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COMMENTARY

Bridging Differences

A Dialogue Between Deborah Meier and Diane Ravitch

By Deborah Meier & Diane Ravitch

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In the course of the last 30 years, the two of us have been at odds on any number of issues—on our judgments about progressive education, on the relative importance of curriculum content (what students are taught) vs. habits of mind (how students come to know what they are taught), and most recently in our views of the risks involved in nationalizing aspects of education policy.

Two renowned educators with often-opposing views, Diane Ravitch, left, and Deborah Meier, share a lighter moment outside the Tweed Courthouse building, the headquarters for the New York City school system.
—Todd Pitt for Education Week

Meeting recently to prepare for a debate on the federal No Child Left Behind Act, however, we found ourselves agreeing about the mess that has been generated by local and state testing. Both of us agreed that the public needs far better information about both inputs and outcomes, without which the public is woefully uninformed and too easily manipulated. As we discussed what the next policy steps should be, Diane preferred a national response, and Deborah preferred a local one.

As we talked further, we were surprised to discover that we shared a similar reaction to many of the things that are happening in education today, especially in our nation's urban school districts. Recent trends and events seem to be confirming our mutual fears and jeopardizing our common hopes about what schooling might accomplish for the nation's children. We might, we agreed, be getting the worst of both our perspectives.

Unlike Deborah, Diane has long supported an explicit, prescribed curriculum, one that would consume about half the school day, on which national examinations would be based. Diane believes in the value of a common, knowledge-based curriculum, such as the Core Knowledge curriculum, that

ensures that all children study history, literature, mathematics, science, art, music, and foreign language; such a curriculum, she thinks, would support rather than undermine teachers' work. Deborah, while strongly agreeing on the need for a broad liberal arts curriculum, doubts that anyone can ensure what children will really understand and usefully make sense of, even through the best imposed curriculum, especially if it is designed by people who are far from the actual school communities and classrooms.

Yet both of us are appalled by the relentless "test prep" activities that have displaced good instruction in far too many urban classrooms, and that narrow the curriculum to nothing but math and reading. We are furthermore distressed by unwarranted claims from many cities and states about "historic gains" that are based on dumbed-down tests, even occasionally on downright dishonest scoring by purposeful exclusion of low-scoring students.

What unites us above all is our conviction that low-income children who live in urban centers are getting the worst of both of our approaches.

Deborah is a pioneer of the small-schools movement. Diane, while not an opponent of that movement, has questioned whether such schools have the capacity to offer a reasonable curriculum, including advanced classes. Yet here, too, we both fear that a good idea has too often been subverted by the mass production of large numbers of small schools, without adequate planning or qualified leadership and with insufficient thought given to how they might promote class and racial integration, rather than contribute to further segregation.

We found that we were both dismayed by efforts in New York City to micromanage what teachers in most K-8 schools do at every moment in the day. While Deborah allies herself with many of the so-called constructivist ideas about teaching that are now in vogue in New York, she believes that the very idea of constructivism is mocked by the city's too often lock-step and authoritarian approach to implementing such ideas. In our shared view, the city's department of education has no curriculum at all, just a mandated and highly prescribed pedagogy in grades K-8, after which time the state Regents examinations—tests that have been dramatically simplified in recent years—serve as an implicit curriculum.

We concur that teachers must be free to use their best professional judgment about how to teach, and we agree on the importance of a strong professional culture in which teachers are encouraged to question and re-examine pedagogical assumptions and practices. Deborah would want teachers to continually re-examine curricular assumptions. Diane urges the adoption of a prescribed curriculum that includes at least the central academic disciplines and the arts. She believes that a policy of letting a thousand flowers bloom without tending is likely to produce hundreds of weeds and only a few rare flowers. Deborah agrees; good gardens need tending. She would leave most of the details to the local school community.

