Becoming Educated

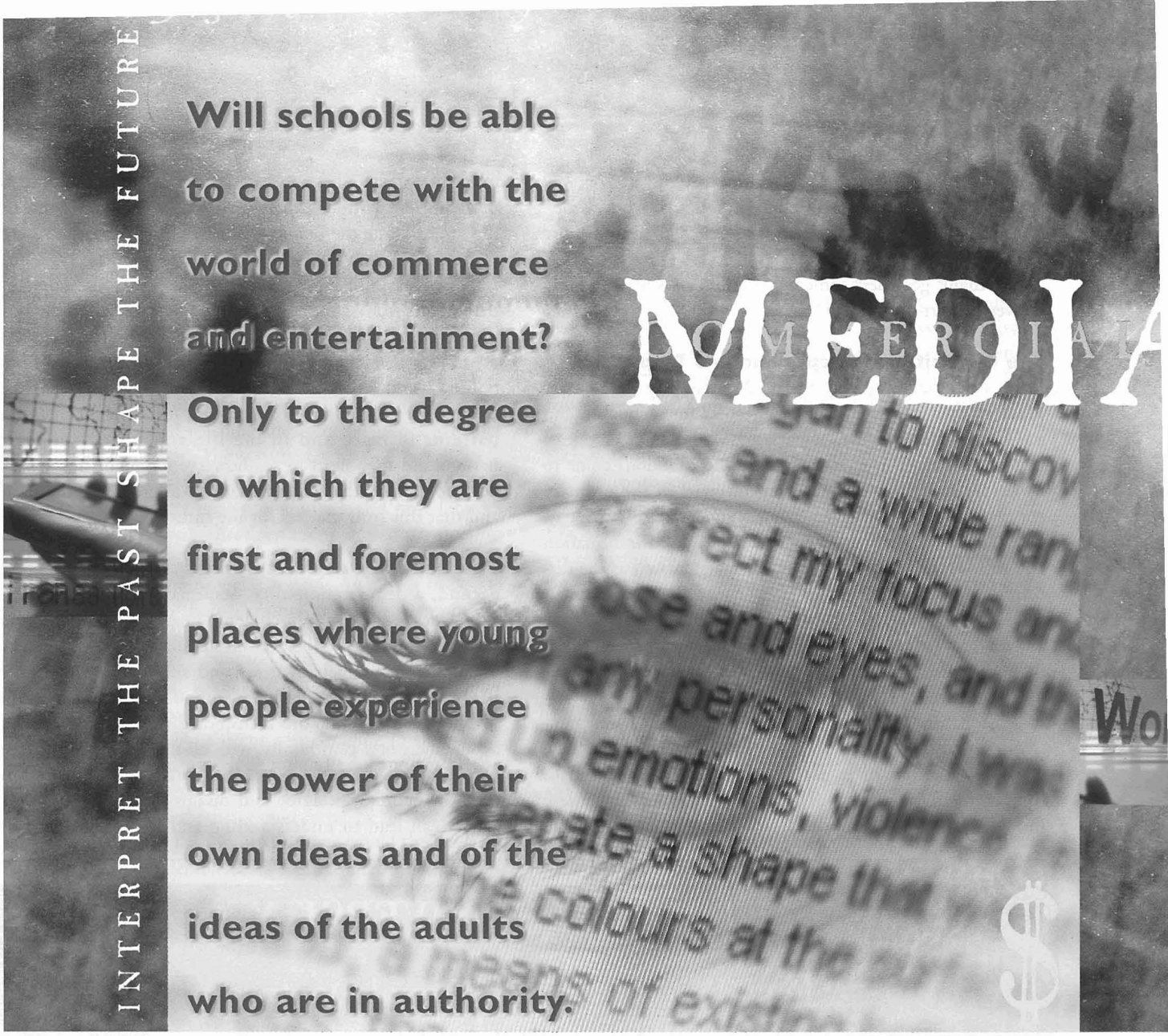
The Power of IDEAS

EDUCATING KIDS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY MEANS TEACHING THEM THE HABITS OF MIND THAT WILL HELP THEM BENEFIT FROM—AND BE BENEFITS TO—THE WORLD.

