



 REPORT K - 12

# Putting Democracy Back into Public Education

NOVEMBER 10, 2016 — RICHARD D. KAHLLENBERG AND CLIFFORD JANEY

Throughout U.S. history, Americans have pivoted between whether the central priority of public education should be to create skilled workers for the economy, or to educate young people for responsible citizenship. Both goals are important, of course, but with the recent rise of a global economy, the emphasis has shifted away from preparing citizens and toward serving the needs of the marketplace.

On one level, this change of priorities is understandable. As we celebrated two hundred years of a continuous, improving democracy, the need for schools to emphasize the civic portion of public education began to feel less urgent to many leaders and educators. In a globalized economy, competition from foreign nations such as China appeared a more imminent threat than domestic challenges undermining our democratic values.

But new evidence suggests that American democracy is under severe strain. In a recent survey, two-thirds of Americans could not name all three branches of the federal government.<sup>1</sup> Only a third could identify Joe Biden as the vice president or name a single Supreme Court justice.<sup>2</sup> Declining proportions say that free elections are important in a democratic society.<sup>3</sup> The crisis came to a head in the 2016 presidential election, in which a candidate with authoritarian leanings captured the presidency of the United States. Moving forward, the question has become: How can our public schools do a better job of educating children for our pluralistic democracy?

This report proceeds in four parts. The first part articulates the ways in which the founders believed that public education was critical to protecting the republic from demagogues. The second part discusses the tilt toward market values and away from democratic norms in recent years in both the courses we teach children directly and the way we model (or do not model) democratic practices in schooling. The third part outlines the considerable costs of failing to emphasize democratic values and embrace democratic practices. And the last part makes public policy recommendations for restoring the right balance in our schools at the state, local and federal levels. Throughout the report, we seek to synthesize the practical experiences of one of us (Janey), who served as superintendent of public schools in Rochester, New York (1995–2002), Washington, D.C. (2004–2007), and Newark, New Jersey (2008–2011), and the scholarly work of one of us (Kahlenberg), who has researched and written about school integration and is the biographer of teacher union leader Albert Shanker.<sup>4</sup>

## The Role of Public Education in Supporting American Democracy

Since the founding of public education in the United States, public schools have been charged not only with giving future workers skills for the private marketplace, but also with preparing students to be citizens in a democracy.

The American Founders were deeply concerned with finding ways to ensure that their new democracy, which provided

ultimate sovereignty to the collective views of average citizens through the franchise, not fall prey to demagogues. The problem of the demagogue, the Founders believed, was endemic to democracy.<sup>5</sup>

One answer to the threat of demagogues and rule by the “mob” in a democracy, the Founders suggested, was America’s elaborate constitutional system of checks and balances. The potential rise of a demagogue is attenuated by dividing power between three branches of government (executive, legislative and judicial); between federal and state governments; and between government and a host of free civic institutions—an independent press, religious congregations, business groups, and labor unions—that check the power of government. The U.S. Senate, in particular, was designed as the “saucer” to cool the piping hot tea boiled by the populist House of Representatives—a metaphor George Washington was said to have used in discussion with Thomas Jefferson.<sup>6</sup>

But the Founders believed that another layer of protection was needed. The Constitution, after all, can be amended (though with difficulty) by the mob. Likewise, a demagogue, appealing to passions rather than reason, can use democratic means to win office, and, once in power, chip away at rival sources of authority—such as an independent press, and an independent judiciary—that stand in his way. Early leaders such as George Washington did not know how this system would work out. “The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government,” he said in his first inaugural address, “are justly considered, perhaps, as deeply, as finally, staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.”<sup>7</sup>

For the experiment to succeed, the Founders knew, a second fundamental bulwark against demagogues needed to be created: an educated populace. Thomas Jefferson argued that general education was necessary to “enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom.”<sup>8</sup> Jefferson noted, “if a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”<sup>9</sup>

The Founders wanted voters to be intelligent in order to discern serious leaders of high character from con men who do not have the nation’s interests at heart. Beyond that, public education in the United States was also meant to instill a love of liberal democracy: a respect for the separation of powers, for a free press and free religious exercise, and for the rights of political minorities. In this way, demagogues who sought to undermine those institutions would themselves be suspect among voters. Educating common people was the answer to the oligarchs who said the average citizen could not be trusted to choose leaders wisely. The founder of American public schooling, nineteenth century Massachusetts educator Horace Mann, saw public education as fundamental to democracy “A republican form of government, without intelligence in the people, must be, on a vast scale, what a mad-house, without superintendent or keepers, would be on a small one.”<sup>10</sup>

