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**Cultivating Failure**

How school gardens are cheating our most vulnerable students

**By Caitlin Flanagan**

Imagine that as a young and desperately poor Mexican man, you had made the dangerous and illegal journey to California to work in the fields with other migrants. There, you performed stoop labor, picking lettuce and bell peppers and table grapes; what made such an existence bearable was the dream of a better life. You met a woman and had a child with her, and because that child was born in the U.S., he was made a citizen of this great country. He will lead a life entirely different from yours; he will be educated. Now that child is about to begin middle school in the American city whose name is synonymous with higher learning, as it is the home of one of the greatest universities in the world: Berkeley. On the first day of sixth grade, the boy walks though the imposing double doors of his new school, stows his backpack, and then heads out to the field, where he stoops under a hot sun and begins to pick lettuce.

It’s rare for an immigrant experience to go the whole 360 in a single generation—one imagines the novel of assimilation, *The White Man Calls It Romaine*. The cruel trick has been pulled on this benighted child by an agglomeration of foodies and educational reformers who are propelled by a vacuous if well-meaning ideology that is responsible for robbing an increasing number of American schoolchildren of hours they might otherwise have spent reading important books or learning higher math (attaining the cultural achievements, in other words, that have lifted uncounted generations of human beings out of the desperate daily scrabble to wrest sustenance from dirt). The galvanizing force behind this ideology is Alice Waters, the dowager queen of the grown-locally movement. Her goal is that children might become “eco-gastronomes” and discover “how food grows”—a lesson, if ever there was one, that our farm worker’s son might have learned at his father’s knee—leaving the Emerson and Euclid to the professionals over at the schoolhouse. Waters’s enormous celebrity, combined with her decision in the 1990s to expand her horizons into the field of public-school education, has helped thrust thousands of schoolchildren into the grip of a giant experiment, one that is predicated on a set of assumptions that are largely unproved, even unexamined. That no one is calling foul on this is only one manifestation of the way the new Food Hysteria has come to dominate and diminish our shared cultural life, and to make an educational reformer out of someone whose brilliant cookery and laudable goals may not be the best qualifications for designing academic curricula for the public schools.

Waters, described by her biographer, Thomas McNamee, as “arguably the most famous restaurateur in the United States,” is, of course, the founder of [Chez Panisse](http://www.chezpanisse.com/reservations/), in Berkeley, an eatery where the right-on, “yes we can,” [ACORN](http://www.acorn.org/index.php?id=2)-loving, public-option-supporting man or woman of the people can tuck into a nice table d’hôte menu of scallops, guinea hen, and tarte tatin for a modest 95 clams—wine, tax, and oppressively sanctimonious and relentlessly conversation-busting service not included. (I’ve had major surgeries in which I was less scrupulously informed about what was about to happen to me, what was happening to me, and what had just happened to me than I’ve been during a dinner there.) It was at Chez Panisse that Waters worked out her new American gastronomic credo, which is built on the concept of using ingredients that are “fresh, local, seasonal, and where possible organic.” Fair enough, and perfectly delicious, but the scope of her operation—which is fueled not only by the skill of its founder, but also by the weird, almost erotic power she wields over a certain kind of educated, professional-class, middle-aged woman (the same kind of woman who tends to light, midway through life’s journey, on school voluntarism as a locus of her fathomless energies)—has widened so far beyond the simple cooking and serving of food that it can hardly be quantified. As McNamee rightly observes, Chez Panisse

is a much larger enterprise than a restaurant. It is a standard-bearer for a system of moral values. It is the leader of a style of cooking, of a social movement, and of a comprehensive philosophy of doing good and living well.

This notion—that it is agreeably possible to do good (school gardens!) and live well (guinea hens!)—bears the hallmark of contemporary progressivism, a kind of win-win, “let them eat tarte tatin” approach to the world and one’s place in it that is prompting an improbable alliance of school reformers, volunteers, movie stars, politicians’ wives, and agricultural concerns (the California Fertilizer Foundation is a big friend of school gardens) to insert its values into the schools.

The [Edible Schoolyard program](http://www.edibleschoolyard.org/) was born when Waters noticed a barren lot next to the Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in Berkeley. Inspired by the notion that a garden would afford students “experience-based learning that illustrates the pleasure of meaningful work, personal responsibility, the need for nutritious, sustainably raised, and sensually stimulating food, and the important socializing effect of the ritual of the table,” and spurred on by the school principal, Waters offered to build a garden and help create a curriculum to go along with it.

