From *Serious Eats*

**Alice Waters–Edible Schoolyard Takedown in the 'Atlantic Monthly': Wrong, Wrong, Wrong**

Posted by [Ed Levine](http://www.seriouseats.com/user/profile/Ed%20Levine), January 13, 2010 at 7:30 AM

**Note:** This post marks the official Serious Eats writing debut of my wife, Vicky Bijur. We actually wrote this together. Welcome to the fray, Vicky. *—Ed Levine*

Caitlin Flanagan's [hatchet job in the usually thought-provoking and intelligent *Atlantic Monthly*](http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/201001/school-yard-garden) on **Alice Waters** and her [**Edible Schoolyard project**](http://www.edibleschoolyard.org/) is so wrongheaded it would be easy to shrug off if it wasn't also so belligerent, so fueled by an animus that is way out of proportion to the terrible crime of Alice Waters's attempts to teach kids about nutrition and gardening.

Flanagan's jumping off point for the story is this: the Edible Schoolyard curriculum is not only not helpful, it's destructive, counter-productive, racist, paternalistic, and classist.

**How is she wrong? Let us count the ways.**

Her arguments:

How dare Alice Waters force the **sons and daughters of migrant farm workers** to toil in the fields (1.5 hours a week in the garden or kitchen) when such work is exactly what their parents would wish for them to avoid.

Huh? As if that's all they do in the Edible Schoolyard curriculum.

Said children should spend less time learning about their food and more time learning about and reading Shakespeare in order for them to escape the shackles of their class and background. **Why is it an either/or situation?** It's not. She speaks of the "misuse of instructional time" that is used to "cheat kids out of thousands of crucial learning hours."

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Edible Schoolyard is a prime example of the colossal failure of the California public school system. (In a system of millions of students, only two schools in California actually have the imprimatur from the Chez Panisse Foundation.) **I think Flanagan should be pointing the finger at many other bigger, more powerful forces** that are at work destroying the California public school system.

She visits Compton and finds two markets full of fresh fruits and vegetables and concludes there is no basis to the argument that many neighborhoods in other cities might lack fresh food.

She "spent many hours poring over endless research on the positive effects of garden curricula" and finds no proof that "classroom gardens help students meet the state standards for English and math." We don't think Alice Waters should be held responsible for improving math and literacy scores as all-powerful as she is.

She decries over-reaching claims, as she should, but has no trouble portraying the Chez Panisse clientele as "the right-on, 'yes we can,' ACORN-loving, public-option-supporting man or woman of the people."

It's one thing to employ a healthy, thoughtful skepticism when it comes to Alice Waters. That, I think, comes with **the Saint Alice territory.** It's another to engage in character and policy assassination, as Flanagan does in this piece.

Shame on her and shame on the *Atlantic* for giving credence to her ridiculously far-fetched arguments.

To support Alice Waters, she says, is to be "complicit...in an act of theft that will...contribute to the creation of a permanent, uneducated underclass...." Shame on her and shame on the *Atlantic* for giving credence to her ridiculously far-fetched arguments. This isn't thought-provoking journalism. It's poorly reasoned mud-slinging.



Alice Waters[[Flickr: David Sifry](http://www.flickr.com/photos/dsifry/531299263/)]

And that's not all, serious eaters. [Carey](http://www.seriouseats.com/user/profile/Carey%20Jones) sent me this after she re-read Flanagan's piece:

Nothing I've read has disgusted me this much since... well, [*Cleaving*](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0316003360/?tag=serieats-20&link_code=ur2&creative=9325&camp=211189). Inflammatory race-baiting rhetoric aside, my first issue (and there are many) is that her point of departure seems to be the idea that the *single purpose* of schooling is to equip students to pass state-imposed milestones; to quote, "doing well on the state tests" and "passing Algebra I."

Not the main purpose—of course, schools should prepare their students for higher education—but the *only* purpose. As if anything not related to exit exams weren't worth teaching. What does this give us? A soulless curriculum of rote learning. For a writer whose work often relates to education, she seems to hold an astoundingly narrow view of its purpose.

Look—out of any classroom of sixth graders, many won't end up in college; it's simple math. But the things you learn in grammar school stick with you.

**I went to a California public elementary school** in the midst of an aggressive anti-smoking campaign. We started learning about lung cancer in first grade. And all my life, I've had a visceral aversion to cigarettes. They never appealed. Even in high school, no kids I knew smoked them—I may have been in college before I saw someone my own age light up. Classroom lessons resonate with the young. More so than vocabulary words.

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Secondly: no one is deploying sixth-graders to backbreaking labor. Please. If you want to complain about the mistreatment of migrant agricultural workers, have at it. (I can't imagine these workers taking the comparison to a sixth-grade class very kindly.) But the stigma Flanagan speaks of is one she herself imposes.

There is no inherent shame in growing food. We all got by that way, once upon a time. Apparently, she believes gardening such a human hardship that one must seek refuge in education, which has "lifted uncounted generations of human beings out of the desperate daily scrabble to wrest sustenance from dirt." Belittled therein: any manual labor, any physical enterprise, any work beyond the armchair. God forbid our children learn the value of hard work.

And finally (for this email, at least), this absurd politicalization. Say anything you want about Alice and her occasionally overzealous following—of course, they can be self-righteous—but **growing a garden is hardly a radical act.** And since when is teaching kids about nutrition a political issue? Every school in America has some kind of health class, and there's no more basic health skill than feeding yourself well.

Flanagan stretches the term "indoctrination" far beyond its borders. Indoctrinating our children with the notion that **vegetables are good for you! The horror!** She's no better than those Fox News pundits who claimed Obama was "indoctrinating" kindergartners about health care—when he told them to wash their hands. It's all the same inflammatory bullshit.

<http://www.seriouseats.com/2010/01/alice-waters-edible-schoolyard-atlantic-monthly-criticism-caitlin-flanagan.html>