The centrality of public education to American democracy was not just the quaint belief of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century leaders. In 1916, John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* explained that "a government resting upon popular suffrage cannot be successful unless those who elect and who obey their governors are educated."<sup>11</sup> In 1938, when dangerous demagogues were erecting totalitarian regimes in many parts of the world, Franklin D. Roosevelt noted: "Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education." He continued: "It has been well said that no system of government gives so much to the individual or exacts so much as a democracy. Upon our educational system must largely depend the perpetuity of those institutions upon which our freedom and our security rest. To prepare each citizen to choose wisely and to enable him to choose freely are paramount functions of the schools in a democracy."<sup>12</sup> And in a 1952 Supreme Court case, Justice Felix Frankfurter, noting the central role of public schools in our system of self-governance, said teachers should be regarded "as the priests of our democracy."<sup>13</sup> All nations, the late historian Paul Gagnon noted, provide an excellent education to "those who are expected to run the country" and the quality of that education "cannot be far from what everyone in a democracy needs to know."<sup>14</sup>

Teaching students to be good democratic citizens had two distinct elements: (1) providing student the analytical and critical thinking skills necessary to be well informed and make sound decisions in elections; and (2) instilling in students an appreciation for the benefits of liberal democracy as a system of governance, thereby guarding against demagogues who would undermine democratic principles. In the United States, as Jennifer Hochschild and Nathan Scovronick argue, schools have been charged with teaching values that "include loyalty to the nation, acceptance of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as venerable founding documents, appreciation that in America, constitutional rights sometimes trump majority rule and the majority rule is supposed to trump intense desire, belief in the rule of law as the proper grounding for a legal system, belief in equal opportunity as the proper grounding for a social system [and a] willingness to adhere to the discipline implied by rotation in office through an electoral system."<sup>15</sup>

While many Americans take these values as self-evident, they are not in-born and must, as American Federation of Teachers president Albert Shanker noted, be taught and cultivated anew in each generation. At bottom, that is the fundamental purpose of public schools, he said: "to teach children what it means to be an American," transmitting "common values and shared culture," in a unique process known as "Americanization." He explained: "one is not born into something that makes you an American. It is not by virtue of birth, but by accepting a common set of values and beliefs that you become an American."<sup>16</sup>

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To be sure, the concept of “Americanization” has at times been misconstrued in U.S. history to justify horrific practices, such as seeking to “civilize” indigenous children and undermine their heritage. As the late Barbara Jordan noted in 1995, Americanization “earned a bad reputation when it was stolen by racists and xenophobes in the 1920s. But it is our word, and we are taking it back. Americanization means becoming a part of the polity—becoming one of us.” Jordan argued, “The United States has united immigrants and their descendants around a commitment to democratic ideals and constitutional principles. People from an extraordinary range of ethnic and religious backgrounds have embraced these ideas.”<sup>17</sup>

There are two primary ways to encourage children to discover the genius of democracy: by telling them explicitly, and by showing them implicitly. A curriculum of rigorous courses in history, literature, and civics can cultivate knowledge of democratic practices and a belief in democratic values. The classes should tell America’s stories—warts and all—and include the ways in which groups have used democratic means to improve the country. Children should also be taught what it is like to live in nondemocratic countries in order to appreciate what they might otherwise take for granted. But that is not enough.

In addition to teaching democratic values directly, we must also address the hidden curriculum—what is taught to students implicitly, through how we conduct ourselves as a society, perhaps most important being how we choose to run our schools. As Century Foundation policy associate Kimberly Quick has noted, our schools “not only reflect our current values as a nation, but also reveal the values that we anticipate passing along to the next generation of Americans.”<sup>18</sup>

Are the voices of parents and community members heard as a part of decision-making, or are they shut out by state takeovers and billionaire philanthropists who bankroll reform efforts? Are teachers, parents, and students involved in determining how schools are run, or do principals get the only voice? Do students have access to economically and racially integrated schools where they are treated equally, or are they segregated into separate and unequal schools or tracks within schools? These are all critical questions, because no matter what the explicit curriculum says about democracy, as Rochester union leader Adam Urbanski has noted, “You cannot teach what you do not model.”

## Shifting Emphasis Away from Democracy to Marketplace Skills

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In recent decades, as the nature of the American economy changed to require greater knowledge and skills from workers, and as democratic capitalism spread after the collapse of the Soviet Union, educators shifted their emphasis strongly toward the role of schools in promoting private skills rather than civic education. This shift occurred both in the explicit curriculum of schools and the “hidden curriculum” that schools impart through example. Fixing the civics curriculum is relatively straightforward. But getting the hidden curriculum right will require extensive efforts over time.

## *Refocusing the Explicit Curriculum*

Education reformers from both major political parties reduced the grand two-fold purposes of American public education to a narrower focus on workplace skills. As part of this effort, reformers have tended to emphasize the economic value of education to individual students using a particular focus on reading and math test scores as the salient metric of success. Students, the mantra pronounced, must be “career and college ready.”

