

CONVERSATIONS ALONG THE ROAD

Eight educators comment on Deborah Meier's prescription for rebuilding public trust in public education

There was a time, not so long ago, when the public schools were a vital part of the fabric of community life—a time when to be a teacher was a noble calling, when to serve on the school board was a badge of civic pride, when citizens believed in the power of public education to uplift and improve society.

In some lucky communities, this is all still true. But in many others, the pace and pressure and complexity of modern life have chipped away at much of what was best about public education, leaving behind a struggling institution.

What happened? How can we reconnect the public with the public schools? *American School Board Journal* asked noted education reformer Deborah Meier for her advice. Her response, "The Road to Trust," appears on page 18. We also asked a number of other educators to comment. Their observations follow.

A PUBLIC ISSUE

Deborah Meier is a voice of reason in a world of continuous, often contentious, debate. When differences over standards and testing threaten to drown out other essential discussions about educational leadership, real learning, and community trust and involvement, Meier offers the hope of a different kind of relationship between schools and communities.

The ideas in "The Road to Trust" are supported by more than a decade of Public Agenda research. On the surface, there is strong support for greater public engagement between school boards and the public. Seventy-six percent of school board members say the schools need to do a better job of listening to the concerns of community residents, and 60 percent of the general public say they would like to see more community involvement in the schools.

But at the same time, 66 percent of board members believe that community residents have the responsibility to state their concerns and that educators can't constantly be expected to seek their input. Two-thirds of the general public (66 percent) say they are comfortable leaving school policies to educators. Fully 38 percent say they don't even know if school officials listen to and take into account what people in the community care about.

In the Public Agenda study *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools*, I wrote, "Public education in America is, in the most fundamental sense, a public issue. Schools will not change because leaders want them to. They will change when parents, students, and teachers go about their daily activities in different ways. That will only happen when the public is considered an equal and respected partner in reform—one whose views are worth listening to."

Kudos to Deborah Meier for stating the case with urgency and eloquence.

Deborah Wadsworth
President
Public Agenda
New York

FAIR COMPETITION

Hooray for school board members like those in the Gresham-Barlow School District, near Portland, Ore., and those on the St. Paul, Minn., board in 1970-71. These school board members, like others around the country, recognized that Deborah Meier was right about the value of choices among *public* schools—in rural, urban, or suburban communities.

Encouraging educators and parents to create new schools allows school boards to introduce the dynamics of fair competition into a district. Effective organizations seek ways to improve. Asking educators for innovative proposals is a great way to encourage them.

In 1971, the St. Paul school board said “yes” to parents, community activists, and educators who dreamed of a small, K-12 public school option. I was one of the lucky educators who benefited from the board’s openness. St. Paul Open School has won national awards and grants to replicate itself, having pioneered such ideas as:

- An adviser/advisee system
- Graduation based on demonstration of knowledge
- Combining classroom work with community research.

What about suburban or rural communities? Four suburban districts in Oregon recently created the Center for Advanced Learning, a new charter school that will serve high school students from all four districts. *The Oregonian*, the state’s largest newspaper, called this “a really good idea.”

Minnesota’s Independent School District 196, serving Rosemount, Apple Valley, and other suburban communities, has received widespread recognition for a public school option teachers created at the Minnesota zoo.

And International Falls, Minn., a rural district, allowed teachers to create a popular elementary school-within-a-school. Families choose between self-contained classrooms (first grade in one room, second in another, and so on) or a multi-age classroom, similar to the one-room schoolhouse idea.

With federal support, our center described six vital and three valuable things that school boards should expect of each school. (The report, “What Should We Do,” is available online at www.centerforschoolchange.org.)

Deborah Meier is right. No policy solves every problem. But whether it’s through a district or a charter option, students and systems gain from more public school choices.

Joe Nathan
Director, Center for School Change
Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis

THE OBLIGATIONS OF PUBLIC SERVICE

Deborah Meier has tackled a vital issue: how communities are and ought to be tied to their schools. One of the fascinating and troubling things about 20th century education reform was the furious effort by administrative and classroom progressives to insulate schooling from the community. Deeming their own judgment far superior to that of common citizens, administrative progressives worked to buffer governance and administration from noneducators. I agree with Meier that this was an enormous error.

Unremarked upon by Meier, however, is the tradition of classroom progressives, dating from John Dewey and George Counts, who think it appropriate for educators to use schools

as forums to promote personal values and beliefs even—or especially—when these subvert the broader community’s. Believing American society coarse, materialistic, racist, and corrupted by corporate interests, these classroom progressives resist public monitoring or control of educational content.

