

So What Does It Take to Build A School for Democracy?

The goal of the public schools should be to prepare all students—regardless of race, gender, or class—to participate equally in a democratic way of life. Ms. Meier presents five propositions that can guide schools in carrying out this function and then details how several exemplary schools have gone about putting those propositions into practice.

By Deborah Meier

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 questions that we would apparently rather not. But the price for our silence is high. The most serious silence has to do with 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 concerns the role of social class: Do we really want the same outcomes for everyone? And the third concerns cost: What price are we willing to pay? I’ll revisit each of these below.

First, about the ends of schooling. I reject the idea that the purpose of schooling 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, and subsequent economic history has proved it was nonsense. Our current worldwide preeminence assuredly doesn’t rest on our high test scores. But the fiction has persisted. It has distracted us from what should be our agenda and led us to the even more absurd and malicious No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

The real crisis we face is not a threat to America’s economic or military dominance but the ebbing strength of our 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. 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 will make them second nature is even harder. It’s no wonder that flourishing democracies are fragile phenomena.

Moreover, if the democratic promise is to thrive, 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, and of women as of men. The inequities of race, gender, and class that persist in our nation will surely grow worse unless civic equity is nourished by a publicly funded system of schooling with exactly that as its prime target. What does this focus on the pursuit of healthy democracy mean for the life of a school?

FIVE PROPOSITIONS ABOUT DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLS

1. *Schools need focus.* But for every focus, there is a tradeoff. 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 or black and white. And it will inevitably widen the gaps between rich and poor when it comes to civic participation. A steadfast vision of what civic life can be needs to pervade schooling and must not be sacrificed to other purposes.

The current focus on testing calls for a curriculum that is an inch deep and a mile wide, a curriculum that aims at rote learning, and a pedagogy that focuses 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 footing and develops the habits of mind needed to tackle contemporary novelties. This is where all the attention needs to be, but getting it right will be hard. 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 was to prepare young people for democratic life, the schools would look very different from those we have invented in the past century and very different from one another. That's what happens when ordinary folks are involved in deciding things for themselves. And that is why we cannot guarantee that two sets of jurors will always make the same, much less the right, decision.

E. D. Hirsch, Jr., 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, teach students through real-life experiences under the guidance of mentors, and they eschew all traditional academic coursework. The school Ted Sizer founded around the same time is built on a deeply serious approach to academic subject matter and coursework. Ann Cook and Herb Mack's Urban Academy is built around controversial arguments in critical academic and civic domains. On my terms, they are all successful, but the rod used to measure their success cannot be a simpleminded 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 made up of individuals who can model what it means to value one another's ideas, to be open to new views, and to be comfortable defending their ideas in public—not just in disputes with students but also with colleagues. That would be as true for Hirsch's, Littky's, Cook's, and Sizer's models as for mine. Everyone would see controversy among adults as a golden opportunity to educate, not as a distraction.

Just as young people need models who show what it means to be a historian, mathematician, musician, or soccer player, so too do they need models of adults who engage in the arts of democratic life. Students need to see an adult community that actively and zestfully participates in the oral and written exchange of ideas and the forms of decision making that democracy promotes. By inviting young people into their circle, the adults act much like a 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 students? Of custodians? Complicated tradeoffs 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 if schools "unwisely" decided that creationism should be taught alongside evolution or that early training in mathematical algorithms is worth a loss in understanding or that a love of books is more valuable than training in phonics.

But sometimes such differences would be resolved by experience, not debate, and, in any case, as in society at large, these disputes are not reasons for anyone to despair of democracy. Checks and balances of many sorts are as necessary for schools as for the larger society; in both arenas, they serve to mediate when the majority has overstepped its bounds. Addressing how to hear and respond to sharply held differences 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 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.* The habits of democracy do not develop naturally, any more than mathematical competence does. One learns best by immersion and apprenticeship. Sometimes these habits may be taught by direct teaching and sometimes holistically, by example. Even the fiercest supporter of the direct teaching of reading or math acknowledges that it will not go far if along the way students don't also experience world of reading or mathematics and 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, students will require 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. These are not paper-and-pencil changes. Ornerly 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. Ornerly adults teach not only all of these things but also how to live together in such a way that new truths are allowed to emerge. They have to juggle when to allow argument and when not to allow it, and they must decide what rules are beyond debate. In addition, all of these things must take place while they help children tie their shoes, make friends, and handle enemies. And the adults in schools must make sure that 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 children vote on classroom decisions in kindergarten will not necessarily get them to respect the ballot box when they are 18. Nor is representative government the only form of democracy suitable to schools.

