Continuity and Change
In the Pursuit of a Democratic Public Mission for Our Schools

An essential mission of schools, Mr. Bellamy and Mr. Goodlad argue, is ensuring that each new generation understands the principles and institutions that support democratic life. Schools require vigilant stewardship to serve this public purpose. Much of the needed work is local, but it depends on new and challenging collaborations among education professionals, local public groups, and policy makers.

BY G. THOMAS BELLAMY AND JOHN I. GOODLAD

The early immigrant landowners in what is now New England taxed themselves to provide schools for the less-fortunate newcomers, most of whom they employed. Why? For their own children, the landowners were able to provide tutors, support private academies, or make arrangements to have them schooled in the homelands they had left behind. Were they simply compassionate people?

Records show a public purpose — that of “civilizing” these children of newcomers in schools charged with teaching the laws of the land and supplementing the church in instilling certain moral principles and behaviors. Presumably, a strong motivation was the inevitability of living with everyone’s children. The people of that era saw no need to consider the religious beliefs and moral principles of other churches and cultures. That reality had not yet begun to complicate the work of schooling. Nor had today’s global complexities of human diversity made their appearance when the Founders met to forge the legal and moral framework of the American democracy. Nor did the Founders seek to define a public purpose for the schools of this democracy. Schooling as such was

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not on their agenda. But something more comprehensive and complex was: the delineation of the freedoms and responsibilities of a democratic public.

There was, however, in the separate writing of several leaders at the time, the clear assumption that a democratic public is a well-educated public — but not necessarily a much-schooled one. As philosopher Jane Roland Martin makes clear, people become educated not merely by attending school but by the total experience of their lives. As part of this experience, “we the people” must endeavor to ensure a nonnegotiable mission for our schools that cultivates democratic belief and action in the young. No other agency in our culture is capable of or charged with this challenging agenda.

A CHALLENGING DEMOCRATIC MISSION

Democracies are premised on the idea that human differences can be accommodated, even great differences in fundamental beliefs. This end is accomplished through mutual tolerance, commitment to resolving disagreements by means of open dialogue, and acquiescence to majority decision making within constitutional protections for individual and minority rights. Education has special responsibilities in democratic societies because all the decisions underlying public institutions are subject to ongoing review. Each new majority can amend the constitution, change the laws, shift public funding to new priorities, undo checks and balances, and allow values of liberty and tolerance to wane. Education is essential, then, to give each generation an understanding of the principles and institutions that support a democratic society.

A four-part mission for schools in a democracy responds to this need for continuing renewal of the social and institutional underpinnings of democratic life: 1) providing equal access to high-quality, school-based learning for the young; 2) promoting responsible stewardship of schools and universities; 3) improving teaching and learning through pedagogy that nurtures and challenges all learners; and 4) providing students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to become fully engaged participants in a democratic society.

A TRIPARTITE APPROACH TO CHANGE

While we stand by our conviction that schooling requires constant stewardship to fulfill the four-part mission of renewing the underpinnings of democratic life and while the various groups that constitute the culture of schooling have not come to agreement on any mission, we must not let schools themselves off the hook. A substantial body of inquiry has revealed that they, too, lack educational mission, both individually and collectively. Indeed, some of this research leads to the conclusion that school-based educators give little thought to the idea that schools have a public purpose and seem unaware of any public agreement on the general expectations that we noted above. There is little in the education of educators that orients teachers and administrators to such public expectations or to the critical need for their schools to prepare the young for re-
sponsible citizenship in a democratic society.

Having participated in some of this inquiry and being well aware of studies in addition to their own, the founders of the Center for Educational Renewal at the University of Washington and later of the nonprofit Institute for Educational Inquiry (IEI) forged the Agenda for Education in a Democracy. The practical goal was to form a tripartite partnership of the college of education, the departments of the arts and sciences in several universities, and a clutch of nearby elementary and secondary schools that provided student teaching experiences for future teachers. Research showed that all three of these prospective partners already participated in teacher education programs but rarely planned and worked together for common ends. From these efforts was born a dynamic national educational enterprise—the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER). Both of us have long histories of involvement with refining the agenda and supporting the NNER school/university partnerships that it guides.

UNIVERSITIES AND SCHOOLS: PARTNERS FOR CHANGE

Both IEI and NNER have devoted much of the last two decades to addressing the discrepancy between the schools and the universities we have and those we need to have if democracy is to flourish. Unlike others who find schools wanting and in need of renewal, these organizations have focused on the local processes through which school goals are negotiated, school character is determined, and school programs are prioritized. While policy makers have sought incentives, sanctions, and structures that could control schools from the statehouse, while many professional educators have sought generic programs and models to promote school improvement from the universities, and while entrepreneurs have created products and consulting models to stimulate change, NNER and IEI have emphasized building local capacity to create schools and educator-preparing programs that can renew themselves.