President Barack Obama highlighted the idea that “A world-class education is the single most important factor in determining not just whether our kids can compete for the best jobs but whether America can out-compete countries around the world. America’s business leaders understand that when it comes to education, we need to up our game. *That’s* why we’re working together to put an outstanding education within reach for every child.”<sup>19</sup> (Emphasis added.) The language of education leaders became infused with the dialect of the marketplace, and the need to garner a “return on investment.” In a telling sign, in 2013, the governing board of the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) dropped fourth- and twelfth-grade civics and American history as a tested subject when it needed to save money.<sup>20</sup>

## *An Ominous Shift in the Implicit Curriculum*

As civics instruction was curtailed, some education reformers went further in their push toward market-based policy, saying that there was too much democracy in the public education system itself. Many reformers took their cue from scholars John Chubb and Terry Moe, whose book, *Politics, Markets and America’s Schools*, argued that “direct democratic control” over public education appears to be “incompatible with effective schooling.”<sup>21</sup> This motif was made manifest in four emerging trends: state takeovers of urban districts; efforts to reduce workplace democracy in schools; diminishment of school integration as a valued goal; and adoption of a new marketplace theory of charter schools. Critics noted that these efforts to reduce democratic control of schools not only sent an unfortunate signal to students about democratic norms; they also frequently failed to improve educational outcomes.

### *State Takeovers*

One popular strategy embraced by education reformers is state takeovers of struggling urban districts. These efforts have sometimes been aided by well-meaning philanthropists, who put faith in technocratic solutions and see community input as a hindrance to getting things done. In Newark, New Jersey, for example, journalist Dale Russakoff chronicled the effort of Governor Chris Christie and Mayor Cory Booker to improve educational opportunities with a \$100 million gift from Facebook billionaire Mark Zuckerberg in 2010. Although Newark schools had been under state control since 1995 with little positive effect, Booker told Zuckerberg that he “could flip a whole city.” Zuckerberg and Booker’s stated goal, says Russakoff, “was not simply to repair education in Newark but to develop a model for saving it in all of urban America—and to do it in five years.”<sup>22</sup>

This transformation would be accomplished not by reducing poverty or school segregation—strong predictors of academic achievement—but by a series of top-down reforms: closing failing schools, expanding charter schools, and weakening teacher tenure. These reforms were adopted with little input from public school teachers, with whom Christie regularly feuded, or from the community.<sup>23</sup> Christie, who noted “I got maybe six votes in Newark,” felt free to ignore local opinion.<sup>24</sup> Christopher Cerf, Christie’s education commissioner, told a group of philanthropists, “We still control all the levers.”<sup>25</sup> At a fundraising party, Zuckerberg was asked who the new superintendent in Newark would be; Zuckerberg replied, “Anyone we want.”<sup>26</sup>

Outside technocrats, wrote journalist Sarah Carr in the *Washington Post*, were given “nearly dictatorial power” in Newark.<sup>27</sup> Cerf consistently overrode the votes of a democratically elected advisory board, leading Shavar Jeffries, a civil rights attorney who was a strong supporter of reform, to warn, “Education reform comes across as colonial to people who’ve been here for decades.”<sup>28</sup>

Thoroughly undemocratic, the reforms also failed to produce positive results for students, as test scores declined in math and literacy during the tenure of Christie’s hand-picked superintendent Cami Anderson. Anderson, who was forced by Christie to resign, was left to complain that the state tests were “fatally flawed.”<sup>29</sup>

The Newark experience is not unique. State takeovers of local districts, writes John Jackson of the Schott Foundation, rarely achieve their stated goal of raising academic outcomes for students. Moreover, by removing local democratic control over schools, they “should sound the same alarm” as efforts to deny individuals the right vote, especially since takeovers frequently occur in low-income communities of color, Jackson argues.<sup>30</sup>

### *Reducing Workplace Democracy*

Another common motif among education reformers is that democratically elected teacher union leaders are seen not as vehicles for workplace democracy, but rather as stubborn impediments to doing right by school children. No one has

embodied this philosophy more clearly than Michelle Rhee, the chancellor of Washington, D.C., public schools from 2007 to 2010, who went on to found Students First, an organization meant to counter the influence of teachers unions.