We both recognize that wise teachers have always found ingenious ways to sabotage any and all demands for compliance. It is hard, if not impossible, to run a perfect lock-step system when professionals (if they really are professionals) expect to make decisions and exercise discretion. Resistance to nonsense is one of the habits that citizens need to hone in a free society. But much of the sabotage that occurs behind classroom doors, we recognize, may disguise watering down the

curriculum or evading responsibility.

During our animated conversation, we agreed that a central, abiding function of public education is to educate the citizens who will preserve the essential balances of power that democracy requires, as well as to support a sufficient level of social and economic equality, without which democracy cannot long be sustained. We agreed that the ends of education—its purposes, and the trade-offs that real life requires—must be openly debated and continuously re-examined. Young people need to see themselves as novice members of a serious, intellectually purposeful community. We think that it would be healthy if students listened to and participated in such discussions, and came to understand the purposes for their schooling beyond the need to acquire more certificates.

These central convictions, rarely discussed these days, led us to agree also on the importance of a strong adult role—including parents, community, principals, and teachers—in the raising of children; on the importance of knowing young people well, if we are to influence their futures; on the risk of placing young people in anonymous, peer-dominated environments in which the adults in authority are disrespected and hold little genuine power to shape or make decisions; on the lack of time for faculty members to become professional experts in either the content or pedagogy of their craft; and on the important role played not only in schools, but also in American life, by unions, which not only represent the common interests of their members, but also serve as a necessary counterbalance to the power of huge blocs of money.

What unites us above all is our conviction that low-income children who live in urban centers are getting the worst of both of our approaches. New York City is a prominent example. No central, abiding definition of what constitutes a well-educated person unites or rationalizes the mandates that flow from central headquarters. The substance of education—history, science, social science, literature, art, music—never sufficiently honored in most of our schools, is being sacrificed to narrowly focused demands to produce higher test scores in reading and math.

Principals and teachers, regardless of their experience, are ordered to comply with mandates about how to teach—down to the minute in many elementary schools—undermining not only their professionalism, but often their common sense. A particular style of teaching has been elevated to a cult, for fear that teachers might err if given more leeway to make decisions and do what they think best. Fear is widespread among teachers, principals, and kids alike, none of whom have any strong countervailing institutions to count on for support.

Almost all the usual intervening mediators—parent organizations, unions, and local community organizations—have either been co-opted, purchased, or weakened, or find themselves under siege if they question the dominant model of corporate-style "reform." All the city's major universities, foundations, and business elites are joined together as cheerleaders, if not actual participants, offering no support or encouragement to watchdogs and dissidents. This allows these elites the opportunity to carry out their experiments on a grand, and they hope uninterrupted, "apolitical" scale, where everything can, at last, be aligned, in each and every school, from

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prekindergarten to grade 12, under the watchful eye of a single leader. If they can remain in power long enough, it is assumed (although what actually is assumed is not easy to find out) that they can create a new paradigm that no future change in leadership can undo.

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Along with the power to impose practice, we are concerned about the inability to discuss—or even discern—the nature of the long-term picture that our corporate leaders have in mind for the city's public schools. Is the "autonomy zone," which New York City has established for several score of mostly small schools, the wave of an undefined future, or is it just a place to park some difficult dissidents to quiet them while other schools are brought into compliance? New York's latest plan of "devolution" is once again the work of a small cadre of corporate-management experts, formulated without public input, not even from those most affected by it. In Chicago, one of many cities embarked on similar programs, autonomy is offered to private entrepreneurs who are invited to "remake" public schooling in union-free zones. It is hard to know what these experiments portend, whether they will lead to greater freedom for certain schools, or for most schools, or whether they are actually a first step towards dismantling the governance of public education.