Their discomfort with directives from parents and voters has especially colored their reaction to demands for accountability. Meier herself has long embraced this tradition—as when she asserts that the Texas accountability system is a product of “distrust” and has not increased trust in the schools, or when she implies that accountability is an untoward nuisance unwisely imposed upon educators.

It seems more than a little naive for those who have argued that schools must undo the racism, sexism, and classism that purportedly plague Americans to wonder why those same Americans may wish to keep a short rein on educators and may be skeptical of their agendas. It is disingenuous to imagine distrust is purely the legacy of the administrative progressives.

Rather than offering bromides about trust, public educators should attend to the obligations of public service. So long as leading educational thinkers call for “consensus” in which their voice is first among equals, ridicule the values of most Americans, and regard trust as an entitlement to be recaptured rather than a solemn obligation to be continually earned, reclaiming “trust” will prove a long, bleak pursuit.

Frederick M. Hess
Resident Scholar
American Enterprise Institute
Washington, D.C.

NOT BY SIZE ALONE

Deborah Meier raises some excellent points. The effectiveness of the public leadership of our school districts through school boards has been the topic of much discussion in recent years. Meier is certainly right when she observes that the decline in public participation through school boards would be devastating to our children’s education. I appreciate her passion for this issue, and I found interesting her suggestion that the best way to guarantee public engagement and engender trust in the schools is through small, more-intimate school districts.

Having grown up attending a small rural school, however, and serving now as the superintendent of a 7,000-student suburban school, I would argue that it is not simply the size of the school or district that promotes trust. Schools and school districts throughout the country, no matter how large or small, have earned the trust of their constituents. That trust is built on the efforts school board members, administrators, and staff members make to connect to parents and the community at large.

Rebuilding trust, I believe, is more about understanding how to engage the public in smaller groups and smaller venues than it is about smaller being automatically better. Economy of



scale in the operation of the school district does provide opportunities for more specialized expertise and service, as well as lower per-pupil cost for many services. In my experience, trust, community participation, and healthy school board governance are not necessarily immediate outgrowths of size or type of school or district.

The annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools indicates that people give higher marks to their own schools and school districts than to those they do not know. I believe this phenomenon is at work when we laud our own form of school or district governance and tend to criticize other forms of governance in other schools or districts. It is important not to generalize in this way. We need trust and strong citizen leadership on our school boards, and that can be obtained in all venues—not only in small or charter schools.

Kenneth A. Dragseth
National Superintendent of the Year, 2003
Superintendent of Schools
Edina, Minn.

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE COMMUNITY

Deborah Meier provides a thoughtful, if partial, analysis of the disconnect between schools and their communities. She is right to point to the consolidation of school districts into increasingly larger units and the concomitant distancing of students and their families from the governance of their schools as a key place to intervene. We know schools work best when students and parents have strong connections to both the governance and educational structures of their schools.

Meier suggests that school boards, and the educators they hire, should work to build stronger and more trusting relationships with their communities. At times she argues that the key relationships are with the parents and students schools serve, and indeed, the educator-student relationship is central to the complex educational enterprise.

But Meier also acknowledges the need to repair the more difficult relationship between those who run schools and the vast majority of those in every community who do not have children in school. We need to build trust between schools and those whose only contact with schools is likely to come at tax time—those who seem to know only what the hypercritical media publicize about the schools and what state and federal officials with a privatization agenda focus on.

The question, then, is what to do. Meier suggests “building a communitywide consensus about the essential purposes of schools” and “agreeing on what to do about minority viewpoints.”

These two suggestions require different kinds of conversation between educators and the broader community. The conversations must be structured to make the messiness of democracy safe. This requires ground rules so all can be heard and so all respect other points of view. It requires a moderator

who can hold people to the ground rules. It requires that the conversation have a substantive structure so that it actually goes somewhere. And it requires that there is follow-through on ideas raised in one meeting.

The conversations might start, as Meier suggests, around “the essential purposes of schools.” But my sense is that won't be a draw for many of the 60 to 70 percent of community members who are disinvested in the schools. Perhaps a more fruitful place to start would be with a conversation about what people value in their community—why they live there, what about their community they want to protect and expand, and how the schools support those values. My experience is that starting with what the community itself values almost always brings people in and helps them understand anew their stake in schools their own children no longer attend.

Finally, I would suggest that at least some of the early conversations be held outside schools. They can be held in community centers, in church meeting rooms, in fire halls—wherever the community at large meets. This would show that we mean it when we say we value the community's input. It's the first step in building the trust that Meier so rightly says we need to rebuild.

