

So, What Does It Take to Build a Democratic School?

By Deborah Meier

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In the 20 years since “A Nation at Risk” called for a major overhaul of our public schools, we have heard endless talk about standards, accountability, and “toughness.” But we have avoided an honest discussion of means and ends. Having that discussion would—for all concerned—force into the open some issues we would apparently rather not face. But the price for avoiding it is high.

The most serious silence is about ends. What do we want schools to accomplish that is of sufficient public (not just personal) value to justify all the hullabaloo, not to mention expense? The second silence is about the role of social class: do we really want the same outcome for everyone? And the third is: at what price?

First, about the ends of schooling. I reject the idea that its purpose is to improve the economic opportunities of individuals or groups. And I also reject the idea that it’s to improve our competitive position worldwide, above all in economic terms. This was the claim that got everyone exercised in 1983. It has been the organizing principle of the last 20 years of school reform. It was based on false and misleading data then; subsequent economic history proved it was nonsense, and our current worldwide pre-eminence assuredly doesn’t rest on getting higher test scores. But the fiction has persisted. It has distracted us from the real agenda and led us to the even more absurd and malicious “No Child Left Behind” Act of 2002.

The real crisis is not a threat to America’s economic or military dominance but the ebbing strength of its democratic and egalitarian culture. We have lost sight of the traditional public function of schools: to pass on the skills, aptitudes, and habits needed for a democratic way of life. These skills, aptitudes, and habits are hard to come by; they are not natural to the species, and in fact the ideal of civic virtue is as counterintuitive as is much of modern science. They are as hard to teach as relativity, and teaching them in ways that make them second nature is even harder. It’s no wonder that flourishing democracies are a fragile phenomenon.

Moreover, these democratic virtues and skills need to be as firmly part of the repertoire of the poor as of the rich, of people of color as of white people, of women as of men, if the democratic promise is to thrive. The inequities of race, gender, and above all class that persist in our nation will surely grow worse unless civic equity is nourished by a publicly funded system of schooling with this as its prime target.

Five Propositions About Democratic Schools

1. *Schools need focus*; but every focus means there's a trade-off. Over the long haul, education for democracy is unlikely to hurt one's test scores and can begin to narrow some of the gaps between rich and poor. But the reverse, a single-minded focus on raising test scores, will not close or even narrow the gaps between rich and poor, black and white. And it will inevitably worsen the gaps between rich and poor when it comes to civic participation. A steadfast vision of civic life needs to pervade schooling—and must not be sacrificed to other purposes.

The testing focus calls for an inch-thick and mile-wide curriculum that aims at rote learning of a familiarly coherent and, at best, half-true story, and a pedagogy focused on coverage and right answers. Its virtues are simplicity, alignment, measurability. But it is an approach peculiarly sensitive to out-of-school variables, and peculiarly insensitive to what it takes to be a powerful citizen. In contrast, teaching a limited number of essential ideas in greater depth, in order to explore the ways in which truth is discovered and uncovered, places all comers on a more even playing field, and develops the habits of mind needed to tackle contemporary novelties. That's where all the attention needs to be—but getting it right will be harder to do. Getting to the wrong place faster, however, is not a virtue.

2. *One size does not fit all*. Even if we all agreed that the purpose of public schooling were preparing young people for democratic life, schools would look both very different from those we have invented in the past century and very different from each other. That's what happens when ordinary folks are involved in deciding things for themselves. It is why we cannot guarantee that two sets of jurors will always make the same, much less the right, decision.

E. D. Hirsch and I agree on the need for rigorous subject matter, not just skills, but we reach different conclusions from this common starting point. The MET Schools founded by Dennis Littky focus student work on real-life experiences and mentors, and eschew all traditional academic course work. The school Ted Sizer founded around the same time is built on a deeply serious approach to academic subject matter and course work. Ann Cook's and Herb Mack's Urban Academy is built around controversial arguments in critical academic and civic domains. They are all, on my terms, successful, but the measuring rod for demonstrating that success couldn't be a simple-minded one.

3. *A democratic school culture would have lots of human interaction*. A school that trains people for citizenship in a democracy needs a faculty who can model what it means to value each other's ideas, to be open to new views, and to be comfortable defending their ideas in public, not just in conflict with students but with colleagues. That would be as true for Hirsch's, Littky's, Cook's, and Sizer's models as for mine. They'd all see adult controversy as a golden opportunity to educate, not a distraction.