An Aztec dance troupe performed on the day the first cover crop was planted (imagine it as a set piece for *The White Man Calls It Romaine*), and soon the exciting garden had made its influence felt across the disciplines. In English class students composed recipes, in math they measured the garden beds, and in history they ground corn as a way of studying pre-Columbian civilizations. Students’ grades quickly improved at King, which makes sense given that a recipe is much easier to write than a coherent paragraph on [*The Crucible*](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ISBN=0140481389/theatlanticmonthA/ref=nosim/).

Fads in education tend to take off quickly, but nothing else has come into our public schools at the rocket-blast rate of school gardens, particularly here in my home state of California. To be sure, this was hardly a new phenomenon in California, where school gardens waxed and waned over the years, propelled by the state’s agricultural interests, the back-to-the-land movement of the ’70s, and so on. But by the time Waters came onto the scene, organic food, nutrition, and sustainability were becoming the pet issues of the volunteering set. In the 1990s, Waters found a powerful ally in Delaine Eastin, the newly elected state superintendent of instruction (herself a “devoted gardener, home cook and recycler”), who called for “A Garden in Every School” the same year the Edible Schoolyard began.

Together, the bureaucrat and the celebrity paved the way for an enormous movement: by 2002, 2,000 of the state’s 9,000 schools had a garden, and by 2008 that number had risen to 3,849, and it continues to grow. Waters, with her charisma and high political profile (which includes her friendship with the Clintons), has been hailed as one of the most important educational innovators not just in the state, but in the nation. In 1998, she received an Excellence in Education Award from Senator Barbara Boxer, as well as an Education Heroes Award from the U.S. Department of Education; the Smithsonian has sponsored an Edible Schoolyard exhibit on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Only four school gardens across the country bear the coveted Chez Panisse Foundation imprimatur (just two of them in California), but their influence has been profound. Not only has the foundation published a mind-numbingly earnest series of books on lesson planning, policy planning, and public policy, but it also has a teacher-training program and offers regular tours of the garden at King. In July, a *Los Angles Times* article was titled [“A New Crop of School Gardens: Even as State Funds Are Wilting, Support for School Gardens Is Still Growing.”](http://www.latimes.com/features/food/la-fo-garden29-2009jul29,0,6578924.story) Maria Shriver, the first lady of California, is a strong supporter and, like all the proponents of this kind of education, she urges schools to use the gardens across all disciplines.

Of course, Waters herself is guilty of nothing more terrible than being a visionary and a woman of tremendous persuasive abilities. It’s the state’s Department of Education that is to blame for allowing these gardens to hijack the curricula of so many schools. But although garden-based curricula are advanced as a means of redressing a wide spectrum of poverty’s ills, the animating spirit behind them is impossible to separate from the haute-bourgeois predilections of the Alice Waters fan club, as best expressed in one of her most oft-repeated philosophies: “Gardens help students to learn the pleasure of physical work.” Does the immigrant farm worker dream that his child will learn to enjoy manual labor, or that his child will be freed from it? What is the goal of an education, of what we once called “book learning”? These are questions best left unasked when it comes to the gardens.

Hispanics constitute 49 percent of the students in California’s public schools. Ever since the state adopted standards-based education (each child must learn a comprehensive set of skills and material) in 1997—coincidentally, at the same moment that garden learning was taking off—a notorious achievement gap has opened between Hispanic and African American students on the one hand, and whites and Asians on the other. Indeed, Hispanic students do particularly poorly at King Middle School. According to the [2009 Federal Accountability Requirements](http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ay/documents/overview09.pdf), statewide, more than 39 percent of Latinos are proficient in English and 44 percent in math, but at the King school, those numbers are a dismal 30 percent and 29 percent, respectively. Where do Berkeley’s African American and Hispanic middle-schoolers do well? At a gardenless charter school called Cal Prep, where 92 percent of the students are black or Latino, where the focus is on academic achievement, and where test scores have been rising steadily.

The garden-based curriculum has good news for the state’s catastrophically underachieving students: a giant team of volunteers is ready to help them. Here is how our garden-loving, home-cooking, recycling superintendent of instruction describes one of the program’s principal advantages in the introduction to [*A Child’s Garden of Standards*](http://www.cde.ca.gov/Ls/nu/he/documents/childsgarden.pdf), a gargantuan compendium of charts and lesson plans intended to link the beloved method of gardening with the hard-ass objectives of the state standards:

“Some families, particularly those from other countries, may feel uncomfortable when asked to help out at school because their English skills or educational background do not give them a solid classroom footing. For these families, the living classroom of a garden can be a much more inviting environment in which to engage in their children’s education.

If this patronizing agenda were promulgated in the Jim Crow South by a white man who was espousing a sharecropping curriculum for African American students, we would see it for what it is: a way of bestowing field work and low expectations on a giant population of students who might become troublesome if they actually got an education.”

