I Used to Think . . . And Now I Think . . .

Twenty Leading Educators Reflect on the Work of School Reform

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METIS AND THE METRICS OF SUCCESS

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I used to think a lot of things. I used to think tests were useful tools because they were diagnostic; now I think that the testing regime is crippling our public schools because it makes tests punitive. I used to think that if we amassed enough evidence of our success in reorganizing the culture of schools in collaboration with other community institutions that superintendents would let us have genuine local governance and control, that our schools would in effect be able to function as subdistricts within the larger system. Now I think that the fear generated by the punitive, top-down, standardized testing system virtually eliminates that possibility. I used to think that the evidence of our success would attract attention and lead to genuine change in thinking about school reform; now I think that if the evidence comes out of people's experience and local knowledge instead of from data analyzed by experts, it just gets ignored.

Evidence is important. I would never suggest otherwise. Data is important, but data is not the only kind of evidence. Data is abstract and easily manipulated. It has even been said that while numbers don't lie, liars do use numbers. Data is useful only to the extent that it reflects reality and its users have a clear understanding of its limitations. The all-too-frequent "suggestion" that we need to further "drill down" into the data that come from standardized tests ignores the fact that our testing system is deeply flawed. The notion of standardized tests as a single measure is by its very nature ridiculous, because it suggests that there are standardized kids with standardized brains.

Education and learning cannot be measured and evaluated in the same way that profits are counted and production is managed—a fact that far too many leaders of the business and philanthropic communities fail to understand. Standardized tests and resulting data are one way to measure the success of our schools, but, taken out of context, they lose much of their meaning. Nor is it in the real interest of teaching and learning for districts to be run by charismatic individuals who see themselves as CEOs at one stop on their ladders to greatness rather than as leaders of communities of learners. Superintendents best serve their districts when they engage the people in the school community—teachers, parents, and community leaders—who have what the Greeks called *metis,* or local knowledge. Metis emerges from experience and is embedded in practice.

Frequently people don't even realize their own expertise until they start having conversations with one another about their work. Classroom teachers, for example, are often so busy doing the teaching that they are not aware of their own learning, which is embedded in their practice and habits. People

must be encouraged, guided, and mentored to reflect on what they learn from their experiences. It is through such structured and focused conversations, both between individuals and within small groups, that the local knowledge is recognized and articulated. It is through the kinds of above experiences that what we call *social knowledge* is both contextualized and understood.

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Now, as James C. Scott reminds us in his book *Seeing Like a State*, the litmus test for metis is practical success.[1] Or, in the context of school reform, is real learning taking place?

For many years our community organizing work with a network of public schools throughout Texas (the Alliance Schools Project) generated greater improvements on standardized tests than those experienced by schools of similar socioeconomic status. Our schools also experienced increases in attendance and improved morale among staff. The development of teachers as leaders in our schools led them to become teachers of educators as well as of students. Many became principals who viewed themselves as head teachers and mentors rather than administrators. As head teachers, their job was to create communities of learners, which focused on caring adults who felt responsible and committed to the development of young people. Building that community involved working with an organizer to identify leadership potential among parents, teachers, classified workers, and members of other neighborhood institutions (churches, synagogues, mosques, temples) who were willing to strategize and work together to build a culture of genuine teaching and

learning. The development of parents as leaders meant that they shared in the guidance of the school community, influencing everything from the availability of health services to making the curricula more challenging to students. The engagement of neighborhood institutions in the life of the school meant that bonds were passed and facilities were upgraded.

The development of the adults in and around the school community dramatically affected the ability of students to learn but was very difficult to quantify. The experts couldn't subject it to regression analysis, and in the face of policies like the No Child Left Behind Act, it became difficult to sustain on a large scale. At the same time, many of the foundations that had supported our work started looking for something new and different to try.

However, one of the foundations that continued to support the school organizing decided to also invest resources in a serious evaluation of the work of Austin Interfaith. Researchers posed three questions: In what ways has Austin Interfaith's organizing influenced school district policy? To what degree has Austin Interfaith's organizing influenced the capacity of schools to educate students successfully? Has Austin Interfaith's organizing produced measurable gains in student outcomes?

The results of their study, including a regression analysis of the relationship between Austin Interfaith's involvement and student performance on Texas's standardized test, were overwhelmingly positive. Deep involvement of Austin Interfaith in a campus predicted gains in standardized test scores ranging from fifteen to nineteen points, while more peripheral engagement led to only four points of improvement.[2] The study also documented that some of the benefits of Austin Interfaith's organizing efforts

spilled beyond the campuses directly involved with the organization to extend to all low-income campuses in the district.