This approach reflects both a measure of pessimism about remotely controlled reform and a belief that schools are more like gardens than machines: they are never “fixed” once and for all. Every community brings its own combination of student aspirations, family expectations, teachers and educational leaders, businesses that see commercial opportunities in schools, and employers who hope for particular kinds of graduates. And every community has its own levels of willingness to pay for basics and extras. Interactions involving this mix of people and interests create the schools we have now, and renewal of those schools similarly depends on how local people and institutions interact in the future. Schools require constant minding, and they thrive in proportion to the quality of this local attention.

THE TRIPARTITE CHALLENGE

To support local educational renewal, NNER and IEI have emphasized the creative capacities that emerge when those involved in education cross traditional boundaries and engage with one another to pursue opportunities for improvement. The work has linked three parts of the education profession that have typically worked with quite different institutional pressures and constraints but that, in the end, are dependent on one another: PK-12 schools, university colleges of education, and university colleges of arts and sciences. Each of these groups is essential for healthy and renewing schools. Together, they form a continuum that can ensure succeeding generations of excellent teachers.

An important reason for this three-part focus was the evidence from our national studies that showed that, while leaders of all three groups were pursuing important changes, the improvements launched by any one group were often stymied locally by inaction or misguided action on the part of the other two. For example, elementary and secondary schools were being challenged by wide-ranging policies designed to effect new approaches, but these frequently faltered when newly prepared graduates of schools of education were familiar only with more traditional strategies. Schools of education, in turn, could adjust their curriculum only as much as their graduates’ employers—school districts—would support. For their part, the arts and sciences faculties were engaged in their efforts to integrate knowledge across disciplines and often felt overloaded in providing general education to students ill prepared for college studies.

The IEI and NNER strategy for institutional renewal involved finding ways to bring these three groups together in dialogue aimed at their simultaneous renewal and renewal of the education of educators. To support this community-level tripartite work, IEI and NNER settings built an integrated strategy that combined leadership development, structures to facilitate collaboration, and local inquiry that led to action. Networks of mutual support, including NNER and other groups, were designed to create a community of innovation, in which regular communication, high standards, and openness to critique stimulated quality and creativity in renewal. It is important to bear in mind that the NNER settings are not intended to be replicas of a model for
improving student learning or teacher development. Instead, these are local partnerships in which communities share a commitment to the four-part mission of education in a democracy and bring a collaborative process to seeking innovative approaches to their own local issues and priorities.

The cumulative result of work in the various NNER settings has helped to foster broad professional recognition of the importance of new partnerships in the preparation of educators, the value of arts and sciences engagement with public schools, current issues related to the equity of learning opportunities in economically and culturally diverse schools, the impact of the university’s general education program on teacher education, and the potential for more democratically oriented educational institutions.

**CHANGING TIMES**

Despite the influence that these efforts have had within the education profession, they are not central to current conversations about schooling among the general public or in policy communities. Like much of the institutional infrastructure supporting professional education, these tripartite partnerships have been buffeted by federal policies that redefine educational success in terms of success on state tests and that subjugate other educational goals to the efficient pursuit of test scores.

But while policy makers responded to globalization with a focus on the skills needed for the new economy, the local impacts of globalization in the NNER settings have been quite different, and the resulting pressures on schools often conflict with national policy directions. For example, many families are concerned that today’s easy access to all kinds of information limits family influence and threatens their ability to pass on cultures and religious beliefs. Not surprisingly, they want schools that can support — or at least not counteract — the family’s socialization efforts. Other families see international competition for jobs as a threat to their children’s future standard of living, and they pressure schools to concentrate resources on advanced programs and to create special credentials that will offer competitive advantages to those who earn them. Still other families, particularly those with limited resources, depend on the schools for basic education and daytime child care, and they expect that these services will be provided with sensitivity to cultural, linguistic, and economic differences.

The response of the various NNER settings to the crosscurrents of national policies and local pressures is instructive. Some have focused on those left behind by current policies and practices, directing renewed efforts toward promoting social justice in their partnership activities and through the commitments of new educators who receive their preparation in the partnership. Others have attended more to engagement with local communities, recognizing that the credibility and success of schools depend on striking a new balance among competing local priorities and finding new bases of support for education’s public purposes. Still others have increased their engagement in local and state policy discussions in an effort to broaden the definition of quality schooling and quality teaching. And others have focused more on school leaders, such as principals, to ensure that they become the new focus of public accountability and advocacy.