Harris Sokoloff
Executive Director
Center for School Study Councils
Graduate School of Education
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia

POLICY, NOT SIZE, MATTERS

The world of education owes Deborah Meier an enormous debt for her leadership, scholarship, and passionate commitment. It is thus with some reluctance that I take strong issue with her longing backward glance at the bygone days when school districts were small and board members were intimately involved in the details of school curriculum and administration.

Meier supports her conclusions with personal observations, and I do not doubt her statement, “I've seen it happen.” So have I.

I agree with her major conclusion that education accountability must be more than a litany of test scores. But my experience with school boards throughout the nation does not suggest that a district's size influences the degree to which board members embrace the “vast areas of critical significance (such areas as oral language, teamwork, reliability, initiative, and judgment)” that Meier rightly regards as important. Indeed, board members from small and large districts can be equally



enlightened or bigoted, willing to challenge students or committed to the abolition of rigor, defenders of established science or dedicated to the imposition of a personal religious agenda on the school curriculum.

Before we extol the virtues of “local control,” let us remember that the 10th Amendment to the Constitution, from which that concept arises, reserves powers to the states—not to local school systems. Most important, “local” is not necessarily wise, good, and caring, as Meier presumes. The bureaucrats at the federal and state level upon whom we so easily heap abuse are the same ones whose regulations fight local policies that justify racism, sexism, and discrimination against disabled students. Fifty years ago, Linda Brown found scant comfort from the well-intentioned local control of the school board of my home town, Topeka, Kan.

I like small-district board members—I’m married to one. But it is the fairness and quality of the policies my spouse and her colleagues enact, not the size of their district or their well-intentioned familiarity with constituents, on which their success as education policy makers should be judged.

Douglas B. Reeves
Chairman, Center for Performance Assessment
Swampscott, Mass.

‘COMMUNITY’ MUST BE EVERYONE

Deborah Meier’s thought-provoking article raises a problem without a solution. In keeping with what our students are confronted with, we—as the stewards of public education—must provide the educational competencies required to help them live and work cooperatively in the global environment.

Like Meier, I am saddened by the “manufactured culture” of distrust for public schools by external detractors. Having served for 11 years on an urban school board and regularly talked with fellow board members around the country, I have witnessed and heard about this distrust—not just by the general public, but by people at the federal and state government levels as well.

Public education has come under attack by politicians seeking to secure recognition and votes, by the business community trying to promote its theories of downsizing and doing more with less, and by the media that serve as a vehicle for both. These purported theories are based on economies of scale rather than need. We know that students learn at different rates and mature differently. That is reality, not theory. Still it is incumbent on us to reverse this scenario or we will never attract qualified, committed persons to serve as board members.

Meier’s comment on building a sense of community is valid, but that community should not be limited by city, county, or

district lines. All children deserve and should receive a sound basic education in all public schools. If we believe this, then the funding will be in place to help make it a reality. Paramount to developing a sense of democracy is the emergence of a sense of urgency for maintaining, enriching, and improving public education.

It is a travesty that board members have had to seek recourse in the courts to ensure that states finance a basic education for all students. But is there the collective public will to embrace this concept?

To do this—to advance the ideals of democracy—we must ensure that students are guaranteed the inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness promised in the Declaration of Independence. All who support public education and hold it as a fundamental action know that it must be undergirded by local, state, and national communities to be sustained.

Florence Johnson
Buffalo Public Schools Board of Education
Buffalo, N.Y.

GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS, OR PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

More students, fewer districts? Centralization of authority for the conduct of the public schools is counterintuitive. In the traditional American system, families and the “villages” that raised the children were gathered to provide for the children’s formal education, a process that was blessed by and financed by the “village,” as well as by the public authority. This gathering took many forms, as some communities were stable, some transient, some small, some large, some financially weak, and some wealthy. Some were ready to stand behind all their neighborhood’s children, and some were ready to jettison that responsibility when their own offspring had outgrown home. All this was and is messy. This is no surprise: Democracy, the means for free people to govern themselves, is messy.

The drift toward centralized, bureaucratic control of the details of schooling has been a gradual process over the past three decades. There are many causes, some arising from varying regional histories, others from inattention, still others (to put it bluntly) from selfishness and disinterest in one’s neighbors. The more schooling has been perceived as a wholly predictable process, and thus a matter of production, the more the values of large scale have been stressed.

Traditional allies of public education—the universities and the local press—have been silent. The failure of the people to nurture the habits of democracy and of government to respect those habits has been costly. Deborah Meier reminds us that we are on a path leading to *government* schools rather than *public* schools. The difference is fundamental.

TheodoreSizer
Professor Emeritus
Brown University
Providence, R.I.