Imagine what a school would look like if it had to document its success in terms of its students' participation in decision making and their ability to accept responsibility for their work and the work of others. Imagine if this extended beyond graduation. Suppose a school's success rating were based not on how many students 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 the voting patterns of the rich and the poor or the similar gap between whites and 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 as opposed to poor youths or black as opposed to white youths are in jail and for how long—a gap that places the U.S. once again in a class by itself. We might hold ourselves accountable, as a society and as individual schools, for 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' SAT 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. And a great many other schools committed to these same propositions during these same 25 years. All of us in such schools looked for indicators that would help us see how the school had af-

fecting 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 on the front burner—although our definition of accountability was rather different from that of George Bush.

IT STILL IS NEWS: THE SECOND SILENCE

We never claimed we could overcome all the odds facing our students. We took for granted that school was but one input, a place where kids spent 180 out of 365 days a year at most, for six out of roughly 16 waking hours each day. Children come to school not at birth but at age 4 or 5. Precisely this limitation makes 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 students' home lives differ, though they surely do. If schools were prepared to accept these differences as potential assets, not deficits to overcome, these differences might not even matter. But some of the differences bring with them the clearly undesirable side effects of poverty and oppression. Some of our students live in settings where asthma is rampant; they suffer more absenteeism than their more favored peers. Some have neither the money nor the time, quite apart 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 that is large enough to give family 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 half a century ago:

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

This is the second great silence: our pretense that the gaps in the quality of life 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 in order to enter into the conversation about their own and society's future as equal partners—or as nearly equal as schooling can get them. However, reaching this point requires care in picking the right goals and an alliance with families that relies on their strengths rather than on their inadequacies.

As we struggled with the five propositions I spelled out above, nearly all of us arrived at the same five corollary conclusions.

1. *Be clear about purpose.* We all decided that our schools could better serve families and children if we were clear about what we were and weren't trying to do: our vision or mission (as we call it nowadays), our methods of assessing both individual students and the school, and finally our specific plan of action. (Ideally, families should also have an opportunity to sample what a school 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 choice to its larger purpose. It should do likewise with the organization of the day, the placement of its faculty, and so on. What the school will not be doing—the tradeoffs 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. Today, at Mission Hill, Landmark, and many other schools that modeled themselves on CPESS, a panel of reviewers—faculty mem-

bers, family members, students, and external community people or professionals—makes the final judgment, subject to a largely pro-forma vote by the faculty. These panels in each major field review a portfolio of work prepared by the student in that field, 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 redo at least some portions of their work, and on rarer occasions they are 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 grades and exams or use other forms of public exhibitions to supplement such grades. But these up-front decisions about what counts help 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 decided that no school should be generic, that decision had repercussions for the placement of faculty and students. We recognized that whole systems of choice naturally followed and that these had to meet essential democratic principles of fairness and equity. Schools had to weigh the merits of requiring students to take the initiative to apply and of being able to "exile" those who violate a school's norms against 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 that featured a public lottery. But some of our sister schools, especially the high schools, introduced admissions processes that sought to include evidence of a desire to attend a particular school and an interest in engaging in the special tasks the school demanded. Some argued that this was a form of "creaming," while others argued that it

was treating students and their intentions with respect. Clearly, such choice is easier to offer in districts with many different buildings (small schools of choice can share a single building, of course) and harder to organize in one-school towns—and maybe less appropriate 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 students and between students and adults are at the heart of the education of the well-to-do. Today, the idea that smaller is better has become a truism, almost a fad in the public sector. But to make it work will take more than the proclamation that "this is now a small school." As a mechanism for decentralizing essentially centralized authority, creating a small school is at best a gimmick and at worst a deception. It's probably most important for the power it offers teachers to know one another and one another's work well and to find ways to provide schoolwide coherence in both subject matter and pedagogy, to build upon one another's strengths.

