

A Conversation about Schools with *Deborah Meier*

Deborah Meier is the principal of the Mission Hill School in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood and the founder of Central Park East, a network of public schools in New York City's East Harlem neighborhood. Meier is the author of the book, *"The Power of Their Ideas, Lessons from a Small School in Harlem."* She recently shared her views on key issues with CONNECTION.

On Schools and the Economy

When the nation's competitiveness was in question, public schools were routinely blamed. Now, despite the economic boom, schools get no congratulations. In fact, they are subjected to merciless attack. It's hard to get to the nub of the criticism since it presents itself in different guises. If it's not the economy, then it's equity. And if not equity, it's toughness or character. The schools are attacked for not providing programs for the gifted even as they are under fire for having different expectations of different folks. It's puzzling.

On the Democratization of Education

The impact of the G.I. Bill, the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the general postwar growth in citizens' aspirations for the good things in life sparked a revolution in expectations. At the turn of the last century, our great grandparents took it on faith that only a very small elite—perhaps 3 percent of their generation—had the capacity for high-level reasoning. Few went to high school; fewer still stayed through graduation. As late as 1960, it was thought that maybe 20 percent should aspire to a liberal arts (as opposed to vocational) college education.

By the 1970s, we largely accepted the idea that all students should aspire to college. But we undertook these revolutionary changes in expectations with barely a nod to their implications, as



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though a change in rhetoric were the same as a change of mind and heart. We expected to undo the prejudiced assumptions underlying past elitism overnight. Then we seemed surprised and irritated by the difficulty in translating these expectations into reality.

On the Blame Game

Raising standardized test scores and closing testing gaps between high and low achievers began to replace all other objectives on the way to a more egalitarian system. Reformers attached ever higher stakes to test scores and threatened dire consequences for kids and teachers who failed to show progress. In the process, they made "teaching to the test" a legitimate pedagogical technique.

Anyone who noted that the emperor was wearing no clothes—that the solutions being offered were missing the point—was labeled racist or elitist. Critics affiliated with public institutions were judged to be whiners. Editorial writers and governors dismissed the skeptics as defensive members of some self-interested education establishment.

The blame game undermines the accomplishments that have been achieved in K-12 and post-secondary education alike. U.S. colleges were no better prepared for the revolution in expectations than were public schools. Stung by criticism from legislators, corporate CEOs and the media for not

immediately achieving egalitarian outcomes at the postsecondary level, many academics joined the search for someone to blame, preferably someone predisposed to accept blame. College professors blamed high schools. High schools blamed elementary schools. And elementary schools blamed mother. Or television.

No one noticed that, for all our failings, the United States was still doing comparatively well. We taught students how to read at an unprecedented rate—second only to Finland in reading test scores by fourth grade and not far behind in math and science among students in elementary grades. It turned out that both phonics and whole language approaches worked. But by the 1980s, celebrating public schools had become politically incorrect—a refuge for folks resisting change. The media ignored the successes and instead reported a flurry of half-truths about the decline of schools.

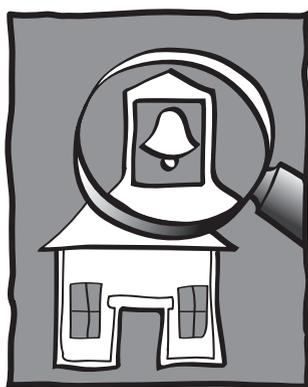
Considering the length and depth of the assault, support for local schools—the ones folks know best—has remained surprisingly high. About half the general public gave local public schools an A or B in a recent *Phi Delta Kappan* poll, while only 20 percent gave public schools *nationally* an A or B. Notably, three-quarters of those polled also favored working within the existing system to improve schools rather than finding an alternative.

On Reform Efforts

By the 1980s, many of the critics thought the time was ripe to engage in some radical experiments in curriculum and pedagogy. The Coalition of Essential Schools, founded in 1984, was deemed by many to be unrealistic and utopian for suggesting that America abandon large, comprehensive high schools for more intimate, focused academies. Yet, the coalition attracted more than 1,000 schools to its banner in fairly short order. Other radical innovations designed to raise the intellectual level of high schools—for example the Paduaia proposal, Harvard's Project Zero or other break-the-mold high school

redesigns sponsored by New American Schools—also attracted widespread interest and high hopes.