Here is the essential question we must ask about the school gardens: What evidence do we have that participation in one of these programs—so enthusiastically supported, so uncritically championed—improves a child’s chances of doing well on the state tests that will determine his or her future (especially the all-important high-school exit exam) and passing Algebra I, which is becoming the make-or-break class for California high-school students? I have spent many hours poring over the endless research on the positive effects of garden curricula, and in all that time, I have yet to find a single study that suggests classroom gardens help students meet the state standards for English and math. Our kids are working in these gardens with the promise of a better chance at getting an education and a high-school diploma but without one bit of proof that their hard work will result in either. We should remember, by the way, that the California high-school exit exam, which so many are failing, is hardly onerous: it requires a mastery of eighth-grade math (students need to score a mere 55 percent on that portion of the test) and 10th-grade English language and composition (on which they need to score 60 percent or higher). And so I would say this to our state’s new child farm laborers: *¡Huelga!* Strike!

The ever-evolving rationale behind the school-garden movement mushes together two emotionally stirring ideas: first, that kids will learn by doing, and second, that millions of poor kids have so little access to fruits and vegetables that if they don’t spend their school day growing some on campus, they will never get any at all. As a pro-Waters friend observed to me in a recent e-mail, “There’s only 7-Eleven in the hood.”

As it happens, I live fewer than 20 miles from the most famous American hood, Compton, and on a recent Wednesday morning I drove over there to do a little grocery shopping. The Ralphs was vast, well-lit, bountifully stocked, and possessed of a huge and well-tended produce section. Using my Ralphs card, I bought four ears of corn for a dollar, green grapes and nectarines (both grown in the state, both 49 cents a pound), a pound of fresh tortillas for $1.69, and a half gallon of low-fat milk for $2.19. The staff, California friendly, outnumbered the customers, and the place had the dreamy, lost-in-time feeling that empty American supermarkets often have.

But across Compton Boulevard, it was a different story. Anyone who says that Americans have lost the desire and ability to cook fresh produce has never been to the Superior Super Warehouse in Compton. The produce section—packed with large families, most of them Hispanic—was like a dreamscape of strange and wonderful offerings: tomatillos, giant mangoes, cactus leaves, bunches of beets with their leaves on, chayote squash, red yams, yucca root. An entire string section of chiles: serrano, Anaheim, green, red, yellow. All of it was dirt cheap, as were the bulk beans and rice. Small children stood beside shopping carts with the complacent, slightly dazed look of kids whose mothers are taking care of business.

What we see at Superior Super Warehouse is an example of capitalism doing what it does best: locating a market need (in this case, poor people living in an American inner city who desire a wide variety of fruits and vegetables and who are willing to devote their time and money to acquiring them) and filling it.

But the existence of the monastically quiet Ralphs in Compton reflects something quite different: advocacy. Over the past decade, many well-intentioned factions have made a focused effort to bring supermarkets—and with them, abundant fresh produce—to poor urban areas. Although the battle is far from over, there has been some progress. This seems to me a more sensible approach to getting produce to children than asking the unfortunate tykes to spend precious school hours growing it themselves. Why not make them build the buses that will take them to and from school, or rotate in shifts through the boiler room?

This notion of the school day as an interlude during which children can desperately attempt to cheat ignorance and death by growing the snap peas and zucchini flowers that are the essential building blocks of life comes with a lofty set of ideals. It is a grand vision, which Waters is happy to expand upon to any reporter who takes an interest, and it was described in the following way in last July’s *Los Angeles Times*:

Waters says there is a shift in priorities that needs to happen within federal policy to give garden programs longevity. In the 1960s, John F. Kennedy implemented the President’s Council on Physical Fitness to instill values of physical fitness. She considers the current prevalence of childhood obesity and early-onset Type 2 diabetes to be signals for immediate action similar to the fitness council.

Well, there’s a leap of logic. Waters calls for a new federal program based on an old one, but the new one is necessary only because the old one has obviously failed: American kids are fatter and sicker than ever.

Why are obesity and Type 2 diabetes so closely related to low incomes in this country? Surely a good part of the answer lies in a heartrending truth about the experience of poverty that many conservatives (and not a few liberals) either don’t know or choose not to know, and it is something I see at my volunteer job in a Los Angeles food bank, where the clients scoop as many candies out of the basket on my desk as I’ll let them have (if I didn’t set a limit, only the first person would get any) before glumly turning to the matter of filling out their food order form, which offers such basic and unexciting items as tuna, rice, and (yes) fresh fruits and vegetables, often including delicious oranges, pears, and peaches that people with fruit trees donate the day they’re picked. The simple truth is expressed clearly by George Orwell in [*The Road to Wigan Pier*](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ISBN=0156767503/theatlanticmonthA/ref=nosim/),his book about the grinding poverty experienced in the North of England in the 1930s:

“The peculiar evil is this: that the less money you have, the less inclined you feel to spend it on wholesome food … When you are unemployed, which is to say when you are underfed, harassed, bored, and miserable, you don’t want to eat dull wholesome food. You want something a little bit “tasty.” There is always some cheaply pleasant thing to tempt you. Let’s have a three pennorth of chips! Run out and buy us a two-penny ice cream! Put the kettle on and we’ll all have a nice cup of tea … Unemployment is an endless misery that has got to be palliated.”