Just as kids need models who show what it means to be a historian, mathematician, musician, or soccer player, so do they need models of adults who engage in the arts of democratic life. Kids need to see an adult community that actively and with zest engages in the kind of oral and written exchange of ideas, rules of debate, and forms of decision-making that democracy promotes. By inviting young people into their circle, the adults act much like any religious community or tribe, offering the young ways to gradually assume more and more of the privileges and responsibilities of full membership. It works, of course, only if the young *want* to

become such adults.

4. *Forms of governance would differ, too.* Should we include all the members of the school community in decision-making? For which decisions? What is the role of kids? Of custodians? Complicated trade-offs are required in each instance, but adults and children learn about democracy in the process. Just as the details of democratic life differ in each of our 50 states, not to mention in a host of countries we call democracies, so would the schools in which adults teach democracy vary. There would be gnashing of teeth as schools “unwisely” decide to teach creationism along with evolution, or that early training in mathematical algorithms is worth a loss in understanding, or that love of books is more valuable than training in phonics.

But sometimes the differences get resolved by experience, not debate, and in any case, as in society at large, these are not reasons for left or right to despair of democracy. Checks and balances of many sorts are as needed for schools as for the larger society, to mediate when the majority has overstepped the bounds. How sharply held differences are heard and responded to is part of the curriculum of such schools. It leads to ways of thinking about the larger world. Pacing such discussions so that they do not overwhelm the school’s life and mission takes care, just as it does in the larger political sphere. Democracy, as Winston Churchill noted, is a thoroughly flawed form of government, except in comparison with all of the others.

5. *Reform consistent with democracy takes time.* One learns best by immersion and apprenticeship. The habits of democracy do not develop naturally, any more than mathematical competence does. They must be taught, sometimes by direct teaching and sometimes holistically, by example. Even the fiercest supporter of direct teaching of reading or math acknowledges that it will not go far if along the way students don’t also experience the world of reading or mathematics, aren’t immersed in a culture of literacy and numeracy. In a society in which most young people, not to mention adults, have had very little experience with how democracy might work, they too will take time to internalize these habits.

It should be clear that schools that set out to train the young to become adults in a democratic society have a tough job ahead; not one of the five propositions above is typical of the schools we have today. Embarking on this journey means taking risky steps—some forward and some backward. They are not paper-and-pencil changes. Ornery little boys and girls need to learn the multiplication tables, and U.S. history, and modern physics, as well as handwriting, spelling, and how best to use the computer, while ornery adults teach not only all of this but also how to live together in such a way that new truths are allowed to emerge. They have to juggle when to allow and when not to allow argument, and what rules are beyond debate. And all this while helping kids tie their shoes, learn to make friends, and handle enemies—and making sure their families and communities are on board. (We forget this last item at our peril.)

Rethinking assessment

Once we’ve decided to build a democratic school culture, how do we know we’re on the right track? Letting kids vote on class decisions in kindergarten will not necessarily get them to respect the ballot box when they are eighteen. Neither is representative government the only form of democracy suitable to schools.

Imagine what it would look like if a school had to document its success in terms of its

students' participation in decision-making and ability to accept responsibility for their work and the work of others—and for doing so not merely in school but also after graduation. Suppose a school's success rating were based not on how many kids go to college but on how many of them vote. Where would that form of accountability lead us?

Far more serious than the test-score gap, and more remediable, is the gap between how many rich versus poor people vote, how many whites versus blacks. On these counts, the U.S. looks worse than it does in math or literacy. Similarly, we might look at the gap between how many rich versus poor and black versus white youth are in jail, and for how long—a gap that places the U.S. again in a class by itself. We might hold ourselves accountable, as a society and as schools, to reducing that gap. Or we might assume responsibility for reducing the health gap between rich and poor. Shouldn't a school system devoted to democracy—and committed to equity—judge itself as much by whether the work it does reduces or increases these gaps?

The old Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS) in East Harlem, which I helped start in 1985, had a statistically significant impact on many of the variables in the preceding paragraph. (We knew because we made sure to keep track of these things after our students graduated.) But the school had very little impact on its students' S.A.T. scores, a fact that did not, incidentally, prevent them from going to college.

It was with these kinds of assessments in mind that Central Park East Elementary School was organized in 1974, CPESS in 1985, and the Mission Hill School in Boston in 1997, along with a great many other schools committed to these same propositions during these same 25 years. They each looked for indicators that would help us see how the school had affected its students—and each held itself accountable to responding to such information. In a way, these schools were among the first in public education to put the accountability question in the forefront—although our definition of accountability was rather different from George Bush's.

