we hope, that like the floor of General Synod, our communities are safe spaces for conversation and dissenement. This resource is designed to help your reflection together on what may be the greatest commandment. This is the greatest intractable problems that afflict the children in America’s public schools, issues whose possible solutions—how to reduce eras to an extent that we are so easily confused in the media conversation. Because schools are deeply rooted community institutions, the political and public finance decisions are overlaid on attitudes, matters of culture, and traditions that we rarely even name at all. Hardly anyone these days considers ethics in relation to the institutions that are the foundation and girders supporting our society.
The church is one of the few places left in America where people have the opportunity thoughtfully to explore issues, assumptions embedded within them, and the way our faith tradition guides us to consider this. Resource is designed to help your group examine central issues facing public schools through the frame of two of our culture’s central narratives: the Common Good and the American Dream.

Our story… The Common Good

The narrative of the Common Good is consistent with our central values in the church. It was recently explored in a resolution passed by General Synod 25, that called “all settings of the United Church of Christ to uphold the common good as a foundational ideal in the United States, rejected the notion that government is more, inefficient than other democratic institutions, and reaffirmed the obligation of citizens to share through taxes the financial responsibility for public services that benefit all citizens.” The resolution charges the church to explore “a just and good society that balances individualism with the needs of the community, in the past quarter century our society has... moved too far in the direction of promoting individual self-interest at the expense of shared community responsibility.”

The biblical grounding for our Christian understanding of the common good is the center of Christian ethics. In the Jewish tradition, we are told, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” (Deuteronomy 6:5) and “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Leviticus 19:18) The three Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, yoke these two commandments together, as Jesus answers the question from the political politician of the great is the greatest? In the words from Matthew, Jesus replies, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” (Matthew 22:37) The Great Commandment and the story of the Great Commandment incorporate the essential values that are folded into our understanding of the common good—that we must work constantly to distribute opportunity more equitably and that, because social injustice continues, society must collectively contribute to the wellbeing of those who have been shut out.

Another narrative… The American Dream

The narrative of the Common Good contrasts with another central myth of American culture, the story of Horatio Alger and the American Dream. An ethos of individualism and an elitist of personal responsibility are essential themes of the story of the American Dream. Like the Common Good story, this one is also about opportunity, but the perspective of view has narrowed to that of the individual, who imagines he or she will thrive because in this land of opportunity anyone can get ahead through hard work. In the American Dream narrative the setting is often a marketplace, where the protagonist is a consumer or an entrepreneur. Enterprise and the freedom to make one’s own choices are key elements in this story; one succeeds by hard work and by making the choices that benefit oneself or one’s family. The choices of all individuals massed together are thought to benefit society as a whole.

As Americans most of us are only too willing to accept the limitations of this narrative’s point of view. We easily identify with the hero and believe the plot: all Americans start at a place where we have an opportunity to succeed if we work hard. There is one set of rules we all play by, and if we are strategic and patient, we can all win. When people succeed it is because they are virtuous, and when people fail it is because they are not morally responsible. We too easily forget to notice that the American Dream has never been accessible to some groups within our society, and we forget to appreciate the external supports that successful individuals have always depended upon.

Author Bill McKibben describes the primary theological mistake that underlies the American Dream narrative: “Three quarters of Americans believe the Bible teaches that ‘God helps those who help themselves.’” That is, three out of four Americans see God’s blessing as something we can earn—through our own hard work and sacrifice. Thus our fame and fortune or our failures whether to enjoy or poverty to endure derive from our own hard work and sacrifice. Christians this idolatrous and narcissistic view fails to acknowledge the primacy of God. “While some may suggest that the sum total of individual choices will automatically constitute the common good, there is no evidence that choices based on self interest will protect the vulnerable or provide the safeguards and services needed by the whole population.” Without criticizing the virtues of careful and responsible living, we must acknowledge that the core ethical principles of our faith are incorporated within another set of narratives, the Common Good and the American Dream.

