explicitly to them, challenge students with appropriate methods without having to teach from a script, and worry mainly about engaging students, cultivating learning as the students grew in their knowledge, skills, and appreciation of the subject matter and the classroom community. This is teaching.

### What a Difference Five Years Make

Yet, as I am constantly learning from my teacher colleagues in public

schools, movements to stamp out teaching thrive, while teachers scamper to maintain any level of academic freedom or control over the pedagogy and curriculum in use in their own classrooms. In fact, high school teachers who enjoyed freedom from the mandate of the high-stakes testing regime are now being chased, pursued, and finally hobbled by the standardization movement. Ultimately, the results are a not-so-subtle narrowing of the curriculum and the pedagogy of the classroom teacher.

In contrast to the freedom and professionalism I felt as a teacher returning to the high school classroom in 2008, my friend Calvin—a high school teacher in another area district—has seen teachers' academic freedom and his own ability to truly teach become severely challenged and tested by the powers that be.

Calvin is a 25-year veteran of high school social studies teaching, an award-winning, decorated classroom teacher. He is a person who has dedicated himself to the project of public education his entire career and has been especially committed to his students. He had spent the past 10 years ducking for cover and dodging bullets, essentially ignoring the state standards because he basically covered all of them anyway. Instead, he was teaching his students, covering the curriculum without being chained to it, and helping students pass his course, graduate, and go on to have productive lives.

His former principal had told the master teachers in Calvin's school for many years: "The classroom, teaching, and curriculum are your ter-

ritories, not mine. You do whatever you need to do to get the academic and social jobs of teaching done. We hired you to teach, and you will teach well. I trust you." Calvin had lived by that mantra, enjoyed his work, and felt successful because his students were successful. Now the message was completely different.

His new principal communicated that Calvin, at the beginning of each semester, would have to submit for approval a final exam, aligned to the standards, and meeting certain "rigorous" criteria specified in a complex rubric. A certain percentage of students had to pass a certain percentage of the test items each semester, and these numbers would be used to calculate "merit" as well as to calculate a teacher evaluation score for him at the end of the academic year. He had protested, saying that creating a test would make him, by default, teach to the test, and he couldn't do it "ethically." That's not what professional teachers do, he argued. But the principal said that she didn't care about his ethics, that the end-of-semester exam was due on her desk by 4:00 p.m. Friday afternoon, and that there was no way around it. His hands were tied. The time had come for him to be a "team player."

"The irony of it all," Calvin said, "is that I am a team player. I have professional integrity. I serve the public, even when the public is wrong or school policy is wrong. While it is a professional commitment we all make contractually to follow the rules, it feels unprofessional to violate strong, time-tested educational principles that have

been embedded in my teaching for so long. Personally, I don't think that is teaching, and that is what has been lost in this whole debate. The things we are being told to do don't enhance teaching and learning. They degrade them, don't improve things, demoralize teachers, and destroy public education."

### Common Practice

Of course, what Calvin is experiencing has been happening to teachers all over the United States. In many aspects, teachers are subject to even more control with the inception of the Common Core State Standards and national standardized testing. More teachers than ever before are speaking from written scripts; juggling different classes with different student needs so they can be on the same page as their colleagues for every lesson; following strict curriculum pacing guides, lesson plans, and activity formats; giving pre-made formative assessments to every student in the same way at the same time; and scoring students with meaningless summative tests and quizzes, ad nauseam.

The truth is that secondary-level teachers have mostly been able to avoid this trap during the past 10 years. I would contend that we are witnessing the destruction of one of the last frontiers of teaching; high school teaching is slipping away from us as the centralizing powers publish more confining standards, prepackaged materials, scripted assessments and lesson plans, pacing guides, and objectives at the secondary level. It's all part of a mad race to nowhere. The high waters

of standardization and control are rising even further, and teachers are drowning as they lose autonomy, creativity, and connections with students. Teachers and students routinely feel a lack of passion and interest in what they are doing. Educators are losing sight of their own and their students' interests and concerns, of the power of intellectual curiosity, and of the importance of pursuing *meaning*.

The great public good of a comprehensive public education system that provides individualized, quality, equitable, and accessible education to every student is a distant dream, currently lost in a sea of standardized drivel, the primacy of arbitrary and contextual-less standards and tests, and a massive movement to privatize education through voucher programs and for-profit charter schools. Most creative teachers know that they are being standardized into extinction, and many feel absolutely powerless to stop it. At times, they take solace in what curricularist and teacher advocate Bill Schubert graciously called "the in-between places," small nooks and crannies of possibility between the mandated tests and lessons (personal communication, Feb. 27, 2013).

