

INTRODUCTION

psychological, and social needs in an integrated and comprehensive way.

"A Language of Hope" and "Finding the Public Good Through the Details of Classroom Life" take us back to the topic of the opening essays: the purpose of school and the language we use to describe it. Here I continue that discussion but within the larger frame of the public good and the place of public education within it. I try to offer an approach to Jeffersonian principles from the particulars of the classroom, from the school desk outward to the republic.

In the conclusion, "The Journey Back and Forward," I consider some of the key issues that faced the nineteenth-century educator and that we still confront today, issues that we need to answer in a fresh way as we move into this new century.

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for All of Us*

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ONE

In Search of a Fresh Language of Schooling

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME you were moved by a high-level speech about education? I don't mean by the personal testimonials we hear at graduations or award ceremonies, but by a policy or political speech. My guess is that it's been quite a while. We seem trapped in a language of schooling that stresses economics, accountability, and compliance. These are important issues, to be sure, but they are not the stuff of personal dreams and democratic aspiration, not a language that inspires.

For a long time now, our public talk about education has been shaped by a concern about economic readiness and competitiveness. There is some mention of the traditional purposes of education—intellectual, civic, and moral development—but not much. The economic motive looms large. Policy discussion is also driven, and increasingly so, by various systems of

standards and assessments that have consequences for how schools are rated, run, and even financed.

The economic motive has always been a significant factor in the spread of mass education in the United States, and as someone from the working class who has achieved financial mobility through schooling, I am acutely aware of the link between education and economic well-being. Furthermore, there is an argument to be made for combining this economic theme with measurement technique, especially when considering a system of education as vast and complex as ours. To take just one point, it is crucial to have some means to detect the significant numbers of young people who don't do well in school. This was one stated—and important—intention of the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

But what I want to consider is how this economic focus, blended with the technology of large-scale assessment, can restrict our sense of what school ought to be about: the full sweep of growth and development, for both individuals and for a pluralistic democracy. This narrowing of discourse, this pinching of what we talk about when we talk about school, is evident in the public sphere, the national and regional discussions of education, the goals that motivate action. "It's unlike anything in my experience," a veteran

education journalist tells me. "Something is always emerging" about tests and testing. In such a policy environment—one that has been with us for over a generation—schooling can devolve to procedures, to measures and outputs that constrain what gets taught, how it's taught, and how we define what it means to be an educated person.

Think of what we don't read and hear.

There's not much public discussion of achievement that includes curiosity, reflectiveness, uncertainty, or a willingness to take a chance, to blunder. And how about accounts of reform that present change as alternately difficult, exhilarating, ambiguous, and promising—and that find reform not in a device, technique, or structure, but in the way we think about teaching and learning? Consider how little we hear about intellect, aesthetics, joy, courage, creativity, civility, understanding. For that matter, think of how rarely we hear of commitment to public education as the center of a free society.

Now, there is an economic discussion of schooling that we ought to hear, but rarely do. This would be a discussion that places individual and school failure in the context of joblessness, health-care and housing security, a diminished tax base, economic policy, and the social safety net. This discussion would include

acknowledgment of the continuing erosion of what social protections we have had in the United States. It would also include the fact that education budgets are threatened in many states, programs are being cut, and there are huge and growing differences in school expenditures. The wealthiest public schools spend two to three times more on their students than the poorest. And this dramatic difference in institutional resources is compounded by differences in the material resources parents can provide: from private space to computers and reference tools to tutoring and other scholastic remedies and enrichments.

Calculating, writing, solving a problem, or recalling information take place *someplace* with its economics and politics—which can have a profound effect on what goes on in a classroom. Poverty does not necessarily diminish the power of one's mind, but it certainly draws attention to the competing demands of safety and survival: the day-to-day assaults of the neighborhood, just the tense navigation from home to school. The threats to family stability: illness or job loss—tough for any family—can unmoor a poor household. A student's own health problems, often untreated or inadequately managed, can shrivel a young person's sense of hope and the future.

We need public talk that links education to a more

decent, thoughtful, open society. Talk that raises in us as a people the appreciation for deliberation and reflection, or for taking intellectual risks and thinking widely—for the sheer power and pleasure of using our minds, alone or in concert with others. We need a discourse that inspires young people to think gracefully and moves young adults to become teachers and foster such development.

I'm not simply longing for rhetorical flourish here, although a little scholastic uplift would be a welcome thing. Public discourse, heard frequently enough and over time, affects the way we think, vote, and lead our lives. I worry that the dominant vocabulary about schooling limits our shared respect for the extraordinary nature of thinking and learning, and lessens our sense of social obligation. So it becomes possible for us to affirm that the most meaningful evidence of learning is a score on a standardized test, or to reframe the public good in favor of fierce and unequal competition for a particular kind of academic honor. Education is reduced to a cognitive horse race.

In the long run, in the big, common picture, this state of affairs is just not good for us. Not only does our definition of "public" get distorted, but our definition of learning also suffers. One result is that our national discussions of education, our cultural

commonplaces about schooling, are pretty much devoid of two themes I think are central to an egalitarian philosophy of education: a robust and nuanced model of intelligence and achievement that affirms the varied richness of human ability, and a foundational commitment to equal opportunity to develop that ability.

These themes, taken together, fuse the cognitive and the civic, ground the civic in specific obligations to the conditions of learning, and connect events in the classroom to a vision of both a knowledgeable and a good society.

Finding Our Way: The Experience of Education

A GOOD EDUCATION helps us make sense of the world and find our way in it.

We are driven—as surely as we are driven to survive—to find meaning in our lives, to interpret what befalls us, the events that swirl around us, the people who cross our paths, the objects and rhythms of the natural world. We do this instinctively; it is essential to being human. So we do it with or without education.

But we are getting educated all the time, of course: by family, community, teachers, pals, bullies, and saints. Our education can be as formal as a lesson or as informal as a lesson learned. This chapter focuses on education that happens in the schoolhouse, the college classroom, the apprenticeship. Education that the culture deems important enough to support and organize.

The question “Why go to school?” has been central