The “Resolution for the Common Good” rejects many of the values and assumptions of the American Dream narrative: “We are told that each of us is responsible for oneself alone and that our individual successes and failures are our own sole responsibility. Thus our fame and fortune or our failures whether to enjoy or poverty to endure derive from our own hard work and sacrifice. Christians this idolatrous and narcissistic view fails to acknowledge the primacy of God.” “While some may suggest that the sum total of individual choices will automatically constitute the common good, there is no evidence that choices based on self interest will protect the vulnerable or provide the safeguards and services needed by the whole population.” Without criticizing the virtues of careful and responsible living, we must acknowledge that the core ethical principles of our faith are incorporated within another set of narratives, the Common Good and the American Dream.

Elements of these two cultural narratives, the Common Good and the American Dream, are embedded into the way we make our decisions. These choices are also used by politicians to manipulate us and sometimes to obscure the real issues. We are influenced by the narrative beneath the surface when laws and policies are framed in the language and assumptions of these familiar stories. As we explore the relevance of these two stories to the No Child Left Behind Act, the charter school experiment in New Orleans, the June, 2007 Supreme Court decision on school integration, and the DREAM Act, we will try to discern the important role of the voice of the church. Each section is followed by discussion questions.

The No Child Left Behind Act: Manipulating Language for the Appearance of the Common Good

Congress continues to debate the scheduled 2007 five-year reauthorization of the federal education law. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is the most recent, and extremely controversial, 2002 version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The law was passed less than a year after the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the invasion of Iraq.

The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act declared an end to the War on Poverty. Even though NCLB technically expired at the end of September 2007, a one-year extension was activated automatically when Congress had taken no action. If another year the law has not been reauthorized, Congress will continue key programs by...
appropriating money for them until a reauthorization is passed.

Heated Congressional debate is likely as Congress continues to debate the reauthorization of NCLB. The State of Public Education in New Orleans, a report, conducted by the Boston (Massachusetts) Consulting Group for several New Orleans civic agencies, was released in June 2007 to outline the enormous challenge facing Superintendent Vallas. The report documents that a coherent, though admittedly troubled, urban school district before Hurricane Katrina has been smashed apart with competing forces public vs. private, non-profit, and for-profit—needing coordination and regulation:

“The once centralized, district-run school system is not reconfigured. Schools are run by two districts. The RSD (Louisiana Recovery School District) operates 22 schools. The OPSBP (Orleans Parish School Board) operates 31 schools. There are 31 charter schools in New Orleans. Eighteen charter schools are linked through six local and national charter networks, and 13 charter schools operate independently. Fifty-three percent of the public schools—educating 57 percent of public school students—are now charters, making New Orleans the most charterized major city in the U.S., and one of the most charterized cities in the nation.”

Additionally, specific services have been privatized: “Much of the Recovery School District’s work involves outsourcing jobs to mostly out-of-state contractors that had replaced the school-board bureaucracy. Providing security: Day and night, the Orleans Charter Schools Infrastructure, a New York-based corporate turnaround firm…”

Although privatizers criticize government bureaucracies, stability and coherence are inarguably preserved by public-systems designed to deliver services to a mass of students with diverse needs. By discarding central schools with the Hurricane, the Louisiana Legislature threw away the common good for New Orleans’ children. No one invokes the central school district as a resource center for parents of children with disabilities, regret the lack of “consensus regarding values or guiding principles in the new configurations in which charters operate”.

The No Child Left Behind Act holds schools “liable” every time it tries to raise test scores by hiring “failing” teachers. The law blames the school when it redirects Title I funds away from school programming to pay for transportation for children to transfer to another school because the teachers are the "principal" liable “when it requires that a “failing” school be reconstituted with new staff.” When NCLB tests students in English before they have a chance to learn English and then subjects them to mandated tutoring, the law makes itself liable when it provides that re-named “failing” school be converted to a charter school or turned over to a private management company.

Reformation of NCLB is needed to improve struggling public schools. The state legislature is required to approve a plan for turning failing schools around. By federal law, “failing” schools are now fragmented: 58 public schools are governed by two districts. The RSD (Louisiana Recovery School District) operates 22 schools. The OPSBP (Orleans Parish School Board) operates 31 schools. There are 31 charter schools in New Orleans. Eighteen charter schools are linked through six local and national charter networks, and 13 charter schools operate independently. Fifty-three percent of the public schools—educating 57 percent of public school students—are now charters, making New Orleans the most charterized major city in the U.S., and one of the most charterized cities in the nation.”