But if the faculty members of a school have no important decisions to make together, then making a school smaller may be time and effort wasted. A smaller school makes the relationships with students—and, probably equally important, with their families—feasible, but only if the will to focus on those relationships 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 need to create sub-communities—sometimes called critical friends groups—in which even more risky learning can take place. Some schools invented common faculty work spaces to replace private classrooms and offices, ensuring greater cross-fertilization of ideas and concerns. Urban Academy, for example, has one huge room in which all adults work, storing their materials in cubbies.

Smallness makes some things possible. But it's also possible, we found out quickly, to run a small school as mindlessly as a 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 and agreeing on its delegation and distribution. Schools also need to work out power structures. 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 the parents and staff members, 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 the 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 work plan and operations of the school. With the help of the teacher union, the school sets forth clearly the terms of staff employment and responsibilities, as well as the mechanisms for resolving disputes when they depart from the labor/management contract.

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 as opposed to the faculty or the faculty as opposed to a representative board varies from school to school. As public schools within a larger system of schooling, we were constrained by the larger contractual rules and arrangements of the city and state we worked within and the union we worked with. 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, operating in many cases on the sheer will and belief of the staff and families and against the actual machinery of government in which they are embedded. In both Boston and New York, the teacher union was a willing ally and supporter and helped pave the way for systemwide 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 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. Above all, its standards for awarding diplomas must be 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 alternative system of assessment in reading, writing, and math to ensure that we were not stuck with only test results and our "reassurances." Wherever possible we looked for direct versus indirect evidence—e.g., biannual tape recordings of students as readers, from kindergarten on. In most of the new schools, students were followed when they graduated, to document the impact of the school on its former students. This proved to be powerful information when, for example, New York State sought to clamp down on the small schools with a history of performance-based graduation. Various forms of public external review—now organized formally by the system in Boston every four years and organized formally by ourselves in New York—attest to and provide critiques of the work of these kinds of schools, as well as help to ward 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 a never-ending project. 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 is that every difficulty such schools face can be a lesson in and for democracy. The fight for leisure inside the school

is related to the fight for leisure outside. The idea that teachers should take 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 schoolwide assessment tasks—it is our shared responsibility to give them the extra time they need. But it's also a reminder that the same thing happens in our towns and cities. The importance of face-to-face encounters between people with differing views and the related capacity to imagine a viewpoint different from one's own are intellectual habits 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 results that you want to see? Don't ordinary citizens need to develop similar habits of caution? Why must high-stakes assessment be the work not of one single person but of a group? And are there lessons here for decision making outside of schools? Why do all high-stakes decisions need to be made openly and include a process of appeal? We must make the connection between how a historian weighs historical evidence and how we as citizens weigh daily evidence. We should compare how cautiously a scholar in any field uses analogies with the way we toss around historical or personal analogies in political discourse.

We need to remind ourselves that the villains we denounce in our daily lives are versions of literary characters we have grown to understand and even sympathize with in the 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 such connections. We need to translate the zeros that differentiate millions from billions into real-life comparisons, as a step toward demystifying school budgets and 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 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 them should be concerned 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, when a marriage is breaking up, or even when a water main bursts! 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 democratic norms in society. 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 that operate 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, these schools are easy prey for takeovers, cutting corners, foolish internecine battles, secret budgets, and closed-mindedness (school systems' own forms of ultra-patriotism and fear of treason). The less embattled and the less at risk such schools are, 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 democracy badly. We may not know how to distinguish a personal battle from an intellectual difference of opinion, or we may see logical argument as a form of bullying and fall back on “it's my opinion and I've got a right to it” arguments out of fear and self doubt. Real democracy will not come without hurt feelings and breaches of civility—and without some losses. It will often 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 to themselves, for fear of the enemy.

But with patience we can learn from the experiences of our sister schools and of small local school communities; with patience more of us will come forward to tell our difficult stories; over time, perhaps, the larger system we live within will develop ways to be supportive of rather than hostile to such communities. We may someday 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 that are struggling to find the balance they need to initiate themselves and their students into the values of democracy, as well as instill the social and intellectual habits that help democracy survive and occasionally thrive. Some lessons will come from ways to organize and teach the formal curriculum, while others will emerge from 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 tradeoffs. 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 other 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 the third and final silence—is immeasurably higher.

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