

Why and How to Be Part of Public-School Changes

Time to go beyond the bake sale.

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"Everybody Talks About the Weather, But Nobody Does Anything About It."
—Charles Dudley Warner (friend of Mark Twain)

Public education concerns are much like the weather, constantly scrutinized, seldom resolved. Since we are living in unprecedented times, what is obvious is that we cannot rely on the social, political reality that was occurring prior to this pandemic. The need is to create new relevant ways that benefit our children and ourselves.



"Public Schooling" Source: Photo by Kenneth Silvestri

To meet today's challenges, it is imperative to reassess our cultural institutions. This includes amongst others, changes to our public-school system. To start, there is a common misunderstanding about the governance of public schools. School districts are not locally controlled as most believe to be the case. District boards of education members may be elected or appointed but are agents of their state due to the fact that the federal

constitution leaves the responsibilities of public education to the states. The setting of policies and statutes is the responsibility of state legislators. In New Jersey, for instance, the state requires that each student receive a "thorough and efficient education," **which is important because it mandates legitimate profound responsiveness to all students.** This, as in all states, is a legal mission to support emotional and intellectual growth for all children so that they can be active informed citizens in a democratic society.

This mandate has not come to full fruition for those of color due to unequal distribution of funds and unresolved issues of racial discrimination that is antithetical to these statutes. Even though there is long-standing precedence to achieve this, much work is still to be done. However, it creates a buffer against attempts such as the president's recent remarks to politicize education by promoting a right-wing "Pro America" curriculum to distort history (New Yorker, 9/17/20).

What does this mean and how/why should parents and community members be involved?

State proficiencies and their implementation depend on effective input and collaboration from parents and community members working with teachers and school personnel. Most states provide clearly written information regarding school law to facilitate this process, however, **it is now urgent to go way beyond bake sales and fundraising, something is not working.** It is concerning and paradoxical, given what is at stake, as to why local board elections traditionally have such an extremely low voter turnout. Reform has gone in cycles but historically is relevant to today's democratic needs.

Progressive movements championed by John Dewey and Lawrence Cremin and the Effective School Improvement processes advocated by Ron Edmonds and TheodoreSizer proposed equitable outcomes, with increased school and community collaboration. The basis and driving force of all these efforts were to avoid and replace the cookie-cutter mentality that defined schooling for most of the twentieth century, which basically attempted to have all students doing the same thing at the same time in each grade across the nation.

These reform efforts for the most part are no longer recognizable, having been seduced by the institutional psychology of public education to favor bureaucratic needs over those of the students that still lingers to this day. The consequences of this have resulted in injurious labeling, tracking, standardized testing, racial, ethnic and diversity insensitivity, not to mention forcing educators to stifle their creativity. Given the pandemic and the widening crack in this "business as usual" framework, why continue a path that we know is counter to how humans learn? **If we are so concerned about the emotional and physical dangers of returning to school, what about the competitive pressures and lack of sensitivity to individual learning styles that existed prior to COVID.**

This is not to say that reform movements are not occurring. Many cities have created smaller schools, better means of citizen involvement, and equity. These are setting wonderful examples for change (examples of successful community-based schools). We can and should learn from them. Questions such as why all public schools cannot be charter-like and decentralized to meet the needs of our children and their families, how to create better parent/community collaboration, etc. Past reform efforts have given us many research-based resources, but seem to fade in the air.

This is due to widespread dependency on standardized testing where schools are forced to depend on content over context creating double binds similar to the above-mentioned weather paradox quote; **"yes this all sounds great, but rules and regulations will not allow these reforms even though they are based on the best interest of the students and our country as a whole."**

What to do as a parent and a concerned community member?

- **First, use a systemic/ecological perspective to advocate for needed changes** that help avoid being coopted by the predominate narrow bureaucratic process that is characteristic of traditional public schooling. This is important because learning entails experiencing the interdependent contexts of our society and nature itself that is not made up of isolated fragmented subjects.
- **Be involved and supportive of student-centered curriculums based on the value of interactive mutual learning.** This is in no way antithetical to state mandates. It reinforces the benefits of critical thinking that uses community resources to create better informed self-inquiring citizens.
- **Know public policy and your rights** to get the best learning contexts for your children and to challenge any patterns of discrimination; parents and community members should have well defined active roles in the implementation of educational procedures and equity at the local level.
- **Join, organize, and participate** with community school associations that have been successful in reframing public education to be representative of students and their families. This will help you revisit not only school law and learning theory but how best to be informed about your children's emotional and physical well-being. Also, use forums such as the Warm Data process developed by

the *International Bateson Institute* to share information and develop new perspectives.

The above has far-reaching implications. It can be a means to depolarize what our society has become and support anti-racist/discrimination patterns that have plagued us for far too long. The changes that are needed are within and amongst us all. This includes every institution that educates, which are simultaneously interdependent and make up our ecology. In short, feel the rewards of being actively mutually learning with other parents, educators, and community members to collaborate for a better world.