Additionally, specific services have been privatized: “Much of the Recovery School District’s work involves outsourcing jobs to mostly out-of-state contractors that had replaced the school-board bureaucracy. Providing security: Day and night, the Orleans Charter Schools Infrastructure, a New York-based corporate turnaround firm…”

Although privatizers criticize government bureaucracies, stability and coherence are inarguably preserved by public-systems designed to deliver services to a mass of students with diverse needs. By discarding central schools with the Hurricane, the Louisiana Legislature threw away the common good for New Orleans’ children. No one invokes the central school district as a resource center for parents of children with disabilities, regret the lack of “consensus regarding values or guiding principles in the new configurations in which charters operate”.

The No Child Left Behind Act holds schools “liable” every time it tries to raise test scores by hiring “failing” teachers. The law blames the school when it redirects Title I funds away from school programming to pay for transportation for children to transfer to another school because the teachers are the "principal" liable “when it requires that a “failing” school be reconstituted with new staff.” When NCLB tests students in English before they have a chance to learn English and then subjects them to mandated tutoring, the law makes itself liable when it provides that re-named “failing” school be converted to a charter school or turned over to a private management company.
hurricane. Charter schools have benefited from targeted federal dollars unavailable to the Recovery District Schools, beginning on September 30, 2005, only one month after then, when U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings announced a $220 million charter school grant to jump start the transformation.31 The charter schools that are part of national networks have been able to build robust network infrastructures in curriculum, recruiting, leadership, and sometimes finances. Local charter networks have also offered management, fundraising and staff recruitment services to their own schools.32 Some charters in New Orleans have also been able to secure additional funding through private donations and foundation grants (totaling over $120,000,000).33

Local activist Brenda Billips Square worries that the common good has been impaired because while many schools may now be affiliated with their own networks, they are no longer connected from the community. She explains the decision after the hurricane to fire all of the district’s teachers has left a deep wound in the community: “Before the storm, the schools were the anchors the walls in American society are evermore tragically divided society: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these Rights are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government.”

The Majority decision turns away from the 1954 precedent in Brown v. Board of Education... The Court's walls in American society are evermore tragically divided society: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these Rights are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government.”

The Majority decision turns away from the 1954 precedent in Brown v. Board of Education... The Court's
When Congress failed to address comprehensive immigration issues in 2007, one important matter of justice that had been folded into that bill was deferred once again.117 While the Development, Education, Relief, and Empowerment for Minors (DREAM) Act was named for the American Dream, which eludes so many of the young people born and raised in undocumented status, the reality is that the DREAM Act must be addressed have everything to do with the common good—with ensuring that we love our neighbors' children by distributing the same opportunities for education as are provided for the children of citizens and with contributing to the wellbeing of those who are vulnerable because they must grow up in secrecy, in poverty, and with contributing to society by distributing access to a college education in the country where they were raised and school.

High school guidance counselors and school administrators across the United States have found themselves suddenly thrust into passionate legislative advocacy when they realize that one or more of their high school's top graduates cannot qualify for a college scholarship, because the family is undocumented and the adolescent has long been living with the difficult secret that he or she is not a citizen.118

If the Senate were to pass the DREAM Act and the House were to pass a companion bill, thousands of students brought to this country as young children and educated with their citizen-peers, could be able to qualify for in-state tuition rates, state and federal grants and loans, and private scholarships.119

While several states have passed laws to protect the right to in-state tuition and scholarships for such students, many states have not addressed this issue, and states that do not provide these opportunities make the goals of the Act less meaningful.120

What about the Senegalese student who helped his high school build a prize-winning robot, but at the last minute had to confess that he had no ID card? That he was not a citizen? That he had to work around the national robotics competition? The New York Times described this student: “Left here long ago by his mother, he has trouble attending the college that has accepted him, and only a slim chance to win his two-year court battle against deportation.”