But the fact of the matter is that, increasingly, the lessons and evaluations are scripted ahead of time by the corporate publishers and leave little room to maneuver, engage, or teach creatively. These tiny in-between places, although perhaps providing a momentary glimmer of legitimate educational experiences and real teaching, are fleeting and don't make for a satisfying profes-

sional career or a morally defensible approach to the enterprise of educating each student in our society. Now, even Calvin, model of mastering the art of the dodge, has been trapped. There seemingly is no way out.

### Not Giving Up the Fight

To his credit, Calvin hasn't given up. He is a competitor. He tries to resist, working to maintain his commitment to students. He hopes for the tide to turn, perhaps politically. Maybe society will see its errors and stem the tide, delivering a turning that Goodlad and other educationists couldn't effect while the flood ensued. Maybe teachers will bring about change, by resisting and becoming more and more civilly disobedient. Maybe students and parents will opt out of the tests, saying enough is enough. Maybe a crusader will reclaim the high ground, topple the mandates, and put an end to the outside pressures that hurt schools. Maybe.

### Glimmers of Resistance

As hobbled as Calvin is and as we all are by extension, dare we let public schooling, with all its inherent flaws, perils, and endless possibilities, be stolen from us without a fight? One thing I know is that Calvin is not really built for a big fight. He wants to be successful, to do the right thing, but at the same time is conflicted. He has very little arsenal, beyond his own professional habits and excellent performance in the classroom, to resist, to fight for a semblance of integrity in his work day-to-day, to educate, to teach his students.

Although he struggles, hobbling along in his work to figure out the best path, others are taking up the good fight on other fronts, advancing his cause, and pushing for change on a regional and national stage. When they fight, these others, myself included, humbly fight for all the teachers, like Calvin, who want to be professional, teach with integrity, co-construct the curriculum with colleagues and students in their own setting, and be transformational agents for students in our most potential-filled and democratic of institutions, the public school classroom. And we fight for students, whose educational lives, curiosities, interests, concerns, and imaginations are being thwarted by a system as it is currently configured that cares nothing at all about them as individuals, only as a number.

As most teachers know, Chicago's public school teachers struck last summer over many issues, but especially about the proposed changes to the teacher evaluation system that included student test scores as a prominent measure of teacher effectiveness—as if those scores said anything meaningful about teaching (Matthews, 2012). Their struggle has spawned other context-bound fights, like those being waged by teachers at Garfield High School in Seattle who refused to waste instructional time administering a faulty and time-consuming standardized test (Jones, 2013). In Portland, teachers will not participate in Race to the Top funding schemes that include faulty student test scores as a measure of effectiveness (Peterson, 2012). In that setting, students, parents, and

families have shown their solidarity with teachers by opting out of the test (Ravitch, 2013).

In early April, citizen activists gathered for the second annual "Occupy the Department of Education" event in Washington, DC, sponsored by United Opt Out National ([www.unitedoptout.com](http://www.unitedoptout.com)). The effort was meant to press a national conversation on the demoralization of teachers, the narrowing of the curriculum, and the corporatization and privatization of public education at such an alarming level and rate. This group encourages students, parents, and teachers to opt out of standardized testing by refusing to participate in it. Citizens also have been meeting to force the reclamation of the public agenda for school change through organizations like Save Our Schools, which has held large rallies in Washington, DC, and organizes teachers and citizens for resistance on a national level ([www.saveourschoolsmarch.org](http://www.saveourschoolsmarch.org)).

Regionally, teacher activist groups are partnering with higher education and community organizations to form coalitions and to further the work of resisting and developing professional capacity to withstand change. I began the Teacher Resistance and Action Network ([TRAAN], [www.traan.weebly.com](http://www.traan.weebly.com)) to heighten teachers' conception of and role in advocacy for public education, teaching, curriculum, and democracy in the Southwest Ohio region. The point of organizing is to bring into the open teacher experiences and concerns about the current reform agenda and to consider and exercise ways of resisting.

If groups of us gather, think, and act, we can perhaps tip the scales, perhaps even stem the tide.

## Final Thoughts

We are a more complete, productive, and effective democratic republic when the bells of freedom ring, overcoming the sights and sounds of tyranny like the ones barely audible and shuttered, but still glimpsed and heard far and wide, of students sitting quietly in desks in rows for hours at a time reading senseless test questions and filling in bubble sheets. We can do better, and we must. Calvin and his students, our schools and our society, deserve our best effort to stem the tide. In the end, perhaps, they deserve a revolution. ■

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