Rhee argued that public schools in Washington, D.C. were in such bad shape that extraordinary measures were required. She even proposed the idea of getting a congressional declaration of emergency, so that she would not have to bargain with the elected representatives of teachers at all. “Cooperation, collaboration, and consensus-building,” she argued, “are way overrated.”<sup>31</sup> Rhee held veteran teachers in disdain, and famously posed on the cover of *Time* magazine with a broom in her hands. As chancellor, she once told a film crew, “I’m going to fire somebody in a little while. Do you want to see that?” Her widespread dismissal of teachers was found to violate due process rights. In 2011, an arbitrator reinstated seventy-five educators fired by Rhee in 2008, after determining that she had neither explained why they were being terminated nor given them a chance to respond to charges.<sup>32</sup> Not only were her methods found to be autocratic; critics noted that they, and those of her anointed successor, Kaya Henderson, did not promote equal opportunity. “Despite all the promises made by Rhee and Henderson,” journalist John Merrow wrote in 2015, “the ‘achievement gap’ between well-to-do kids and poor kids has widened.”<sup>33</sup>

#### *Reduced National Commitment to School Integration*

The U.S. Supreme Court’s landmark 1954 decision *Brown v. Board of Education* held that separate schools for black and white are inherently unequal; and subsequent research also suggested that separate schools for rich and poor are a recipe for inequality.<sup>34</sup> The *Brown* decision explicitly underlined “the importance of education to our democratic society,” noting that schooling “is the very foundation of good citizenship.” Integrated schools underline the democratic message of equality, while segregated schools can teach the opposite: that some citizens are more deserving than others.

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But education reformers have often walked away from the democratic lessons of *Brown*. Intimidated by the political challenges to racial and socioeconomic integration, they argue that we should instead devote our efforts to improving high-poverty schools as best we can.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, some charter schools boast of the fact that they are segregated and have “the highest octane mix of poor and minority kids,” notes the American Enterprise Institute’s Frederick Hess, “even though just about every observer thinks that” integrated schools are “good for kids, communities, and the country.”<sup>36</sup>



## *The Market-Based Rather than Democracy-Based Model of Charter Schools*

The evolution of the charter school phenomenon nicely illustrates the education reform community's shift away from a focus on democracy toward an emphasis on market-based policy. Democracy was at the center of the early concept of charter schools that American Federation of Teachers president Albert Shanker outlined in a 1988 speech to the National Press Club and subsequent writings. Shanker saw charters as a vehicle for workplace democracy—where rank and file teachers could suggest ideas on how schools could be run better. He also believed charters offered the opportunity for socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic integration of students, drawing upon the example of a school he visited in Cologne Germany that educated Turkish immigrant students alongside native Germans. These laboratory schools would then share lessons with traditional public schools.<sup>37</sup>

But as the charter school movement grew, the idea shifted markedly from a democratic vision of teacher empowerment, school integration, and collaboration to one that suggested “charter schools are a vehicle for infusing competition and market forces into public education,” in the words of one leading charter advocate.<sup>38</sup> Charter schools became seen as a way to bypass elected teacher union leaders; they purposefully located in segregated neighborhoods; and they were pushed as a way to whip traditional public schools into shape. A 2013 review of charter school laws found that providing competition was the most widely cited purpose of charter school legislation.<sup>39</sup>

Across a variety of policy areas, then, the education reform community helped to radically shift the focus of public education. Being career and college ready became much more important than training students to become citizens. It seemed safe to focus on producing skilled workers for a market economy because America's highly successful experiment in self-governance appeared stable and firmly ensconced.

## Cost to Ignoring Democracy's Role

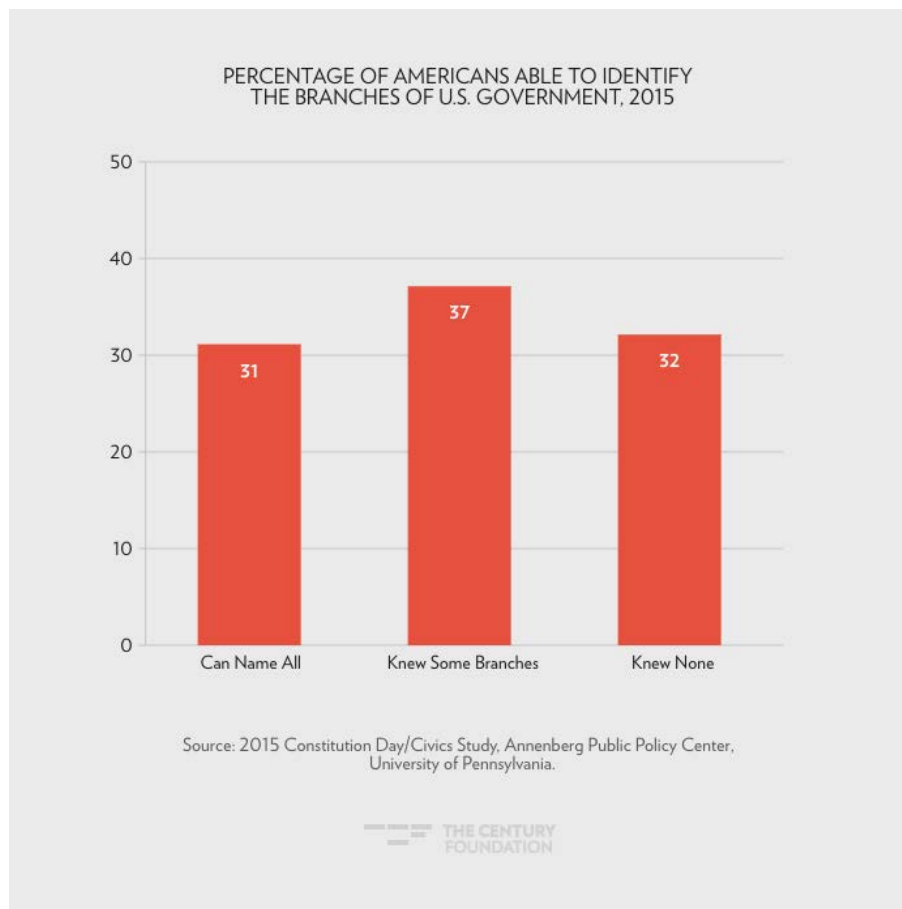
Today, however, we are seeing the costs of an unbalanced approach to public education that focuses on markets far more than democracy: dangerously low levels of civic knowledge, and a reduced faith in democratic values among Americans. These developments are particularly troublesome because they have occurred alongside two larger societal trends that undermine our democracy: a decline in labor unions, and increased political polarization by residential areas, all of which we explore below.