If the Senate were to pass the DREAM Act and the House were to pass a companion bill, thousands of students brought to this country as young children and educated with their citizen-peers, could be able to qualify for in-state tuition rates, state and federal grants and loans, and private scholarships.

For several states have passed laws to protect the right to in-state tuition and scholarships for such students, many states have not addressed this issue, and states that do not provide these opportunities make the goals of the Act less meaningful.

What about the Senegalese student who helped his high school build a prize-winning robot, but at the last minute had to confess that he had no ID card? That he was not a citizen? That he had to work around the national robotics competition? The New York Times described this student: “Left here long ago by his mother, he has trouble attending the college that has accepted him, and only a slim chance to win his two-year court battle against deportation.”

If the Senate were to pass the DREAM Act and the House were to pass a companion bill, thousands of students brought to this country as young children and educated with their citizen-peers, could be able to qualify for in-state tuition rates, state and federal grants and loans, and private scholarships.

For several states have passed laws to protect the right to in-state tuition and scholarships for such students, many states have not addressed this issue, and states that do not provide these opportunities make the goals of the Act less meaningful.

What about the Senegalese student who helped his high school build a prize-winning robot, but at the last minute had to confess that he had no ID card? That he was not a citizen? That he had to work around the national robotics competition? The New York Times described this student: “Left here long ago by his mother, he has trouble attending the college that has accepted him, and only a slim chance to win his two-year court battle against deportation.”

If the Senate were to pass the DREAM Act and the House were to pass a companion bill, thousands of students brought to this country as young children and educated with their citizen-peers, could be able to qualify for in-state tuition rates, state and federal grants and loans, and private scholarships.

For several states have passed laws to protect the right to in-state tuition and scholarships for such students, many states have not addressed this issue, and states that do not provide these opportunities make the goals of the Act less meaningful.

What about the Senegalese student who helped his high school build a prize-winning robot, but at the last minute had to confess that he had no ID card? That he was not a citizen? That he had to work around the national robotics competition? The New York Times described this student: “Left here long ago by his mother, he has trouble attending the college that has accepted him, and only a slim chance to win his two-year court battle against deportation.”

If the Senate were to pass the DREAM Act and the House were to pass a companion bill, thousands of students brought to this country as young children and educated with their citizen-peers, could be able to qualify for in-state tuition rates, state and federal grants and loans, and private scholarships.

For several states have passed laws to protect the right to in-state tuition and scholarships for such students, many states have not addressed this issue, and states that do not provide these opportunities make the goals of the Act less meaningful.

What about the Senegalese student who helped his high school build a prize-winning robot, but at the last minute had to confess that he had no ID card? That he was not a citizen? That he had to work around the national robotics competition? The New York Times described this student: “Left here long ago by his mother, he has trouble attending the college that has accepted him, and only a slim chance to win his two-year court battle against deportation.”

If the Senate were to pass the DREAM Act and the House were to pass a companion bill, thousands of students brought to this country as young children and educated with their citizen-peers, could be able to qualify for in-state tuition rates, state and federal grants and loans, and private scholarships.

For several states have passed laws to protect the right to in-state tuition and scholarships for such students, many states have not addressed this issue, and states that do not provide these opportunities make the goals of the Act less meaningful.

What about the Senegalese student who helped his high school build a prize-winning robot, but at the last minute had to confess that he had no ID card? That he was not a citizen? That he had to work around the national robotics competition? The New York Times described this student: “Left here long ago by his mother, he has trouble attending the college that has accepted him, and only a slim chance to win his two-year court battle against deportation.”

If the Senate were to pass the DREAM Act and the House were to pass a companion bill, thousands of students brought to this country as young children and educated with their citizen-peers, could be able to qualify for in-state tuition rates, state and federal grants and loans, and private scholarships.

For several states have passed laws to protect the right to in-state tuition and scholarships for such students, many states have not addressed this issue, and states that do not provide these opportunities make the goals of the Act less meaningful.

What about the Senegalese student who helped his high school build a prize-winning robot, but at the last minute had to confess that he had no ID card? That he was not a citizen? That he had to work around the national robotics competition? The New York Times described this student: “Left here long ago by his mother, he has trouble attending the college that has accepted him, and only a slim chance to win his two-year court battle against deportation.”

