

# Creating Democratic Schools

*A democratic school culture is the best professional development*

■ BY DEBORAH MEIER

**T**he school change we need cannot be undertaken by a faculty that is not convinced and involved. Even when teachers are engaged, it's tough to change the habits of a lifetime, embedded as such habits are in the way we talk about schooling and the way our students and their families expect it to be delivered. Such a task must be the work of the participants themselves in a climate of self-governance.

The kinds of change required by today's agenda can only be the work of thoughtful teachers. Either we acknowledge and create conditions based on this fact, conditions for teachers to work collectively and collaboratively and openly, or we create conditions that encourage resistance, secrecy, and sabotage. Teachers who believe in spelling tests every Friday or are "hooked on phonics" sneak them in, even when they're taboo. And so do those who want good books or fewer workbooks, regardless of school regulations. The braver and more conscientious cheat the most, but even the timid can't practice well what they don't believe in. This is obviously an argument for why these schools must be small.

Even if we're talking only about individual classrooms, size is important. But, if we're talking about the creation of a thoughtful school culture, size becomes decisive—especially if we're trying to create a changed culture. Thoughtfulness is time-consuming. Collaboration is time-consuming. The time they both consume can't be private

time, late-at-night at-home time. To find time for thoughtful discussion we need to create schools in which consensus is easy to arrive at while argument is encouraged (even fostered) and focused on those issues of teaching and learning close to teacher and student experiences, rather than on procedural rules and processes, elections and nominating committees, building-wide disciplinary codes, detention policies, filling out forms and checklists, scheduling, etc.

Only in a small school can deep ongoing discussion take place in ways that produce change and involve the entire faculty—and even there, it's tough to sustain. For teachers to start thinking through the task before them, collectively and collaboratively, schools must be so small that governance does not become the topic of discussion but issues of education do, so small that the faculty as a whole becomes the decision-making body on questions of teaching and learning.

We bragged for years that the Central Park East (CPE) schools didn't have a single permanent committee. We were a committee of the whole; the time we spent talking had immediate repercussions affecting the way we thought and felt about children, classroom life, our teaching practices. If an issue arose we could meet with almost no notice, and gather together in one room, around one table or one circle, and hear each other out. We didn't need complex governing structures, committees of committees, representatives of representatives, differentiations of staff, classes and subclasses.

And even though on the high school level we now do have one permanent committee (our Cabinet), anyone can join any of its meetings—even kids if they wish. (It would be nice if they did more often.) A third of the faculty is in

the Cabinet, which only occasionally takes a vote. Mostly we argue it out and find a solution that all can live with for the time being. We avoid deciding issues better decided elsewhere. And anyone can insist that decisions made by the Cabinet can be reviewed at a schoolwide meeting.

This continuing dialogue, face to face, over and over, is a powerful educative force. It is our primary form of staff development. When people ask me how we "train" new teachers, I say that the school itself is an educator for the kids and staff; it's its own staff development project. And it is by this same token always accessible to the outside world as well as to our students; the school itself is a public deliberative body whose existence is a reminder of the power of reasoning, reflecting, assessing, revising, and planning. The habits of mind, our five essential questions, and the habits of work we encourage in our students are thus exemplified in the daily life of the staff. We too weigh evidence, explore alternative viewpoints, conjecture about other possibilities, make connections, and ask, So what? We too must meet deadlines and keep our word and communicate clearly. We're "demonstrating" the value of what we preach—daily.

The staff spends all year reviewing its 14 graduation requirements, and each fall comes up with new versions of one or another of them. The experience of our alumni/ae, of external visitors, the work of our colleagues across the nation, as well as our own daily practice, all lead to such revisions. At various steps along the way the latest drafts are circulated and debated by students and teachers. We added a new section on computer literacy after considerable debate on whether it should be a part of our requirements or a separate one.

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Recently we added an emphasis on experimental science and redrafted the math requirements to reflect the latest National Council of Teachers of Math (NCTM) standards.

Similarly, issues of behavior, school management, and student-teacher relations occupy our attention. We spend a good deal of time—even an embarrassing amount of time—debating student “dress codes,” mostly shall they or shan’t they be allowed to wear hats. But even this issue was argued on terms that allowed students to join us. People brought in articles about the impact of clothes and raised issues about the importance (or not) of worrying about how others see us and whether our informality would make it harder for

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kids to shift to more formal ways of dressing in more formal workplaces. The opponents of dress codes eventually won, but supporters occasionally still submit interesting pieces of evidence for their side.

In a small school we can dare to experiment without feeling we are treating kids like guinea pigs. After all, what doesn’t work isn’t irreversible. We can reschedule one afternoon and put a new agenda into practice the next morning. We can undo them just as fast. Changes don’t require Herculean coordination or time-consuming bureaucratic arranging. In short, smallness makes democracy feasible, and without democracy we won’t be able to create the kind of profound rethinking the times demand. ■