### *Low Levels of Civics Knowledge*

Americans' knowledge of basic civics is frighteningly scant. A 2015 survey conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy

Center of the University of Pennsylvania found that only 31 percent of Americans can name all three branches of government, and 32 percent cannot identify a single one. (See Figure 1.) The survey found that only 53 percent of Americans understood that a 5–4 decision by the U.S. Supreme Court constitutes law and must be followed; 15 percent believed that a 5–4 decision is sent back to Congress for reconsideration, and 13 percent thought that the decision would be returned to lower courts and decided there.<sup>40</sup>

**Figure 1**



Performance among students on the 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was also disturbingly low. Only 27 percent of fourth-graders, 22 percent of eighth-graders, and 24 percent of twelfth-graders performed at or above the proficient level in civics. Thirty-six percent of twelfth grade students failed to even reach the basic level in civics, signifying that they were unable to describe forms of political participation in a democracy, or draw simple conclusions from basic graphs, charts, maps, or cartoons.<sup>41</sup>

What is particularly disturbing is that civic literacy has not risen despite considerable gains in educational attainment.

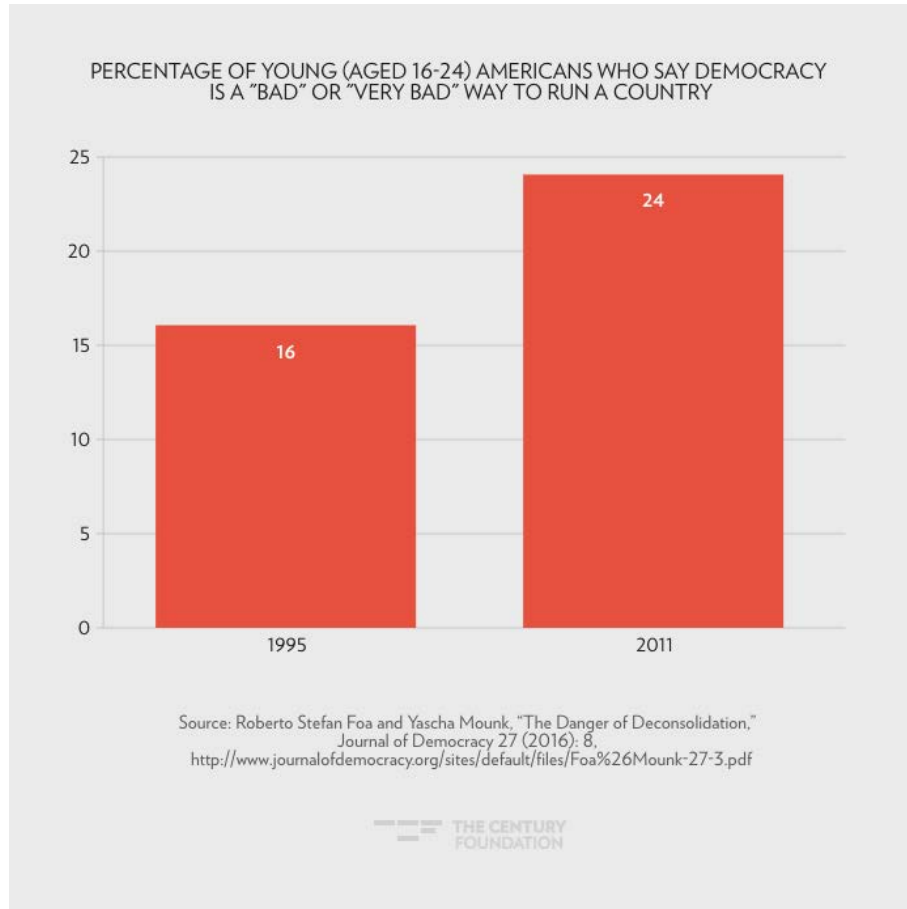
As scholar William Galston observed in 2003, “Although the level of formal schooling in the United States is much higher than it was fifty years ago, the civic knowledge of today’s students is at best no higher than that of their parents and grandparents.”<sup>42</sup> Among college graduates, older respondents perform significantly better than younger ones according to the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. While over 98 percent of college graduates over 65, for example, knew that the president cannot establish taxes, only 74 percent of graduates aged 25–34 understood this concept.<sup>43</sup>