If the Senate were to pass the DREAM Act and the House were to pass a companion bill, thousands of students brought to this country as young children and educated with their citizen-peers, could be able to qualify for in-state tuition rates, state and federal grants and loans, and private scholarships.

For several states have passed laws to protect the right to in-state tuition and scholarships for such students, many states have not addressed this issue, and states that do not provide these opportunities make the goals of the Act less meaningful.

What about the Senegalese student who helped his high school build a prize-winning robot, but at the last minute had to confess that he had no ID card? That he was not a citizen? That he had to work around the national robotics competition? The New York Times described this student: “Left here long ago by his mother, he has trouble attending the college that has accepted him, and only a slim chance to win his two-year court battle against deportation.”

If the Senate were to pass the DREAM Act and the House were to pass a companion bill, thousands of students brought to this country as young children and educated with their citizen-peers, could be able to qualify for in-state tuition rates, state and federal grants and loans, and private scholarships.

For several states have passed laws to protect the right to in-state tuition and scholarships for such students, many states have not addressed this issue, and states that do not provide these opportunities make the goals of the Act less meaningful.

What about the Senegalese student who helped his high school build a prize-winning robot, but at the last minute had to confess that he had no ID card? That he was not a citizen? That he had to work around the national robotics competition? The New York Times described this student: “Left here long ago by his mother, he has trouble attending the college that has accepted him, and only a slim chance to win his two-year court battle against deportation.”

If the Senate were to pass the DREAM Act and the House were to pass a companion bill, thousands of students brought to this country as young children and educated with their citizen-peers, could be able to qualify for in-state tuition rates, state and federal grants and loans, and private scholarships.

For several states have passed laws to protect the right to in-state tuition and scholarships for such students, many states have not addressed this issue, and states that do not provide these opportunities make the goals of the Act less meaningful.

What about the Senegalese student who helped his high school build a prize-winning robot, but at the last minute had to confess that he had no ID card? That he was not a citizen? That he had to work around the national robotics competition? The New York Times described this student: “Left here long ago by his mother, he has trouble attending the college that has accepted him, and only a slim chance to win his two-year court battle against deportation.”

If the Senate were to pass the DREAM Act and the House were to pass a companion bill, thousands of students brought to this country as young children and educated with their citizen-peers, could be able to qualify for in-state tuition rates, state and federal grants and loans, and private scholarships.

For several states have passed laws to protect the right to in-state tuition and scholarships for such students, many states have not addressed this issue, and states that do not provide these opportunities make the goals of the Act less meaningful.

What about the Senegalese student who helped his high school build a prize-winning robot, but at the last minute had to confess that he had no ID card? That he was not a citizen? That he had to work around the national robotics competition? The New York Times described this student: “Left here long ago by his mother, he has trouble attending the college that has accepted him, and only a slim chance to win his two-year court battle against deportation.”

If the Senate were to pass the DREAM Act and the House were to pass a companion bill, thousands of students brought to this country as young children and educated with their citizen-peers, could be able to qualify for in-state tuition rates, state and federal grants and loans, and private scholarships.

For several states have passed laws to protect the right to in-state tuition and scholarships for such students, many states have not addressed this issue, and states that do not provide these opportunities make the goals of the Act less meaningful.

What about the Senegalese student who helped his high school build a prize-winning robot, but at the last minute had to confess that he had no ID card? That he was not a citizen? That he had to work around the national robotics competition? The New York Times described this student: “Left here long ago by his mother, he has trouble attending the college that has accepted him, and only a slim chance to win his two-year court battle against deportation.”

If the Senate were to pass the DREAM Act and the House were to pass a companion bill, thousands of students brought to this country as young children and educated with their citizen-peers, could be able to qualify for in-state tuition rates, state and federal grants and loans, and private scholarships.

For several states have passed laws to protect the right to in-state tuition and scholarships for such students, many states have not addressed this issue, and states that do not provide these opportunities make the goals of the Act less meaningful.