It Still Is News: The Second Silence

We never claimed we could overcome all the odds facing our kids. We took for granted that school was but one input, where kids spent 180 out of 365 days a year at most, for 6 out of at least 16 waking hours a day. They come to school not at birth but at age four or five. Precisely this limitation made it critical that we focus on the right stuff—the stuff that lasts when our backs are turned, when the kids are on their own.

It is not merely that kids' home lives differ. If schools were prepared to accept these differences as potential assets, not deficits to overcome, it might not even matter. But some of the differences were clearly undesirable side effects of poverty and oppression. Some of our kids lived in settings where asthma was rampant; they suffered more absenteeism than their more favored peers. Some had neither the money nor time, quite aside from the knowledge, to eat nutritiously, to get sufficient exercise, to have access to medical care, to remain in the same stable setting for long, or to have a place to live large enough to give its members sufficient space and privacy for intellectual work.

It would be ludicrous to think that such factors don't produce in-school as well as lifelong differentials—not to mention the subtler advantages of being a child whose parents can hire tutors, give expert homework assistance, send you to a luxurious summer camp, and have friends in places of power and influence to get you a leg up at critical moments.

As Billie Holiday reminded us a half century ago,

*Them that's got shall get
Them that's not shall lose
So the Bible said
and it still is news.*

That is the second great silence: our pretence that the quality-of-life gaps outside of school are matters of, at most, inconvenience, or matters of poor parenting skills.

The Central Park East schools, along with so many others that took on this project in the past 25 years, argued that all children can learn what they need to be able to enter into the conversation about their own and society's future as equal partners—or as nearly equal as schooling can get them—but that to do so requires care in picking the right goals and an alliance with families, that relies on their strengths rather than one that views them as inadequate. .

As we struggled with the five propositions I named above, nearly all of us arrived at the same five corollary conclusions:

1. *Be Clear About Purpose.* We all decided that schools could better serve families and kids if they were clear about what they were and weren't trying to do: what we call nowadays variously our vision or mission, our methods of assessing both individual kids and the school, and finally our specific plan of action. (Ideally, families should have an opportunity to also see what it looks, sounds, and “tastes” like—not just read what it claims to be.)

If a school decided, as we did, on multiple-age homerooms, it should relate this to its larger purpose; likewise with the organization of the day, the placement of its faculty, etc. What the school will not be doing, the trade-offs it has chosen, should be as clear as what it will do. We all got into trouble when we tried to meet too many different goals; and we learned to be more and more explicit about the connection between our mission and what we agreed to be accountable for.

We needed, we all agreed, to explain clearly how we decided when students were ready to graduate. While the goals and criteria for competence were universally applicable for students of a particular school, the ways students met them varied. At Mission Hill, Landmark, and many other schools that modeled themselves on CPESS, a panel of reviewers—faculty and family members, students, and external community people or professionals—make the final judgment, subject to a largely pro-forma final vote by the faculty. These panels review in each major field a portfolio of work the student prepares, listen to a major presentation of one piece of that work the student is particularly proud of, ask questions, probe for strengths and weaknesses, and then retire to make a collective judgment. Several on-demand tasks add to the package. At such schools a substantial number of students are required to re-do all or portions of their work, and on rarer occasions required to spend considerably more time at the school before they can move on.

But this is just one of many different approaches to external review of student competence. All depend on a mixture of expert opinion—some close and some distant—in making judgments about a student's readiness to move on. Some rely more than we did on conventional class grades and exams, or use other forms of public exhibitions to supplement such grades. But these up-front decisions about what counts helped define the meaning of a school's mission statement.

2. *Choice Is Powerful.* We discovered that schools could better serve democratic ends if they were intentional communities for teachers, students, and families. Once we insisted that no school should be generic, with no particular viewpoint, it had repercussions for the placement of faculty and students. We recognized that systems of choice naturally followed, and that these had to meet essential democratic procedures of fairness and equity. Schools had to balance the merits of students having to take the initiative to apply, or being able to “exile” those who break its norms, with the knowledge we have of the unintended consequences of such forms of choice.

We opted for more inclusion, and didn’t even have an application system, since we operated within a large system of controlled choice and a public lottery. But some of our sister schools, especially high schools, introduced admissions processes that sought to include evidence of a desire to attend this particular school and an interest in engaging in the special tasks the school demanded. Some argued this was a form of creaming, but others argued it was treating kids and their intentions with respect. Such choice, of course, is easier in districts with many different buildings (small schools of choice can share a single building) and harder to organize in one-school towns—and maybe less important to do so in such settings. But choice is an inevitable aspect of acknowledging that there is more than one legitimate way to think about democratic imperatives.