New York City also has launched more than a hundred new schools of choice, especially at the secondary level, including dozens of schools open only to selected, high-achieving students. Selectivity is hardly a new practice in New York. Within-school tracking, after all, often served similar purposes. But the latest reforms contain disturbing and unacknowledged implications. Many students are assigned to "schools of choice" that the students themselves have not chosen. When big schools are closed down, thousands of students are relocated to the remaining large schools, causing extreme overcrowding since there are not enough seats for all of them in the new small schools. In some cases, the new schools have excluded students who require special education services or have limited English proficiency. And all of this is happening in the name of equity and "closing the achievement gap" and other unimpeachable rhetoric.

As we talked, we found ourselves deeply frustrated, even angry, as we realized that the so-called reforms of the day are too often a perverse distortion—one might say an "evil twin"—of the different ideas that each of us has advocated.

We acknowledged that our disagreements are both deep and important. Diane believes that national standards and a national curriculum would give everyone access to what only the elites now learn. She argues that the curriculum most schools teach is already a national curriculum, but is characterized by mediocrity and superficiality, based on boring textbooks, and assessed by tests that are as banal as the curriculum. Deborah agrees about the latter, but believes individual schools and families must have more, not less, power to decide not only how to teach, but also what is to be taught, and that schools must be able to respond to local circumstances, the passions of students and teachers, and the experimentation required to meet the astounding demand that "all children shall achieve what only a few once did."

Both of us also acknowledged that our choices involve risks. A national curriculum might be unwieldy and superficial ("a mile wide and an inch deep"—ironically, the charge directed at our current

incoherent and fragmented curriculum) as well as politically compromised, while a local one might reflect the low expectations of the local community as well as local foolishness and local biases (some schools, for example, might teach intelligent design). We agreed that the measurement of "results"—what constitutes intellectual achievement—has been badly distorted by current local and state tests, which undermine high-quality tasks and make a mockery of critical thinking. But we disagreed on whether a national test similar to the National Assessment of Educational Progress would be better, or whether some newly fashioned, open-ended, high-quality test was even feasible, much less desirable.

Deborah, more than Diane, worries about the impact on teaching, and on relationships among teachers and between teachers and their students, when the authority to examine ends, not just means, is outside teachers' influence, and how easily the one could end up dictating the other. She is even more concerned that being able to dictate what is taught could infringe on intellectual freedom; she prefers a free marketplace of diverse ideas about what is important and why. She argues that the imposition of one official version of history, for example, would override our different views. Why, she asks, do we assume that "local politics" is necessarily more suspect—more corrupt or petty—than national politics? This itself, she suggests, is a risky proposition for a society determined to nourish the democratic idea.

Deborah Meier, left, and Diane Ravitch urge more discussion of conflicting ideas about schooling, making educators models of democratic engagement.
—Todd Pitt for Education Week

Diane is more optimistic than Deborah about the possibility of crafting a lean curriculum that avoids any prescriptions about how to teach, and developing assessments to go with them. She points out that many other countries (such as Britain, France, and Japan) have done this without compromising intellectual freedom. In her view, intellectual freedom may be even more endangered by the continual dumbing-down of curriculum and tests that is the consequence of allowing every district and state to define science, mathematics, and other subjects in its own way, without regard to existing international standards. If one wants to find an "official history" that overrides our different views, she argues, just line up the leading history textbooks, and there it is.

Deborah worries that federalizing education policy would open up new opportunities for elites to impose their agendas, as is already happening in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and other locations. If textbooks already do so, she argues for less, not more, reliance on them. She is prepared to accept the risks of local, parochial agendas rather than risk the centralized power over ideas. She is concerned that federal control of education would lead to a further drying up, in community after community, of any sense of local voice, and the growth of a sense of powerlessness and alienation from public life. This alienation, she fears, is a more potent danger to democracy than any real or imagined loss of academic purity. She fears the arrival of federally approved texts and programs, all in the name of improving scores on nationally normed tests. She argues that federal control would lead to the same meddling and dumbing-down on a national scale that we now see at the local and state levels, and would increase a trend toward the privatization, as opposed to the

localization, of school choice. Teachers cannot pass on an imposed curriculum that does not connect to their own or their students' understanding, Deborah argues, and trying to do so distorts the very ends that such a curriculum seeks: thoughtful habits of mind.

