

DEBORAH MEIER on why we must make
public education feel like a public enterprise again
—and how we should set about it

THE ROAD TO TRUST

In 1930 there were 200,000 school boards in the United States. Today, with twice as many citizens and three times as many students in our public schools, we have only 15,000. Once one of every 500 citizens sat on a school board; today it's one out of nearly 20,000. Once most of us knew a school board member personally; today it's rare to know one.

During the years I spent on a school board serving a population of more than 100,000 and responsible for 20 different schools, I never expected my fellow citizens to recognize me on the street or to share their concerns with me. I had barely any firsthand knowledge about what went on in most of those schools.

It's no wonder that most citizens aren't concerned about the demise of public education: It's been a long time since education felt like a public enterprise—except for who pays for it.

This shrinkage of public participation in school governance represents an enormous and utterly unnecessary loss—for our kids' learning and their relationship with the adult world, for the status of public education, for the relationship between citizens and their government, and for democracy itself. It's at the heart of what's gone wrong with education and what must be changed.

Bigger is not better

The demise of small districts was coincidental with the demise of small schools. The two phenomena together have led to a serious disconnect between young people and adults, between youth culture and adult culture.

There were good reasons to be concerned that small schools might be havens for parochial prejudices and insularity—and that larger consolidated districts would be able to offer greater variety and economies of scale. We were preparing our youngsters for both national and global citizenship; big schools and big districts were often seen as a way of enlarging young people's exposure to a wider range of options and offering them greater expertise and more specialized programs.

Furthermore, new state and federal mandates created compliance problems in small and isolated districts. How could a small school offer the kind of library, science labs, sports programs, range of foreign language opportunities, or Advanced Placement options that would be possible in a large school?

But we embarked on that path without considering the costs, either in how adults saw their responsibility for the education of the next generation, or in the growing disconnect between school and community and its impact on children's intellectual, social, and moral development. Citizenship requires a recognition of what it means to be a member of something—and we've forgotten that kids today have precious little experience being members of anything beyond their immediate family and their self-chosen peer group.

Parochialism certainly can stunt kids' growth and impede their sharing of larger societal norms and concerns. The solution to parochialism, however, isn't to destroy all small communities and institutions in favor of large, anonymous ones. When we look closely, we see that the consolidation and centralization of school districts actually made the problems they were supposed to cure even worse. Rather than expanding young people's sense of membership in the world, consolidation seriously endangered their feeling of community. And it didn't even save money: The evidence suggests that the cost per graduate of small schools is less.

Nor did consolidation lead to other hoped-for outcomes, such as greater ethnic, racial, and social class integration. Our progress on racial separatism has been substantial, if we look back as far as 1930, but in recent years we have been losing ground. As for social class, the big difference is that far more low-income children now attend school for longer periods of time—but rarely together with rich kids. And if they do attend the same schools, they rarely study in the same classes or belong to the same subgroups. For within the new large schools, kids have recreat-

ed their own small schools, made up of their like-minded and look-alike peers. You see them in the hallways and lunchrooms and on the playgrounds.

A world designed by strangers

Local communities are in far less danger of narrow parochialism today than in the past. The influence of television, computers and other technology, and the vast youth-savvy world of mass entertainment has altered the landscape of our lives, especially for children.

Few of today's youngsters lack awareness of the larger demands of society, as job requirements and college expectations are largely national in scope. We are inescapably connected by these new technologies, and there are more of them every year. It's not the Big World that kids are cut off from; increasingly, it's the one at their doorsteps—their own communities.

Education has barely acknowledged, much less begun to address, this sea change toward a new world of universalism run amok. We are not much of a match anymore for the educational impact of the national norms established not by schools, teachers, or churches, but by that great equalizer the mass media, with its relentless drive to turn our kids into world-class consumers.

By the time they are adolescents, our children are largely cut off from relationships with adults outside their immediate families—and stuck with each other in a world designed for them by strangers. They all are educated by the music, advertisements, and products designed to sell to an international youth market. They are carefully groomed to recognize ways to enhance their status in the race to look good, get ahead, be the most, have the most. What they do not have are very strong roots in any specific multiage community.

Democracy is messy—and that's good

We need schools where strong cross-generational relationships can be built around matters of importance to the world. Schools cannot do it alone—kids also need other nonschool communities—but creating such schools is a necessary start. These schools can exist only in communities that trust them. There is no shortcut. The authority needed to do the job requires trust. Trusting our schools cannot be a long-term goal in some utopian vision. If you don't trust the babysitter, no accountability scheme will make it safe to leave your child in her hands tonight. The only alternative is to stay home.

There is no way around it. We have to work harder at making our schools and teachers *trustworthy*. And that, in turn, means we need schools whose work we can easily see, whose governors are folks we know well, and whose graduates' lives we can track without complex databases or academic studies.

The business world offers little guidance in this task. The ways of business hardly work for business, where “buyer beware” is the primary response to demands for accountability.

We need to return schools to our fellow citizens—yes, ordinary citizens, with all their warts. The solution to the messiness of democracy is more of it—and more time set aside to make it

work. If we want to continue our grand experiment in American democracy, we are stuck depending on the people “to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion,” in Thomas Jefferson's words. And if they are not enlightened enough to do so, he said, “the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.”

That's what local school boards are intended to be all about. If we can't trust ordinary citizens with matters of local K-12 schooling, whatever can we trust them with?