**ANOTHER TRIPARTITE CHALLENGE**

The developments we have written about so far are local actions, led by people working together to address practical needs in their own communities. But they also serve as important indicators of new challenges facing public education and educators who believe that schools have an important public purpose in a democratic society. While the existing tripartite group — schools, colleges of education, and colleges of arts and sciences — has neither finished its work nor exhausted its opportunities, these new challenges suggest other groups whose participation is needed and new boundaries that must be spanned in order for local school renewal to succeed.

Today, the work of advancing the public purposes of education depends on collaboration and boundary-crossing among the education profession, policy makers, and local community groups. As with our first tripartite challenge, each of these groups is already engaged in its own efforts to improve schools, and each can stymie the improvements initiated by the other groups. Policy makers can create mandates, incentives, and new structures, but local citizens must ultimately agree to trust schools with their children and support them with their taxes. Similarly, whatever policy mak-
ers decide, educators ultimately must operate the schools where the interactions among teachers, children, and curricula actually occur. Policy makers can make it so bureaucratic or difficult to act on local priorities or professional judgment that nothing changes. And both educators and policy makers can undermine the preferences of local organizations. Moreover, each of these groups contains its own internal differences. Consequently, interactions among them need to be broadly based and ongoing if schools are to continue to improve and adapt to shifts in priorities.

What makes this challenge that goes beyond school/university partnerships so important is that global economic changes are pushing these more comprehensive groups further and further apart. Policy makers have strong incentives to focus on immediate threats, and so their emphasis on educational productivity for economic competitiveness is not surprising. Locally, the widespread immigration and new technologies that have accompanied globalization are creating sometimes dramatic demographic shifts that upend long-standing community traditions and create unfamiliar barriers to civic collaboration on schools and other local services. For their part, educators see schools — where immigration and economic differences are perhaps more apparent than in other parts of society — that are increasingly more diverse than before. As a group, educators have responded quite differently than have policy makers, emphasizing equity and social justice rather than economic competitiveness as guiding values for schooling.

**COLLABORATION**

Whatever the differences within and among groups, the public purposes of education depend on collaboration. Without it, schools are yanked back and forth as different groups gain the spotlight. With each shift in priorities comes pressure for a fresh start, which entails a loss of necessary infrastructure and capacity that schools must build only gradually. The losses associated with each swing of the priority pendulum argue for a more stable alternative. High-quality schools are less likely to result from one group’s gaining enough power to define school priorities “once and for all” than from continued small adjustments to goals that emerge from the informal democracy of local dialogue.

Local educational renewal is still a contrarian strategy. Policy makers, funding agencies, and external professional groups all seem more easily convinced to work toward a particular group’s goals than toward sustainable local processes that involve mutual adjustments. Nevertheless, much of what is at stake in schooling is local and depends on what individual families want their children to learn and what communities want their schools to be. As communities work out differences in their priorities for student learning and school character, policy makers, education professionals, and others with broader interests can contribute to the conversations, but they cannot control the outcomes from afar.

Local deliberation about school priorities is still the foundation for educational renewal. But as communities have become more diverse and less willing to give unquestioning acceptance to either education professionals or policy makers, the participants in educational renewal are necessarily more comprehensive than before. Success depends less on collaboration across boundaries in the education profession and more on effective deliberation among a school’s many publics, with participation and sponsorship by both professionals and policy makers.

**IS EDUCATIONAL RENEWAL STILL POSSIBLE?**

The differences within and among local citizens’ groups, education professionals, and policy makers have become so great that many question whether local decision making can produce high-quality schools. Now-familiar attacks on elected school boards, state takeovers of school systems, and contracts with corporations to manage school districts all show a loss of confidence in decision making through the local representative democracy of school boards. Similar pressures exist to bypass the informal democracy of local conversations about priorities for individual schools. Some argue, for example, that high-quality schools can be achieved only through stratification — developing entrepreneurial schools of choice that attract like-minded families to particular school experiences. Others believe that common support for schools can be achieved only by limiting school goals to a narrow academic focus and leaving other developmental concerns to the
family and religious or social institutions. The alternative — local renewal that relies on deliberative processes to resolve differences among groups interested in a school’s work — has certainly become more complex and difficult. Competing priorities complicate deliberation about schools, and it is not clear exactly where and how the needed community conversations can occur. It is easy to appreciate the appeal of seemingly easier alternatives that do not require negotiation of differences.