## *Adherence to Democratic Values*

If schools are doing a poor job of imparting civic knowledge, they are also doing a poor job of inculcating an appreciation for the democratic values embodied in the Bill of Rights. In the 2015 Annenberg Survey, for example, over one-quarter of people (26 percent) would vote to alter or eliminate the Fifth Amendment so that courts could require a person testify against herself. Almost half (46 percent) opposed a prohibition on “double jeopardy”; the same percentage of people believe that the government should be permitted to prohibit a peaceful march down a main street if those marching expressed offensive views; and only half of respondents thought that the government should not be able to prohibit practice of a religion if a majority of voters perceived it to hold “un-American” views.<sup>44</sup>

The problem has grown over time, giving rise to some startling attitudes. Columnist Catherine Rampell points out that Americans have become, “steadily more open to anti-democratic, autocratic ideals.”<sup>45</sup> As researchers Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk note, trends in the World Values Survey show that Americans have shown a declining trust in institutions, including democracy.<sup>46</sup> When asked whether democracy is a good or bad way to run a country, 17 percent said bad or very bad, up from 9 percent in the mid-1990s. Among those ages 16 to 24, about a quarter said democracy was bad or very bad, an increase of one-third from a decade and a half earlier (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



Some 25 percent of millennials said it is “unimportant,” that in a democracy, people should “choose their leaders in free elections.” Among U.S. citizens of all ages, the proportion who said it would be “fairly good” or “very good” for the “army to rule,” has risen from one in sixteen in 1995, to one in six today.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, a June 2016 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute and the Brookings Institution found that a majority of Americans showed authoritarian (as opposed to autonomous) leanings. Moreover, fully 49 percent of Americans agreed that “because things have gotten so far off track in this country, we need a leader who is willing to break some rules if that’s what it takes to set things right.”<sup>48</sup>

### *Decline in Unions as Schools of Democracy*

The decline of public schools’ emphasis on democracy has been particularly disturbing because it has been accompanied by a parallel decline of labor unions, which serve as critical civic associations in healthy democracies. From the 1950s to today, union membership fell precipitously, from one in three to one in ten. This decline is closely associated with the hollowing out of the American middle class, which thriving democracies need to survive. But the drop in labor membership also has reduced the role of unions as incubators of democratic practice. Throughout much of the twentieth

century, labor unions served as what Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam calls “schools for democracy.”<sup>49</sup> Being involved in workplace decisions and collective bargaining, and voting for union leadership are important drivers of “democratic acculturation.” Union members also staff phone banks and go door to door recruiting voters, which increases civic participation among union members and nonmembers alike.<sup>50</sup> Relatedly, research shows that unions played an important role in countering “an authoritarian streak” among working-class voters. Seymour Martin Lipset found that organized labor made workers more inclined to embrace democratic norms by inculcating “civic virtues in its members.”<sup>51</sup> That critical force is greatly diminished today.

## *Political Polarization through Residential Segregation*

Finally, the crisis in civic education in our public schools comes at a time of increasing political polarization—including by residential areas—that makes it harder for democracy to operate well. Part of the democratic process is the education of citizens—by neighbors and news sources—that will help them consider a wide range of views and make up their minds about candidates and policy issues. But that continuing lifelong education through dialogue in a democracy no longer works the way it used to in the United States.

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Sociologist Robert Cushing and political analyst Bill Bishop have found that Americans have become increasingly likely to live in close proximity to those who share a political ideology. In the presidential election of 1976, 27 percent of voters lived in so called “landslide counties”—counties in which the winning presidential candidate won by twenty points or more. By the 2004 election, that number had reached 48 percent.<sup>52</sup> In 2016, a poll of Virginia voters found that more than half of Hillary Clinton supporters said they had no close friends or family voting for Donald Trump, and vice versa.<sup>53</sup>

We also are increasingly engaging with news sources and social media that confirm our preexisting hunches, creating political echo chambers that inhibit critical thinking. According to the Pew Research Center, consistently liberal voters are most likely to block, un-follow, or defriend someone on social media because they disagreed with that person’s

political stance. Meanwhile, consistent conservatives do the same and tend to receive their news from one conservative source, *FOX News*.<sup>54</sup> In this way, political polarization is helping compound the ineffectiveness of schools in making us good citizens.