Diane points out that the federal government has traditionally been the guarantor of equity in school affairs, because it is not ensnared in local politics. Any federal standards would aim to lift the performance of all American students, and to equalize life chances between haves and have-nots. If curriculum and standards were federally determined, rather than determined by the states, she argues, there would be no reason to require that texts or programs receive federal approval. In her view, the current system of low standards or no standards affirms a reign of mediocrity and legitimates the inequitable distribution of knowledge. However, national standards need not be federal standards, and they need not be compulsory. They might be developed by private groups, such as the College Board, and made available to schools that accept these goals. Even if national tests were administered by the U.S. Department of Education, as the NAEP tests are, Diane believes that experience has shown such tests to be less subject to the politics of dumbing-down than are local and state tests. At the very least, she argues, everyone would get accurate—or at least comparable—information about student and school performance. That, in itself, would be a huge improvement over the current situation, in which many states have lowered their standards to declare nonexistent gains in student learning.

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Deborah considers NAEP to be flawed in ways not dissimilar to most standardized tests, and she regards its cut scores and norms as equally politically determined and, at present, absurdly high. She notes that the view of the federal government as the guarantor of equity was the product of a particular time and place in our history, and sees no reason to assume that the federal government is likely to be better intentioned about education policy now, or in the future, than local communities are. She believes that certain conservatives favor national standards and testing because they are in power. Diane points out, however, that most conservatives are adamantly opposed to any national standards, while President Clinton actively supported a national system of standards and testing. In any event, she reasons, the development of national standards and tests is a project for the next decade, and should be outside partisan interests or control.

As for NAEP's norms and cut scores, Diane contends that the assessment's standards are entirely nonpolitical and benchmarked to international standards. Deborah thinks that Diane's hopes for unbiased, apolitical benchmarking are well-intentioned but inaccurate as a description of all the current tests, including NAEP. Having abandoned the normal curve, she believes, we're stuck with the fallibility of human judgment.

The establishment of a national curriculum and national testing has its dangers, Diane concedes, but the consequences of preserving the status quo may be even more dangerous for the nation's future. On this point—opposition to preserving the status quo—both Diane and Deborah agree. The question becomes one of difficult trade-offs and differing judgments of which dangers are worth risking. Putting these disagreements out onto the public stage is, we believe, essential to democratic decisionmaking.

So this is where our conversation left us—at the heart of a conflict that is not so much over our ideals, our hopes for our own children, or our dreams for America, but over the trade-offs we are prepared to risk, in the short run or the long run, to achieve our common vision.

As the lunch ended, Diane said to Deborah, "I would be glad to see my grandchildren attend a school that you led." Our macro-level differences do not interfere with our mutual respect for each other's work. That itself is something we hope our schools can help teach young people.

Our differences helped us consider ways to rethink our ideas and find places where those holding different views might compromise, and perhaps learn to live under one umbrella. What we hope to model is the idea of democratic engagement, the notion that citizens need to think about and debate their beliefs and values with others who do not necessarily share all of them. We want the issues connected to schooling to be a matter for discussion among all people who care.

We don't have it in our power to solve the problems that confront American education—not those that take place within the schoolhouse, much less those that have a direct impact on children's ability to learn, such as their unequal access to health care, housing, and myriad other life necessities. But we hope that we have it in our power to provoke the thinking that must precede, accompany, and follow any attempt to reform—perhaps, even better, to transform—our schools.

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Diane Ravitch is an education historian and a former assistant U.S. secretary of education under President George H.W. Bush. She was appointed by the Clinton administration to serve two terms on the National Assessment Governing Board, which supervises the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Now a research professor of education at NYU, she is a senior fellow at both the Brookings Institution, in Washington, and the Hoover Institution, in Stanford, Calif.

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