These reformers, however, discovered powerful obstacles to substantial reform. Neither practitioners, parents nor school committees jumped on board. On the whole, both K-12 and postsecondary educators dabbled with real change, postponing larger steps while their constituents got accustomed to the new ideas. Only a few were able to take the big steps, although when and where they did,



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the results were impressive. But opposition from many fronts remained powerful through the '80s and early '90s.

These delays met with frustration. "Can we afford to wait?" people wondered. Having stirred up talk of crisis in the classroom, those farthest from the action—legislators, CEOs and think tank pundits—hammered out their own solutions. The trouble, they decided, lies with the people who know the kids best—their parents and their teachers. Let them be gone.

Change, they declared, must come from elsewhere. And so they stepped up a process of removing the public from public schools. (In this, they were cynically joined by those who believe that only marketplace schooling can solve our problems, but that first they must prove how rotten the present system is.)

In less than half a century, the number of U.S. school boards had shrunk from more than 200,000 to fewer than 20,000 (a development ironically championed by liberals who view the boards, often with good reason, as founts of ignorance, racism and right-wing fundamentalism). It now became necessary, they argued, to take the plunge and remove parents and teachers from all big-time policy decisions as well. Local folks had their chance and failed. It was time for executives and politicians to step in and straighten out the mess.

But educators hadn't made a mess. They took on a challenge to educate all children to levels of intellectual rigor that few had ever been expected to reach. It will take more than one generation of impatient patience to achieve serious results on a large scale. To pretend we can get there faster flies in the face of what we know about human behavior and historical experience with top-down revolutions that propose to change such behavior by fiat.

On Raising Standards

Even hardnosed businessmen know better than to try to establish standards in the way we have proceeded lately in schools. They know that when those on the frontlines feel no moral responsibility for their work and view ever shifting policies and practices as silly or offensive to their dignity, the result is resistance, sabotage and cheating. This applies to teachers and students as well. The best innovations and the worst get treated alike—as educators try to avoid swinging from one top-down fad to another.

There's nothing wrong with introducing external ideas, nor with

requiring schools and communities to make public their standards, nor with monitoring them in public ways—if it's done right. Even standardized test scores can be useful as one source of evidence. But better still would be the oversight of *insiders* who know the kids and their work—the teachers and students' families, for example—and *outsiders* of all sorts prepared to ask difficult questions, to play the role of provocateur. *Is this really what you call quality work? How about comparing it to what the school down the street calls quality? How come the girls are always doing better than the boys? How come students who have been with you the longest do the worst?*

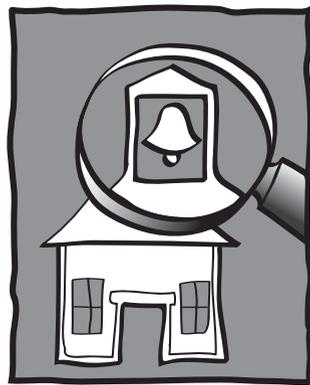
Armed with evidence gathered and presented by the school itself and through observation and interviews with different constituents, these outsiders can provide a healthy antidote to the self-interest and parochialism that insiders might bring to the task. That's how we did it at the public high school I was principal of in East Harlem. It was the toughest and most enlightening system of all: strongminded teachers answering to strongminded critics. That's also what Boston's pilot schools—like the Mission Hill School—undergo every four to five years. Next year, it's our turn. Does it make us nervous? Of course. Nothing is as powerful as the opinion of one's peers, especially when made public to the community. But it's also a learning experience that raises our consciousness of our own work and improves our capacity to make sound judgments.

On Haves and Have-Nots

Of course, advantaged families give their kids every opportunity they can to keep up, get ahead or simply live a good life. So do disadvantaged families. But the more advantages one brings to this central task of parenting, the more successful one's offspring are likely to be. This is hardly rocket science. In the less than one-fifth of a youngster's waking hours that are spent in school, not all these

differences can be overcome—even if schools offer an equal chance to all.

Public schools cannot and should not be expected to close all the gaps between the *haves* and *have-nots* that the larger society seems bent on widening. But schools can, and should, use their limited time to prevent the disadvantages that kids come to school with from becoming more serious lifetime handicaps.