## *Case Study: Donald Trump's Presidential Candidacy—A Twenty-First-Century Sputnik Moment*

These anti-democratic developments came to a head in the 2016 election and the disturbing rise of an authoritarian presidential candidate, Donald Trump, who ran on a platform that consistently rejected mainstream liberal democratic norms that historically have been embraced by Republicans and Democrats alike and nevertheless managed to win the presidency. The rise of a candidate who questioned several elements of constitutional democracy—including freedom of religion, freedom of the press, the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, and the peaceful transition of power following elections—should serve as a Sputnik moment for civics education and the need to model democratic values in how our schools are run. Just as Soviet technological advances triggered investment in science education in the 1950s, the 2016 election should spur renewed emphasis on the need for schools to instill an appreciation for liberal democratic values.

### *Attack on Widely Accepted Constitutional Norms*

Against a backdrop in which the American public school system has deemphasized democratic citizenship, and in which Americans have demonstrated less commitment to democratic institutions, Trump called for a series of attacks on liberal democratic values. While candidates have often been chided by the opposing party for rejecting constitutional norms, Trump's candidacy was different in kind. Fellow Republicans repeatedly had to distance themselves from their own standard-bearer for rejecting essential democratic norms.

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Michael Gerson, a former speechwriter for President George W. Bush, said that with Donald Trump, “we have reached the culmination of the founders’ fears: Democracy is producing a genuine threat to the American form of self-government.”<sup>55</sup> Peter Wehner, another veteran Republican official, wrote of Trump's candidacy: “The founders, knowing history and human nature, took great care to devise a system that would prevent demagogues and those with

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authoritarian tendencies from rising up in America. That system has been extraordinarily successful. We have never before faced the prospect of a political strongman becoming president. Until now.”<sup>56</sup> What set Trump apart, wrote University of Texas historian Jeffrey Tulis, is that “no other previous major party presidential candidate has felt so unconstrained by . . . constitutional norms.”<sup>57</sup> Consider:

- *Freedom of Religion.* The First Amendment provides for the free exercise of religion, yet during the campaign, Trump proposed a religious test on immigration, calling for “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States.”<sup>58</sup> He called for heavily surveillance of Muslim communities and their houses of worship, which Anthony Romero of the ACLU noted “would infringe upon American Muslims’ First Amendment right to exercise their religion freely without fear or intimidation.”<sup>59</sup> While these policies were widely rejected by mainstream Republican leaders, Trump’s announcements, disturbingly, were associated with his rise in the polls.
- *Freedom of the Press.* The free press is essential for holding government officials accountable, which is why the U.S. Supreme Court more than a half century ago suggested special protection from libel suits brought by public figures.<sup>60</sup> During the campaign, however, Trump promised to “open up” the nation’s libel laws. He revoked the press credentials of critical reporters from newspapers such as the *Washington Post* and *Politico*, “an almost unheard-of practice for a modern presidential candidate.”<sup>61</sup>
- *Rule of Law.* While President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney were criticized for engaging in waterboarding of terrorism suspects, Trump suggested he would do “a hell of a lot worse than waterboarding.”<sup>62</sup> Trump also called for murdering family members of terrorists, which is a violation of the Geneva Conventions.<sup>63</sup> When Trump was asked by a Fox News host what would happen if the military refused to follow orders to torture, Trump responded, “They’re not going to refuse me.” Such “impatience with constraints placed on democratic governments,” Dalibor Rohac of the American Enterprise Institute notes, is the hallmark of “authoritarianism.”<sup>64</sup>
- *An Independent Judiciary.* During the campaign, Trump famously criticized a federal judge presiding over a lawsuit against Trump University. He suggested an Indiana-born jurist of Mexican heritage, Gonzalo Curiel, was incapable of being neutral in the suit. Paul Ryan, Republican Speaker of the House, said, “Claiming a person can’t do their job because of their race is sort of like the textbook definition of a racist comment.”<sup>65</sup> Trump was scolded by Republican judge and former Attorney General Michael Mukasey, who called Trump’s position, “baseless and squalid.”<sup>66</sup>
- *Scapegoating Minorities.* More generally, Trump used the classic tactic of demagogues seeking to enhance their own power by whipping up animosity against society’s minorities. Trump focused mostly on Muslims and immigrants from Mexico, whom he broad brushed as “rapists.”<sup>67</sup> The founders warned against a “tyranny of the majority” that

overrode the rights of minorities. Some of the founders were particularly concerned about the rights of elites who owned property, but Trump used the classic ploy of going after elites who allegedly “coddle minorities.”<sup>68</sup>