3. *Size Matters.* There’s a good reason why the rich favor small schools over big ones. Relationships between kids, and between kids and adults, are at the heart of the education of the well-to-do. Today this idea has become a truism, almost a fad in the public sector. But to make it work will take more than the proclamation that “you over here are now a small school.” As a mechanism for decentralizing essentially centralized authority it’s at best a gimmick, and at worst a deception. It’s probably most important for the power it offers teachers to know each other and each other’s work well, and to find ways to provide school-wide coherence in both subject matter and pedagogy, to build upon each other’s strengths.

But if the faculty have no important decisions to make together it may be time wasted. It makes the relationships with kids, and probably equally important with their families, feasible—but only if the will to use it that way exists. Over time smallness can become the basis for looking each other in the eye and learning how and when to trust each other to make important decisions. Even small schools, we discovered, often needed to create sub-communities—sometimes called critical friends groups—where even more risky learning could take place. Some schools invented common faculty work spaces (Urban Academy has one huge room with cubbies in which all adults work) to replace private classrooms and offices, ensuring greater cross-fertilization of ideas and concerns.

Smallness made some things possible. But it’s also possible, we found out quickly, to run a small school like a mindless big one. Smallness is necessary, but not sufficient—it’s the relationships that matter.

4. *Be Clear About Who’s in Charge.* Democracy requires acknowledging power, its delegation and distribution. Schools need to also. At Mission Hill, the co-principals are responsible to a school-based board of governors, which approves the budget and the annual staffing and curricular plan. The board consists of equal numbers of parent and staff representatives, along with an equal number of community members chosen by parents and staff, plus two senior students. The dividing line between this board’s powers and the responsibilities of the Faculty Council, the co-principals, and the Parent Council are always unclear at the edges,

and occasionally contentious, as are the powers of executive and legislative branches in our state and local governments. Ultimately the board, with consent from the city's superintendent, holds the power to evaluate and renew the principals' tenure, to resolve disputes between members of the community, and to review the workplan and operations of the school. With the help of the teachers union, the school sets forth clearly the terms of staff employment and responsibilities, as well as the mechanisms for resolving disputes where they differ from the labor-management contact.

Other schools have very different forms of governance, and some have no formal plan at all. How much power to put into the hands of the principal versus the faculty, or the faculty versus a representative board, where students have and do not have formal governance roles, varied by schools. As public schools within a larger system of schooling, we were constrained by the larger contractual rules and arrangements of the city, state, and union we worked within. In a way, these ventures at self-governance, which lie at the heart of democratic life, are in cities like New York and Boston quixotic, imaginary, operating in many cases on the sheer will and belief of the staff and families, against the actual machinery of government in which they are embedded. In both Boston and New York, the teachers union was a willing ally and supporter, and helped pave the way for system-wide acceptance. There's a continual balancing that needs to take place between the various parts of the community. And sometimes the best-laid plans—as is true in the larger world—will come to naught as bad decisions are made, weak leaders prevail, and schools revert to the status quo. Even CPESS experienced such reversals.

5. Openness Makes Us Stronger. We learned that in all of its work a school must be open and transparent, the evidence of its strengths and weaknesses accessible to both its immediate community and the larger public, and above all its standards for awarding diplomas accessible and open to public criticism. Even in our early vulnerable half-outlaw state, we paid a price for having to keep too many secrets. Folks may differ in their interpretation of the data, but shared and common data are needed.

At Mission Hill we built a formal alternate system of assessment in reading, writing, and math to ensure that we were not stuck only with test results and our "reassurances." Wherever possible we looked for direct versus indirect evidence—e.g. tape recordings taken bi-annually of students as readers from Kindergarten on. In most of the new schools students were followed when they left, to document the impact of the school on its former students. This proved to be powerful information, for example, when New York State sought to clamp down on the small schools with a history of performance-based graduation. Various forms of public external review—organized formally by the system now in Boston every four years, and organized formally by ourselves in New York—attest to and provide critiques for the work of these kinds of schools, as well as being useful tools in warding off external attack.

As these five principles suggest, the work of building these little oases of trust between people with very different styles, personalities, histories, beliefs, and racial and ethnic identifications and ties is never-ending. Even as schools claim to stand for some particular set of views about curriculum and pedagogy, they will attract people with their own sometimes differing interpretations of what it all means. Such schools are always works in progress. That in itself is a lesson in democracy.