The suicidal dietary choices of so many poor people are the result of a problem, not the problem itself. The solution lies in an education that will propel students into a higher economic class, where they will live better and therefore eat better.

I started to ask Michael Piscal, founder and CEO of the Inner City Education Foundation Public Schools, which runs 15 successful charter schools in South Los Angeles, what he thought about the Edible Schoolyard and school gardens in general, but he cut me off. “I ignore all those e-mails,” he told me bluntly. “Look,” he said, when pressed, “there’s nothing wrong with kids getting together after school and working on a garden; that’s very nice. But when it becomes the center of everything—as it usually does—it’s absurd. The only question in education reform that’s worth anything is this: What are you doing to prepare these kids for college? If I can get a kid to read Shakespeare and laugh at the right places, I can get him to college. That’s all that matters to me.”

With the Edible Schoolyard, and the thousands of similar programs, the idea of a school as a venue in which to advance a social agenda has reached rock bottom. This kind of misuse of instructional time began in the Progressive Era, and it has been employed to cheat kids out of thousands of crucial learning hours over the years, so that they might be indoctrinated in whatever the fashionable idea of the moment or the school district might be. One year it’s hygiene and another it’s anti-Communism; in one city it’s safe-sex “outer-course,” and in another it’s abstinence-only education. (Sixth-graders at King spend an hour and a half each week in the garden or the kitchen—and that doesn’t include the time they spend in the classroom, in efforts effective or not, to apply the experiences of planting and cooking to learning the skills and subjects that the state of California mandates must be mastered.) But with these gardens—and their implication that one of the few important things we as a culture have to teach the next generation is what and how to eat—we’re mocking one of our most ennobling American ideals. Our children don’t get an education because they’re lucky, or because we’ve generously decided to give them one as a special gift. Our children get an education—or should get an education—because they have a right to one. At the very least, shouldn’t we ensure that the person who makes her mark on the curricula we teach be someone other than an extremely talented cook with a highly political agenda?

I have spent my life, it seems, in and around schools. For complicated reasons, I attended a score of them, both in the United States and abroad; I taught in Louisiana and Los Angeles for more than a decade; I have volunteered in all sorts of schools, and am now a mother of elementary-school students. I have never seen an entire school system as fundamentally broken and rudderless as the California public schools, a system in which one out of five high-school students drops out before graduation, and in which scarcely 60 percent of the African American and Hispanic students leave school with a diploma. These young people are cast adrift in a $50 billion system in which failure is almost a foregone conclusion.

So why not give these troubled kids a bit of engagement and excitement out in the nourishing gardens, which if nothing else might slim them down and thus extend their lives? Really: How can that hurt?

Last October, we lost the greatest educational reformer of the late 20th century, [Theodore Sizer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ted_Sizer), the founder of the Essential Schools movement, who was brave enough to say that when a school is in crisis, its leaders should strip away every program and resource that is not essential to the mission of schooling. He wrote in his classic 1984 book, *Horace’s Compromise*:

If students have yet to meet the fundamental standards of literacy, numeracy and civic understanding, programs should focus exclusively on these. Some critics will argue that the school must go beyond these subjects to hold the interest of the pupils … but a fourteen year old who is semi-literate is an adolescent in need of intensive, focused attention.

My state is full of semiliterate 14- year-olds. Let their after-school hours be filled with whatever enriching programs the good volunteers and philanthropic organizations of California care to offer them: club sports, choruses, creative-writing workshops, gardens. But until our kids have a decent chance at mastering the essential skills and knowledge that they will need to graduate from high school, we should devote every resource and every moment of their academic day to helping them realize that life-changing goal. Otherwise, we become complicit— through our best intentions—in an act of theft that will not only contribute to the creation of a permanent, uneducated underclass but will rob that group of the very force necessary to change its fate. The state, which failed these students as children and adolescents, will have to shoulder them in adulthood, for it will have created not a generation of gentleman farmers but one of intellectual sharecroppers, whose fortunes depend on the largesse or political whim of their educated peers.

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