By Deborah W. Meier

There are times these days when it's hard to remember that public schools are intended, at minimum, for a social purpose: to pass on to the next generation something this generation values and to generate new ideas that might benefit future generations. They do not exist, in short, primarily to give each individual student a better chance to beat out other individual students in the race to succeed. In thinking about the aims of education, therefore, we are really asking about our social values. It should not be a surprise then that some of us wonder how anyone would think there could be a single set of standards or that such standards could be set in stone by politicians and measured by a test, with no room for uncertainty or ambiguity. That truly would be the end of history.

Of course, schools must reflect some shared values across political and religious divisions; individual villages, towns,



PHOTO/ILLUSTRATION BY P. CHISHOLM

and cities—and maybe even states and nations. They are the one secular institution that is given the task of publicly molding and shaping the future that we will all inhabit. But it is also well to remember that they are not the only institution that molds and shapes kids. Quite aside from families and churches, there is another powerful educational system out there, a very large cohort of thoughtful and clever folks with a lot of resources whose eyes and ears are relentlessly observing and responding to our youth. I'm talking about the world of popular commercial media, which is in the business of knowing our young people well so it can take their money from them—but who, in the process, also interpret the past and shape the future for our students.

If only the school-based professional educators of this land knew the kids half as well and had half as many resources to balance the view of reality that the media are selling. And had as relentless a purpose. In short, we—the school teachers and school boards of America—are also trying to sell the kids something, but we don't take it nearly as seriously as do our competitors in the commercial media.

Our competitors know clearly what they are selling. What we in the public sphere rarely debate, much less even whisper about, is *what* we think it's all for. We speak about "achievement" as though what is achieved didn't matter. We speak of literacy in mathematics and language, writing good sentences and punctuating correctly, knowing how to use math in practical ways, being smarter than our competitors, and having enough scientists. And we speak of keeping kids from getting into trouble, keeping them busy while their parents are at work, and keeping them from shooting one another or taking drugs.

But are these adequate reasons for making kids spend increasingly long days in school for increasing years? When they aren't doing well, they are punished with even more than the standard six hours a day, 180 days a year, and more than the requisite 13 years of elementary and secondary school. If they are held back, they might spend 14, 15, or even 16 years in school. And we deprive the losers of even a chance at largely "unskilled" jobs that have nothing

to do with any of the courses or tests they did not do well at in school. *That* will teach them to do better, work harder. (No one punishes kids by requiring them to watch more TV!)

So thank goodness someone is asking, "What for?" My answer is short—and incomplete.

The Capacity for Skepticism and Empathy

First, a democratic polity in the 21st century desperately needs citizens who have a healthy respect for skepticism and a penchant for empathy—especially for those who are least like themselves. These are habits of mind that don't come to us naturally and are often not encouraged in the ordinary course of life. They require training and practice every day. The capacity to remain open to new ideas and information and to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty, as well as the discomfort of stepping into the shoes of those most unlike ourselves, is not natural or unnatural to our species. These abilities require conscious and deliberate valuing—and, thus, training—and a chance to see how much they enhance real-life experience.

The habits of skepticism and empathy must be practiced from the heart if they are to stick. They must be applied to matters of importance to young people and to society, in the company of older people who share these intellectual values and who know how to practice them publicly. Students need to be seen as novices in the process of acquiring wisdom. They need to learn in real contexts how to examine the kinds of issues that will confront them tomorrow, in a tough-minded and reasoned way: They need to imagine viewpoints they've never dreamed of before and won't confront often amongst their tightly knit peer culture. They need to know what it is to judge the credibility of evidence—in the sciences, the arts, history, politics—and when it's time to change their minds. They need to be in the habit of looking for connections and patterns in math and in the life and history of their nation, and they need to see how events might not always be preordained, that people made a difference in the past, and that this stuff matters for the future.

The Capacity to Build Connections

Second, a democratic polity—especially in the 21st century—desperately needs citizens, neighbors, and parents who feel connected, who see the suffering and joy of others as important to their own joy and suffering, who find it hard to pass by a homeless man without twinges of concern. We need citizens who are accustomed to seeing themselves as members of a community, with all the give and take, the compromises and complexities that entails. Citizens need to see how people can agree and disagree civilly; how arguments can lead to understanding and understanding can

lead to new arguments; how reliability, resourcefulness, and perseverance in the face of difficulty count; and how important it is to be trustworthy. Such habits cannot, on the whole, be taught didactically; but the way we organize schooling will contribute to or negate the development of such inclinations. Organizational structures that inhibit such traits need to be jettisoned. First things must come first.