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On a Successful Model

At Central Park East, a network of East Harlem public schools I was involved in founding 25 years ago, the success rate of sixth-grade graduates 10 years later far surpassed the demographic odds. These results were replicated in the Central Park East Secondary School organized a decade later. In terms of high school graduation, college attendance and college graduation rates, as well as other life-success indicators, Bruner Foundation researchers concluded that the schools were

not only a cheap solution, but a taxpayers' bonanza.

When interviewed many years later, both students and their families described the differences between their experiences and those of their less successful East Harlem neighbors. The students attributed their success to the fact that at Central Park East, they had close relationships with interesting, empowered teachers. No teacher in the high school, for example, was responsible for more than 50 students. At other nearby schools, teachers worked with as many as 170 students per semester. And with only 500 students in all, Central Park East was small enough for everyone to know everyone.

Students were engaged by in-depth studies in a few focused areas rather than a smorgasbord a mile wide and an inch deep. They still remembered each school year in detail. They were convinced that their survival over the many tough years that lay ahead depended upon the strong personal passions and relationships that the school had honored and nurtured. The school also had helped them weave a host of adults into a support network, aided by community service and school-to-work programs, as well as music classes, drama clubs and extended lab work.

Many also noted that Central Park East was a school where families and teachers were partners and where students felt respected as individuals with different styles and concerns. Ongoing teacher-family ties helped make allies out of otherwise edgy rivals. Every family had at least one full-time staff member designated as its special ally for two years or more. Kids and their parents said they felt they had belonged to a powerful little community that stood for something. And its strength added to their own personal staying power. The students described the intervening years as difficult. But they attributed their perseverance to the kind of schooling we had offered so many years earlier. Studies of other successful schools point to similar effects. They are not miracles. They are distinctly "replicable" if we take them seriously.

At the same time, we must make sure that pressure to cover more and more material does not reduce opportunities for students and teachers to get to know each other well. Furthermore, as teachers have less say in what and how they teach, their knowledge of their students and their subject matter seems more and more superfluous. When teachers are seen as mere conduits of other people's expertise, the alienation between student and teacher grows apace.

At Central Park East, we insisted that it was our job to model what it was like to be responsible citizens of our school. Unfortunately, few of the colleges that served the least-advantaged and weakest of our students operated as we did. The students who attended the city and state colleges were often unknown to faculty members. Few were the faculty who saw students as partners in an intellectual pursuit—belonging to an intergenerational community.

In fact, America's non-elite public institutions display much of the madness that Ted Sizer finds in the nation's comprehensive high schools, where the faculty are in much the same situation as Sizer's fictional high school teacher Horace, who "knew some of his students well, but most of them only as semi-strangers passing through." Many of our colleges are also too big, too impersonal and too anonymous. They too cater to every variety of real or presumed need as they process students in pursuit of a magic credential. Sure, they do more good than harm, but less good than they could.

Graduates of Central Park East used to say that we prepared them well for small private colleges, but less well for large, impersonal public colleges where the least successful ended up. The best-prepared and most socially able kids at large colleges find a niche that sustains them, but the most fragile do not. If small schools are good for young people, maybe they're good for older ones too—even folks as old as us, their teachers.

Shouldn't all educators join together to bring the advantages of a powerful school composed of powerful adults

to all children regardless of where they start from? Shouldn't this be a common task for all educators ranging from kindergarten teachers to college professors? The impulse that makes us teachers—love for our subject matter, love for our students and high regard for the intellectual demands of democracy—are not so different. We have more in common than we usually imagine.

On Teachers and Professors

College professors complain about what high school teachers forgot to teach. Many are happy to distance themselves from both their own colleagues in schools of education and from K-12 educators—to our mutual harm. Postsecondary educators and their K-12 counterparts are part of a single, larger public education enterprise. Our challenges as educators are almost identical.

Yet we've allowed mischief-makers in high places—and our natural desire to avoid being blamed—to divide us by implying that the school's focus on "the child" is a disservice to the university's focus on "the disciplines." But the intellectual power we all seek for children requires a combination of the two: abiding personal relationships between generations and a focus on powerful subject matter.

Meanwhile, the notion of academic freedom, which buttresses the independence of college professors, has rarely been espoused with fervor for high school faculty. And now both are under attack and likely to lose some of the independence they need more than ever in the face of unprecedented demands for intellectual rigor and high standards.