Are We Having Fun Yet?

In fact, the fun part of it is that every difficulty such a school faces is a lesson in and for democracy. The fight for leisure inside the school is related to the fight for leisure outside. The idea of teachers taking responsibility for their collective, not just individual, work carries over to other workplaces and communities. When colleagues take on additional tasks for the school as a whole—attend parent council meetings, go to union meetings, do research on shared curriculum topics, review their peers' work, or take on school-wide assessment tasks—it is our shared responsibility to get them the extra time to do this. But it's also a reminder that the same thing happens in our local towns and cities. The importance of face-to-face encounters between people with different views, and the related capacity to imagine a viewpoint different from one's own, is an intellectual habit of mind central to our academic work, our school governance, and the governance of the larger society.

At every point in our work we must connect the dots between our practice and democracy. Why are scientists wary about how easy it is to see what you want to see? Don't ordinary citizens need to develop the same habits of caution? Why must high-stakes assessment be the work not of one single person but a group? And are there lessons here for decision-making outside of schools? Why do all high-stakes decisions need to be done openly, with a process of appeal? We must make the connection between how a historian weighs historical evidence and how we as citizens weigh daily evidence, and how cautiously a scholar uses analogies in any field, compared to how we toss around historical or personal analogies in political discourse.

We need to remind ourselves that the villains we denounce in our daily life are versions of literary characters we have grown to understand and even sympathize with in novels we have devoured. Could such empathy help inform our respect for often despised minorities? If great literature is to inform our lives, we need to take the time to trace the connections. We need to translate the zeros that differentiate millions from billions into real-life comparisons, as a step toward demystifying school budgets as well as national budgets.

Such a view of schooling leads us to ask questions about why all jobs, not just all schools, don't have built-in requirements for civic leisure—to attend school meetings, town meetings, and go to legislative hearings, not to mention to use the library, meet with colleagues, and join study groups. These are tasks of civic life that we view as luxuries, which no one but the individual who "wants" to do these things should have to concern himself with. What would civic life be like if we educated our children to honor such activity as central to the good life?

And because civic life overlaps with just plain human decency and neighborliness, schools like Mission Hill provide the extra time folks need on occasion: when a family member is sick, a marriage is breaking up, or even when a water main breaks down! The school naturally bends and twists to make it possible for its members to take care of their personal business without ignoring the impact on the school's work or its students. We do this for its own sake, but also because such practices should be part of our societal democratic norms. They should be assumed in all workplaces.

Just as democracy is at its most fragile at times of war or civil strife, so will schools operating against the grain have an even harder time maintaining normal democratic practices in what too often appears to be a war with "the system." Under such circumstances they are easy prey to takeovers, cutting corners, foolish internecine battles, secret budgets, and closed-mindedness, their own form of ultra-patriotism and fear of treason. The less embattled, the less at risk such schools will be, and the less they will need to turn to superhuman heroes to be their

leaders.

Above all, given the paucity of experience that most of us have had with truly democratic institutions, we will simply often do it badly—not know how to distinguish a personal battle from an intellectual difference of opinion, see logical argument as a form of bullying, and fall back on “Well, that’s my opinion and I’ve got a right to it” arguments out of fear and self doubt. It will not come without hurt feelings and breaches of civility—and without losses. It will confuse parents and students. Sometimes people will pull back and yearn for a benign dictator. In the face of a hostile system, many will fold. Others will keep their problems—successes and failures—to themselves, for fear of the enemy.

But with patience we will learn from the experiences of our sister schools and small local school communities; with patience more of us will come out to tell our difficult stories; over time, perhaps, the larger system we live within will come to develop ways to be supportive of rather than hostile to such communities. We may learn to build systems to accommodate and cherish these ornery and complex entities. We will have much to learn from the many small schools in America struggling to find the balance they need to initiate themselves and their students into the value of democracy, as well as the social and intellectual habits that help it survive and on occasion thrive. The lessons will come from ways to organize and teach the formal curriculum, as well as those that are embedded in the culture of everyday life and decision-making in the school.

None of this will take us far until a larger number of our fellow citizens begin to see these goals as important and worth some uncomfortable trade-offs. It turns out one can have varsity football and small serious schools of choice, but one still has to decide which comes first—which is the add-on and which is the essential. In others words: what price are we willing to pay for putting democracy at the head of the line? Whatever answer to that question we come up with, the price of not asking it at all--the cost of silence--is immeasurably higher"