Choice and voice

How to establish trust among school boards, schools, and the public? First, school boards should stop apologizing and demand more say-so on matters of importance. Moreover, boards need to divide and multiply until we return to the ratios we once enjoyed. There is no reason any school board should have authority over more than 2,500 students and at most 10 small schools.

Trust in schools can't grow unless principals, parents, teachers, and kids know each other well, and their work is accessible to the larger community. Likewise, the board members that oversee them must know the schools intimately—through first-hand engagement, not printouts and manipulatable bureaucratic data.

Maybe each school needs its own form of self-governance. At the Mission Hill School in Boston, our board is made up of five parent representatives, five staff representatives, five public members chosen jointly, and two students. And while the Boston School Committee has ultimate power, “in-between” (which is most of the time) it's our own board that makes the important decisions on policy, budget, and personnel. That's part of the secret of our success.

The state can set broad guidelines, and it can surely demand that schools make their standards explicit and the evidence of performance publicly accessible. It can insist on fairness for all citizens—and set out what such fairness requires. But each local board ought to be responsible for the details, including exactly how schools are held accountable to their constituents and what evidence will count toward the awarding of diplomas. There is precious little likelihood that a board will ignore what colleges and employers say, what the Educational Testing Service and other credentialing bodies lay down as norms, or what the mass media and national politicians and public figures claim needs to be done.

The state might reasonably require that sample populations of students be tested to look at indicators across localities. And it might require schools to submit every few years to a review of their work by a panel of expert and lay outsiders, whose opinions and analysis would be made public. Otherwise, let there be both voice and, where possible, choice—close to where children live. While choice allows folks to vote with their feet, voice allows them to vote in the most democratic sense—by going to the polls.

Both choice and voice strengthen the allegiance of communities to their schools. Not all people will get exactly what



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they want; but democracy is also all about compromises, building consensus, thinking about the other guy's needs and views, and a commitment to the larger community.

There will be acrimony, and there will be local fights. Hurrah, not alas. It is the habits of mind necessary for practicing and resolving disagreement—the mental toughness that democracy rests on—that kids most need to learn about in school. If we all agreed about everything, we wouldn't need democracy; we wouldn't need to learn how people work out differences.

School boards need to look the politicians, corporate heads, and foundation leaders square in the eye and remind them: This is what America is all about. And it just so happens it's what a strong and rigorous education requires—even if we don't get it right at first or all the time. That, too, is what America is all about.

Rebuilding trust

Our school boards need to turn their eyes to their real constituencies—not just to following the dictates of state and federal government micromanagers. That's not easy, of course. But it will be the foundation of a powerful coalition of school people and local school boards creating trustworthy schools.

There is no way to give all kids a serious and high-quality education unless and until we make their schools worthy of trust—even as we acknowledge the need for skepticism, openness, review, and feedback. The more these two groups—educators and school boards—act as though they deserve distrust, the less they'll be trusted. The Texas “miracle” has not led to one whit more trust in its schools. No sooner did kids meet the requirements of its tightly controlled state system than new, even tighter controls followed. Distrust feeds distrust.

Here's the rub: The same reasons that we need to trust local school boards—for better or worse—apply to how school boards need to relate to the faculties and families in their schools. Micromanaging doesn't work at this level either. But schools need to accept the fact that asking for explanations and offering tough criticism is not micromanaging. In fact, all professionals need to openly defend their work, even in settings that are essentially supportive. Getting that balance right is difficult, and it won't always work. Some local boards will be too passive and some too active; some will go from one stance to

another, depending on the issues.

But it can be done. I've seen it happen, in communities all across this country. There are at least four critical first steps on the road to trust:

1. Building a communitywide consensus about the essential purposes of schools and education—about what comes first
2. Agreeing on what to do about minority viewpoints that can't comfortably fit under the same roof—on how to provide the needed choices
3. Selecting the key educational leaders to carry out the work in ways that honor the views of both families and professional staff
4. Providing these leaders with the kind of respect and freedom they need to do the job.

There are no shortcuts. When we pretend that efficiency means we don't have to get to know each other, when we depend on test scores or other indirect forms of data to avoid having to look closely at what kids are actually doing, we undermine trust. At best, standardized tests measure only a very small portion of what is vital for adult success in contemporary life. They totally ignore vast areas of critical significance (such as oral language, teamwork, reliability, initiative, and judgment). We wouldn't trust a doctor who made life-or-death decisions about our treatment by looking at only one test result.

As in medicine, meaningful assessment and diagnosis in education depend on parents and professionals having the time to examine an array of interesting data. School boards need to be engaged in helping the community gather and then understand the data. The data should include that all-too-rare information about what happens to graduates when they become adults. For example, what percentage of young adults vote? Finally, board members and educators should use this information to engage the public in tough and important conversations about our children.

It has never been easy, and it never will be. There are times when expertise overrules popular opinion, and vice versa. But we cannot and will not do a better job of resolving these conflicts by getting rid of the crucial local voice of the people. We cannot hope to raise a generation of thoughtful citizens in schools where adults are not themselves viewed as thoughtful citizens.

Schools need to be governed in ways that honor the same intellectual and social skills we expect our children to master, and—ideally—in ways the young can see, hear, and respect. It's nice when ends and means can come together in this way, and it's the most powerful form of education when they do. Will it be neat and orderly? Probably not. But democracy is and ever was messy, problematic, and always a work in progress.

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