

In Schools We Trust: Creating Communities of Learning in an Era of Testing and Standardization

(Book Review)

Reviewer:

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Textbook Details:

In Schools We Trust: Creating Communities of Learning in an Era of Testing and Standardization

Deborah Meier
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Introduction

Progressive educator Deborah Meier, a legendary school founder and reformer addresses the issue of distrust in her book, *In Schools We Trust*. Policy makers and communities across America feel that the public schools are failing to meet our student's academic needs. The educational policy makers promote the notion that standardized tests are an effective tool to measure academic achievement in the nation's youth. Meier challenges this theory making the comparison between schools that rely upon standardized tests, versus small, self-governed schools. Meier focuses on her theory that schools flourish when classes are smaller, intimate, and when parents take an active role in their child's educational experience. Both parents and teachers can better assess learning in this educational setting as opposed to one that merely trains students to improve their tests taking techniques. This plea for educational reform asks parents and educators to re-evaluate the complete learning process in our schools with the use of standardized tests. The book focuses on the possibility of a different way to organize our children's schooling.

Deborah Meier is the MacArthur Award-winning founder of the Central Park East School in East Harlem and the Mission Hill School in Boston. She is the vice chair emeritus of the Coalition of Essential Schools and a fellow at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. Deborah Meier is the author of *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem*.

Part One: Trust and the Culture of Schools

In Part one of *In Schools We Trust*, Meier addresses the importance of children learning with and along side of adults. She argues that students today do not truly know their teachers, and the result is that they are not receiving the needed positive influence in their lives that teachers can provide. Children are missing these opportunities to interact on a personal level with their teachers because the system encourages a student's in-school world to be separated from their out-of-school world. Consequently, this does not allow students to display their expertise of subject matter in a fashion that is separate from textbook standard, and work with teachers to exhibit their passion for classroom curriculum in a personal manner.

In this section Meier also addresses the issue of parental involvement in schools. She examines how, what, and when parental involvement should be incorporated in a student's education. Meier goes into details of the personal dilemmas a parent faces when confronted with placing trust in their child's school.

Meier also takes an in-depth look at how race and cultural differences have an affect on students, parents, and their trust in the school system. Meier has spent a majority of her working career teaching in racially diverse communities characterized by their lower socio-economic status. She examines the dynamics that these issues play in the area of trust for the school system. Meier acknowledges the importance of being mindful of these differences. In addition, she encourages educators to understand that parents and communities are inclined to be less trusting of schools because of their unannounced awareness that the school system is overall controlled by the majority. These views lead parents and children to feel as though their education is not at the forefront of

priorities in comparison to children within the majority. Since these barriers are present, Meier encourages educators to acknowledge their presence and make a conscience “effort to create communities that resonate equally for people of color.”

Part Two: Testing and Trust

In part two of the book *In Schools We Trust*, Deborah Meier addresses the notion of cultural biases that are present in standardized tests. This assessment is made through comparing the answers that students from different cultural and racial backgrounds gave to various test questions with answers given by students linked with the majority. Meier addresses the unknown truth that such tests rate the knowledge that students acquire outside of the classroom in their communities and within their families, as opposed to what is essentially taught in a school setting. Meier focuses on the issue that standardized testing creates an academic institution that is chalk full of anxiety for the students in minority groups that are essentially set up to fail such tests. The end result is that standardized tests have placed underrepresented, minority students into an academic category that shuns them and closes their window of opportunity to be placed in the college preparatory classes that increase the possibility of college acceptance.

Meier also acknowledges the fact that schooling is organized around these tests, and has lead teachers to in essence “teach to the test.” Meier attests that such schooling is counterproductive to a student’s overall learning process because it basically conveys the message to students that in life there is only one right answer for every problem or question. These standardized tests are ineffective in measuring knowledge and intelligence, and truly have only served as a superficial means to measuring accountability, competence, or the success of a school. In part two of her book Meier states that standardized tests represent only a small piece of the puzzle that assesses a student’s knowledge, rather than the sole evidence of a student’s intellectual growth.

Part Three: A Broader Vision

In the final part of Deborah Meier’s book *In Schools We Trust*, Meier offers advice from her former experiences in relation to “scaling up” in our public schools. She believes that educators need to challenge their current way of thinking and trust in themselves and one another. She asserts that decisions should be made by those closest to the classrooms, rather than the politicians that are currently the final decision makers for our public schools. She works to convince her colleagues that are enraptured by standardized testing to promote the creation of small, intimate classrooms that encourage teachers, parents, and students to work closely together and produce a conducive learning environment that is essentially customized for each individual. Meier acknowledges a difference in every student and explains that a standardized test is incapable of showing individual strengths. It is here in the book that Meier sets forth her plea that educators and parents across America recognize the students as an individual rather than simply a test score that needs improvement.

Conclusion

In Schools We Trust is a well-written book that acknowledges the trouble and turmoil our public schools are facing with standardized testing. Deborah Meier uncovers and analyzes every layer of the concept trust in relation to American schools. She tackles the issues with standardized testing from the ground up, and offers new possibilities for educators to consider.

Deborah Meier speaks her message loud and clear through her book, that standardized testing is an ineffective means of measuring accountability and student knowledge. Meier has a wealth of experience to offer, and provides possible proven techniques she herself utilized and incorporated into the two schools she founded. If other educators read this beautifully written book with an open mind, and put her concepts into practice, it can possibly revolutionize the current state of our public school system.