

Recalling Public Schooling's Larger Aims

BY SHELDON H. BERMAN



When I was 10 years old, I watched the Edward R. Murrow television special “Harvest of Shame” about hunger in America. Although I had heard discussions of injustice, discrimination and poverty before, this graphic exposé left an indelible impression. It awakened both my awareness of social injustice and a desire to correct it — convictions that have remained constant for more than half a century.

Eventually these interests led me to research the development of social consciousness and social responsibility in young people. I found that children become aware of the socio-political world earlier than we imagine, and their social and moral sensibilities are more advanced than we think. Through play, classroom activities and family interactions, children try to make sense of their role in the world. Often in unspoken ways they wonder, do I have a meaningful place in the world? Are there values I can commit to and people I can stand with? Will my efforts make a difference?

From watching and listening to the adults around them, children develop an internal theory of how society works, who has power and influence and what impact an individual can have. In essence, the degree to which children experience a connection to the world influences their interest in participating in that world, particularly their concern and empathy for others and their overall sense of efficacy.

Navigating Complexity

Society, politics and civic engagement have become more complex, and problems seem



Eugene, Ore., Superintendent Sheldon Berman wants public education’s democratizing processes restored to their pre-eminent berth.

more intractable than during the war on poverty and the early civil rights movement. If the past several decades presage the decades to come, the world will increasingly become an interconnected planet marked by exponential change as well as conflict. In helping students navigate and prepare for a world in which personal, career, societal and political change is the norm, how should we define the purpose of education?

When change is the constant, it’s the meta-cognitive skills that enable one to function well — fluency in literacy and numeracy, adaptive flexibility, persistence, critical analysis, integrative synthesis and creative problem-solving. As Gary Marx points out in his book *21 Trends for the 21st Century*, “Much of what we need to know today and will need to know tomorrow is in the spaces between and among the disciplines.”

Yet young people require something more to guide the day-to-day and long-term decisions they will face. That guidance won’t come from skills, even meta-cognitive ones, but from their ethical compass and moral convictions. As Marx notes, “All need to accept that ethical skills are fast becoming survival skills.”

To navigate increasingly complex issues, social consciousness and a sense of social responsibility — that is, personal investment in the well-being of others and the planet — must constitute our guidance system. Yet the development of social responsibility doesn’t just happen. It takes intention, attention and time. It takes classrooms and schools that value and foster empowerment, cooperation, compassion and respect. If I were to define the most important purpose of education relative to trends impacting our children’s future, it would be to assist young people in developing the convictions and skills to shape a safe, sustainable, democratic and just world.

Civic Preparation

The theme of empowering citizens to positively participate in our democratic processes has long been the grounding purpose of public education. This concept flows through our history from Thomas Jefferson’s 1779 proposal to establish public schools in Virginia to Horace Mann’s formulation of public education in Massachusetts to John Dewey’s famous declaration in “My Pedagogical Creed.”

However, the democratizing vision of pub-

lic schools has been compromised in recent decades. Attacking public education for not closing achievement gaps and ensuring that all students reach proficiency, critics advocate for charters, vouchers, home schooling and other alternatives that further segregate populations and undermine the fabric of diversity that is a necessary ingredient for sustaining a democratic nation.

As a result of these attacks, public school educators have focused on developing students' skills in literacy, numeracy and preparation for economic realities, meanwhile taking our eyes off the larger purpose of education. These pressures often have narrowed the curriculum, leaving students with fragmentary and disconnected understandings and a muddled sense of purpose and meaning.

While preparation for the world of work and accountability for skills in literacy and numeracy are critical, they are not sufficient. The challenge we face is how to actively support the historic mission of education while addressing the accountability demands of the present.

Participatory Skills

Refocusing on the civic mission of education begins by understanding that the nature of the classroom and school community establishes for students a model for their own participation. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey wrote, "In the first place, the school must itself be a community in all which that implies," thereby acknowledging that the social curriculum of the school is as important as the academic curriculum for cultivating the skills and attitudes that facilitate civic engagement.

We must teach students not only basic social-emotional skills of cooperation, perspective taking and conflict resolution, but also consciously create a caring, collaborative and participatory classroom community that encourages students to apply the social concepts and skills they are learning. We must teach participatory skills such as group problem-solving, consensus-building, organizing and long-term thinking while helping students engage with real-world issues and understand global and environmental interdependence.

While I was the superintendent in Jefferson County, Ky., David Pearson, dean of the Graduate School of Education at the University of California-Berkeley, helped assess the school

district's reading program. Debriefing district leaders, he posited that only two subjects are worthy of study. To our surprise, he announced that these subjects are not reading and math, but rather science and social studies — science because it is the study of the way the world works, and social studies because it is the study of the way people work in the world. The other content areas are tools that support these two subjects.

Although we can debate Pearson's contention, it is essential that we restore rigorous academic attention on science and social studies in order to empower students to understand the social and political world and participate in democratic processes.

Core Values

Beyond nurturing social and academic skills, we must provide students with opportunities for social contribution so that the lessons of civic engagement and democratic participation don't remain abstract notions. Through school-based buddy programs, engagement with local organizations that are making a difference and curriculum-based service learning in the community, children can experience their power and capacity to help others.

We also must ensure that our finances and instructional priorities focus on students who have been traditionally underserved, realizing that the achievement gap is a symptom of a societal empowerment gap.

In one district where I was superintendent, we synthesized these themes through the core values of empathy, ethics and service. In another, the staff chose understanding, meaning and connection. However it is framed, we must recognize that public education is much more than the process of acquiring knowledge and skills. It is an experience from which young people come to perceive themselves as having a meaningful role in constructing a better world.

As Marx maintains, "What we do in schools is a scaffold for reaching out to the future," and preparing and empowering students to create that better world is the vital purpose that should drive the future of public education. ■

SHELDON BERMAN is superintendent of the Eugene Public Schools in Eugene, Ore. E-mail: berman_s@4j.lane.edu

