

May 2012

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Recommended Citation

Meier, D. (2012). Schooling of and for Democracy. *Occasional Paper Series*, 2012 (27). Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2012/iss27/8>

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Schooling of and for Democracy

Deborah Meier

Walk into any school in any town or community in the country and observe for a day or a morning or just for a couple of hours; check out the hallways and poke into the lunchroom; get a feel for the tone and the temperament of a few classrooms. Notice whether or not students are treated—habitually—with the kind of respect every citizen and resident deserves; whether teachers are afraid and timid, working secretly behind closed doors, or bold and thoughtful, taking delight in guests (even parents and colleagues) dropping in for a visit; whether or not students feel powerful in their purposes and pursuits. You are noticing something fundamental about what makes a good school.

It's time for us to “measure” schools by the values we believe in for public life in general, and to “measure” our students, then, by the long-term impact they will have on our larger society and the vitality of our democracy. In a democracy we want every student to build an understanding of both independence and interdependence, a sense of being entirely unique and yet a part of the larger community. We want students to develop dispositions of initiative, courage, creativity, and curiosity; the capacity to question and wonder, invent and create. I know dozens and dozens of schools—some more “traditional” and some more “progressive” in their curriculum, their seating arrangements, their codes of dress and behavior—where these dispositions are acknowledged and practiced.

There is neither a single model nor a neat blueprint to follow in order to create excellent classrooms or outstanding schools of this kind in our democracy. But surely it requires us—as a citizenry—to think about what habits of mind and practice are required of adults who can make and participate in the kind of society we together treasure. We've chosen an idea of governance—democracy—that rests on presumptions that are complex and yet fundamental. These presumptions are undermined when we rely exclusively on standardized tests, because we assume, unwittingly or not, that what we want are adults who can get a lot of right answers after reading short passages completely out of context. Ditto for math.

There are surely some precocious six-year-olds who can accomplish this, but no one would argue that the future of the world should rest upon the judgment of precocious six-year-olds. Part of our mission as educators is to protect and nourish democracy and all those preconditions that make it possible (even if not guaranteed).

A school can't teach the values and dispositions of democracy to the young if students don't encounter an adult community that exhibits, day in and day out, the habits of a democratic community. We can argue all we want about how we'd do this, but it's a far different argument than we're having now.

It requires a flat governance structure—or surely a much flatter one than we have grown accustomed to—and a transparent one, and ways for every voice, including the novices, to get heard by the other

constituents. It should be possible for any adult to walk into a school and ask, “Who is it that knows Jack well?” and find at least one, ideally many adults, who can be pointed to—not to mention many of Jack’s peers.

Parent should be delighted to go to family conferences because they have thoughts to impart that will be valuable to the school folks, and stuff to learn that will help them and their child. And the child needs to be there to take responsibility for him or herself. Secrets are inimical to democracy and the fewer the better.

So put interesting adults together—in appropriate ratios of experts to novices—and trust their judgment. Yes, adults, *plural*, because we need to trust, not the imagined super-hero individual teacher, but the community of adults whose *most-of-the-time* good judgment we are depending on. In the best of schools there is sufficient stability and time for the experts to work alongside the novices in order to observe and dialogue with them over time. And every single year the adults involved—and students too—should have a chance to review their “contract” with each other, and revise or renew it in an established and accepted way.

Finally, good data is useful, including so-called “hard” as well a “soft” data, and the way the school appears to the larger public upon which it rests must also be taken into account, plus the regard of its peers—other schools. In the early 90s a group of nearly one hundred New York City public schools tried to create such a “system”—under the close scrutiny of researchers at New York University and Columbia University. It was called *Networks for School Renewal*. It was meant as an “experiment” from which all could learn about recreating a very different sense of what a “system” could be like—one that learns as it goes. The hundred volunteer schools would, by agreement, be freed of most (but not all) provisions of the labor-management contract and selected other regulatory city and state rules. In return the schools would form themselves into smaller networks—maximum seven schools—that would be required to hold each other accountable through a jointly agreed upon plan in return for having greater autonomy over finances as well as operations. A foundation agreed to provide each network with funds to hire necessary staff to conduct the network’s business and to create an accountability review board to attest, not to the quality of the schools, but rather whether they were carrying out the approved accountability plan.

It never got off the ground. The networks lasted for a while, as did the money, but none of the freedoms promised in return. Why? A new chancellor was not prepared to release these schools from his direct control. This is not ancient history, so, I wonder, where were all those hot-shot business folks when we needed them?

Will it be easy to build the kind of trust that such schools rest on? Not “faith,” but trust and verify, as conservatives like to put it. No, it will not be easy, any more than the building of a democracy at large has been easy anywhere in the world. It would be a work-in-progress, perhaps forever. But just as we

haven't given up on democracy because it's such a flawed and fragile idea everywhere it's been tried, we need to bring the same attitude to our schooling for democracy. It's a work of generations. Fortunately, under better circumstances than the ones we've settled for—with all their built-in institutionalized distrust—schools can be wonderful places to work (and play) in, for all. Every time I return to Mission Hill or Central Park East and others like it, I'm reminded about how the most serious-minded places can also be joyous ones. And I am reminded that uncovering the world together with novices is the best way to parent and to teach, and makes “lifelong learning” more than an empty slogan but a daily reality.