Citizens need to see that honor, honesty, and truthfulness are at the heart of a strong community, including the one they spend the bulk of their early lives in—their school. Schools cannot avoid teaching these critical values, whether they choose to or not. The way that schools are organized, how children are sorted out into more-or less-valued categories, the way adults treat one another, and how families are viewed and served, these represent the apprenticeship our students go through on the way to adulthood. If we're lucky, that is. If we're unlucky, schools—good or bad—are largely incidental to their learning entirely; the important values are taught through the screen, the monitor, the shopping mall.

But what is clear is that no single model of a school could meet these broad value-laden needs in ways that would be tolerable for all U.S. citizens and engaging to the young. The border between proselytizing and education is always tricky. Which of these values might at any given moment have to give way to another would never be decided in the same way by all families (or all kids). nor would the resulting compromises feel tolerable. Is it possible that for some parents advanced music is more important than advanced math or that the history of West Africa is more important than the history of England? Is it tolerable to us that for some families acceptance of authority is not so easily placed second to the value of the ever-questioning mind?

The Power of Play

The capacities for exhibiting skepticism, feeling empathy, and building connections require something else—a third component. They require a self-confident engagement with life, an active playfulness, a treasuring of the imaginative capacities of human beings, the ability to see what isn't yet but might be, as well as what isn't yet and hopefully never will be. It even involves the development of a sense of aesthetics—an appreciation for what is and isn't pleasing to the eye and ear. Few of these qualities can be easily scheduled, taught sequentially, or practiced on demand. Most are part of the inheritance of every preschooler in the safety of their home. In a democracy these early habits need extensions into adulthood; they thrive on the public treasuring of leisure that was once the hallmark of all ruling classes—but must be the hallmark of all citizens in a democracy. Not leisure as mere entertainment (from fox hunting to movie going), but leisure in the sense the Greeks had in mind when they used the same word for school and leisure: a time and place to reflect alone and in concert with others. It's a habit that starts young—in infant play. And it's a habit that we lose to our enormous disadvantage during our formative schooling years.

A society in which everyone is always in too much a hurry to reflect and revise, converse, explore, and invent—in short, play—is one ready to give up on the messy exercise of democratic decision making. And when we lose sight, even in early childhood, of the connections between our own lives and the real, not merely the virtual, world around us, we deprive ourselves of some rock-bottom basics we need for developing confidence in our ability to exercise important judgements. Modern science may have gone beyond the basic elements—earth, air, fire, water—but we're raising too many kids who haven't even gotten to those basics yet. When we pretend that moving the mouse around to manipulate the objects on the screen can reproduce what it means to dig a tunnel to China, build a sand castle to withstand the tides, or invent an imaginary world in the tree in our backyard, we're at risk in ways we may not yet fully appreciate.

Will schools be able to compete with the world of commerce and entertainment? Only to the degree to which they are first and foremost places where young people experience the power of their own ideas and of the ideas of the adults who are in authority. Only if they experience that power as thrilling, amazing, useful, and something they seek to imitate. We learn best and most efficiently—above all in matters that require higher skill—from experts who we'd like to become and whom we believe we could become. Real, not virtual, relationships are what schools have over e-mail, the Internet, the screen, and the radio. Schools that serve our collective social purposes need to exploit real relationships by being genuine communities—small enough so everyone is well-known and diverse enough so we're bound to come to know people very different from ourselves.

Conclusion

We are here to train kids in the exercise of human judgment on matters of importance in their lives and in their communities and nations and the planet. Human judgment is bound to be messy. It doesn't come with certainties. It is hard to see exactly how it works. But kids who spend a lot of time with grown-ups who are accustomed—and trusted—to demonstrate what human judgment looks like have a greater shot at growing up to be thoughtful, in all the senses of that word. **PL**

Deborah W. Meier is the principal of Mission Hill Elementary, a public school in Rodbury, MA. Her book In Schools We Trust: Creating Communities of Learning in an Era of Testing and Standardization *was recently published by Beacon Press.*