Were there trumpets? Heralds of a new era in school reform? Even widespread press coverage? Not so much.

Now, to be fair, a number of thoughtful researchers in the field of education have examined our work with schools over the years. Howard Gardner, Richard Murnane, Dennis Shirley, Thomas Hatch, and others have spoken and written eloquently about the successes of the Alliance Schools. Unfortunately, it is difficult to be heard above the drumbeats of charter schools, performance-based pay, prescribed curricula, and the like.

Part of the difficulty is that our strategy takes time, or what we refer to as *patient capital*. It takes time to develop leaders, to develop relationships, to develop the social knowledge necessary to understand what we know and what we are learning. It takes time to develop trust. In his book *So Much Reform, So Little Change*, Charles Payne cites a lack of trust among adults as creating dysfunction in schools. In schools where trust among adults is built over time, Payne says, student achievement improves.[3] This certainly mirrors our experience with the Alliance Schools.

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It takes time to develop a culture of constant learning, one that includes not only students but also the adults in a school community. At its best, our organizing leads to a culture that continues to evolve rather than one that is rigid, fixed, or proscribed. Part of the challenge is that many people are looking for a one-size-fits-all model for school reform. Yet

schools exist in different contexts and different situations, and those contexts and situations change over time.

This may be another part of the difficulty in recognizing the value of the work: in our strategy, school "reform" is never finished. Constant evaluation and adaptation is required. Why? Because conditions change. Populations shift. Technologies emerge. Facilities deteriorate. Resources come and go. Economies falter. Families come under different kinds of pressures all the time—and those are the same families who are sending their children to the school. They are the same families whose adults are the parents, the teachers, and the classified workers at the school.

Circumstances alter, and unless the culture of a school is one of ongoing learning and adaptation, one that constantly supports the development of new leaders, then the ability to respond to new and different stimuli is lost.

The notion that it is a good idea for a superintendent to know at 10:00 a.m. what page every fourth-grade teacher in his or her district is teaching from is ridiculous. The factory model of education has been discredited repeatedly over the last decades. Even if the primary purpose of an education was to prepare students for employment (which it is not), the factory model does a disservice to young people preparing for the twenty-first-century economy. In a top-down culture that reinforces passivity—in both students and adults—no one is learning to be creative and initiatory. No one is learning what Frank Levy and Richard Murnane described as the soft skills: the ability to communicate effectively both orally and in writing, the ability to solve problems by forming and testing hypotheses, the ability to work well with persons from different backgrounds. No one is learning what the leaders of Motorola described as the "most critical skill" in their introduction to Levy and

Murnane's *Teaching the New Basic Skills*—the ability to learn and keep learning, to become lifelong learners.[4]

Lifelong learning is predicated on the understanding that intellectual capital is more than merely information; it is the ability to analyze and reflect. We have to be prepared to teach students the wonder, awe, and beauty of the U.S. Constitution while also recognizing it as a deeply flawed document that ignored women, men without property, and the horrors of slavery. Teaching (as opposed to mere instruction) should transmit the value of and appreciation for a democratic culture while at the same time prepare students to challenge it and to learn from its shortcomings.

In fact, the primary reason taxpayers should support public education is because of the way in which it (ideally) inculcates the vision and values of a democratic culture. Only if education is about teaching people—particularly young people—to understand other perspectives and points of view while maintaining the ability to debate and argue their own can we hope to sustain democracy in the face of the growing isolationism, cynicism, and polarization not just in our own nation but in the global community.

Even for adults, the public schools are a source of democratic participation. In her book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, Diane Ravitch cites neighborhood schools as the only local institutions "where people congregate and mobilize to solve local problems, where individuals learn to speak up and debate and engage in democratic give-and-take with their neighbors."[5]

Watching the Senate Judiciary Committee during the confirmation hearings for Elena Kagan, I was struck by how truncated our concept of debate has become and by our inability to

engage in anything other than station identification. By this I mean our tendency to basically identify ourselves and our predetermined positions, then (at best) pause appropriately while someone else speaks and we think about what we are going to say next. It is as if we have lost the capacity for genuine engagement, contestation, and argument—the kind of debate that leads to some sort of negotiated settlement and compromise. More than ever today, we need institutions to teach these kinds of habits and practices that are central to a democratic culture.

I will go so far as to suggest that there is no democratic culture without public education—for both our present and our future. As far back as the 1830s, free public education has been promoted as a "crucible of democracy, a blending of all children to function from a common set of values."[6] If we don't understand how to make our public schools more centers of democratic culture, our way of life as a self-governing people is at risk.