What gives us hope that local educational renewal is still possible is the simple fact of interdependence. None of those involved in the effort to create high-quality schools can succeed without the others. As a result, each ultimately has reason to support local deliberation. Both policy makers and educators depend on public trust for their legitimacy and influence. Policy makers, though susceptible to influence from special interests, need the support of citizens in elections to sustain their priorities. Similarly, while educators may have collective professional norms and goals, the institutional structure of state licensing and university preparation that supports education as a profession depends on public support and enabling policies. Consequently, we believe that many professionals and policy makers will find it important to sponsor local deliberative processes and commit to supporting the decisions reached through civic processes.

For their part, local groups may be tempted to opt out of public schools and join less diverse negotiations about school purposes and priorities in schools of choice. But, as David Labaree has noted, exit from the public schools is only partial. In a democratic society, everyone is affected by what schools accomplish as they educate the majority of each generation’s voters, jurors, and taxpayers. So all have reason to stay involved in the public conversation about school quality. Consequently, while local renewal seems to be the most promising way to achieve the democratic purposes of education, it is unlikely to develop spontaneously to a sufficient level to influence the national conversation about school quality. Thus a national support strategy seems necessary to help interested communities build successful approaches for civic collaboration around schooling, share these with one another, and communicate the results.

The strategies that evolved as IEI and NNER sought to advance school renewal from within the education profession provide a useful foundation for supporting a more broadly based renewal effort. For example, collaborative decision making and collective action depend on leaders who can cross boundaries within and among the various groups involved in setting school priorities. The ability to frame issues in ways that support broad participation, bridge communication gaps across groups, and facilitate local deliberations is critical, but often missing. Consequently, one important way to support local renewal is by identifying individuals who are attempting such cross-sector leadership, connecting them with one another, and offering learning experiences related to local challenges. Leadership development has been central to the IEI strategy of supporting renewal through collaboration within the education profession and seems even more important in fostering the development of leaders who can facilitate broader local deliberations about school quality.

A second support strategy follows from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s observation that creativity depends on a supportive context with high expectations. Local renewal does require creative solutions to seemingly intractable problems. Connecting renewing communities to others in a network of mutual support and challenge can support local renewal. Just as NNER has connected settings where various components of the education profession are working together to solve local problems, a network of settings engaged in broader cross-sector renewal efforts could establish a context that supports creative solutions and encourages

A NATIONAL SUPPORT STRATEGY FOR EDUCATIONAL RENEWAL

Local educational renewal depends on sustained involvement in often difficult dialogue. While this occurs readily in some communities, it is less common, Robert Putnam notes, as communities grow more diverse (one might say, just when it is most needed). Consequently, while local renewal seems to be the most promising way to achieve the democratic purposes of education, it is unlikely to develop spontaneously to a sufficient level to influence the national conversation about school quality. Thus a national support strategy seems necessary to help interested communities build successful approaches for civic collaboration around schooling, share these with one another, and communicate the results.

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continued commitment to the process.

A third way to support local renewal involves developing broad frameworks and mechanisms that communities can use to organize their dialogues about schools. For example, partner schools and centers of pedagogy provide such structures for local cross-sector collaboration within the education profession, creating opportunities for dialogue about emerging local problems. Similar mechanisms are now needed to support cross-sector dialogue in the larger community, as schools address emerging challenges and goals.

A fourth strategy for supporting renewal involves helping communities study the status of education locally in order to identify areas where current realities do not match shared values. Such help could involve, for example, sharing reports across communities, developing indicators and measures for communitywide educational “dashboards,” and organizing available data for public discussion. Like the inquiry projects supported in our earlier tripartite work, this aspect of a support strategy helps communities focus on their unique issues and needs rather than on fads and programs that originated elsewhere.

Thankfully, no policy-making body has yet imposed on local communities and school/university partnerships a mandated design for the proposed collaboration and its work. Such a mandate would present us with a contradiction so massive that it would stifle even the hope for advancing what should be a nonnegotiable agenda of education for democracy. So let us begin the conversation about school renewal that we so desperately need.

1. For a penetrating analysis of the nature, extent, and power of education outside of schools, see Jane Roland Martin, Educational Metamorphoses (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).


3. For further discussion of these new challenges and the need for collaboration among the three major groups of players, see G. Thomas Bellamy et al., Principal Accomplishments: How School Leaders Succeed (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007).


10. The need for and nature of this conversation, its role in advancing the democratic purpose of education, the difficulties to be overcome in the necessary collaboration, and examples of successful progress are discussed in John I. Goodlad, Roger Soder, and Bonnie McDaniel, eds., Education and the Making of a Democratic People (Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm Publishers, 2008).
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