- *Celebrating the Violence of the Mob.* Authoritarians often rely on violence to intimidate. During the campaign, when Trump was asked what would happen if he were denied the Republican nomination, he responded, “I think you’d have riots.” When protesters interrupted his rallies, Trump mused, “In the old days, protesters would be “carried out in a stretcher.”<sup>69</sup> Journalist Andrew Sullivan observes, “No modern politician who has come this close to the presidency has championed violence in this way.”<sup>70</sup> For Trump, violence is linked to the promise of strength, says Brookings Institution scholar Robert Kagan. “What [Trump] offers is an attitude, an aura of crude strength and machismo, a boasting disrespect for the niceties of the democratic culture that he claims, and his followers believe, have produced national weakness and incompetence.”<sup>71</sup>
- *Imprisoning Political Opponents.* The hallmark of authoritarian regimes, Dana Milbank notes, is the imprisonment of political opponents, which is what made chilling the constant refrain from the Republican National Convention’s lynch mob regarding the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee: “Lock her up!”<sup>72</sup> Donald Trump then doubled down on this idea, telling Hillary Clinton in the second presidential debate that if he wins, he would “instruct my attorney general to get a special prosecutor to look into your situation,” and adding that “you’d be in jail,” if he ran the country. “It’s a chilling thought,” said Michael Chertoff, head of the Justice Department’s criminal justice division in the administration of George W. Bush. “It smacks of what we read about tin-pot dictators in other parts of the world, where when they win an election their first move is to imprison opponents,” he said.<sup>73</sup>
- *Threatening Not To Respect Election Results.* Before the ultimate outcome of the election was known, during the third presidential debate with Clinton, Trump astounded observers by refusing to say he would respect the results of the election, a hallmark of American democracy for centuries. Trump would not commit to this principle despite the plea of the moderator, Chris Wallace of *FOX News*, who noted, “But sir, one of the prides of this country is the peaceful transition of power and that no matter how hard-fought a campaign is, that at the end of the campaign that the loser concedes to the winner.”<sup>74</sup> John McCain, the 2008 Republican presidential nominee, noted that while he did not like losing the election, he had “a duty to concede.” He said, “A concessions isn’t just an exercise in graciousness. It is an act of respect for the will of the American people.”<sup>75</sup>
- *Strongman to the Rescue.* Like a Central American strongman, Trump claimed in his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention, “I am your voice.” He declared, “Nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it.”<sup>76</sup> This sentiment, that Trump was the “man on the horseback to save a frightened and supine nation,” wrote Gerson, is a notion the founders would have held “in utter contempt.”<sup>77</sup>



- *A Preference for Authoritarians.* During the campaign, Trump famously and repeatedly showered admiration on Vladimir Putin, at one point saying the Russian dictator was “a leader far more than our leader.” Russian chess champion Garry Kasparov responded, “Vladimir Putin is a strong leader in the same way that arsenic is a strong drink.” He continued: “Praising a brutal K.G.B. dictator, especially as preferable to a democratically elected U.S. president, whether you like Obama or hate him, is despicable and dangerous.”<sup>78</sup> Trump also expressed admiration for Iraq’s dictator Saddam Hussein, Kim Jong Un of North Korea, and the Chinese leaders behind the Tiananmen Square massacre.<sup>79</sup> “There is no precedent for what Trump is saying,” notes former Mitt Romney advisor Max Boot. “George McGovern was not running around saying ‘what a wonderful guy Ho Chi Minh is!’”<sup>80</sup> Trump is not a totalitarian, Eric Chenoweth, an expert on democracy notes, because he does not have a fixed ideology. But he does seem to identify with authoritarians, who gain “political power with a clear aim to dominate and control the state.”<sup>81</sup>

The 2016 election stood apart from other elections, Chenoweth wrote. Historically, both parties, while differing on the size of government, regulation, taxation, and other issues “have remained within a broad democratic range and commit themselves to adhering to America’s constitutional foundations that establish and protect basic rights and a democratic system of governance.” During the midst of the 2016 campaign, however, we faced “an abnormal situation: one of America’s two major parties has nominated an explicitly authoritarian candidate for the presidency,” which posed “a present danger to American democracy.”<sup>82</sup> Reflecting on Trump’s campaign through July, Chenoweth wrote that the candidate “adopted many parts of the authoritarian toolkit from the last century: chauvinism, preying on people’s fears of national decline, promising an idyllic vision for the future based on a unique individual’s ability to lead the people and encouraging mass adulation for a political savior of the nation.”<sup>83</sup>

Running on this platform, Trump, a newcomer to politics, stunningly defeating sixteen other candidates for the Republican presidential nomination, several of them respected governors and senators with decades of political experience between them.<sup>84</sup> Along the way, he won more primary votes than any other Republican candidate in the party’s history.<sup>85</sup> America has long seen demagogues who rejected civil rights and civil liberties—from Huey Long to Father Charles Coughlin, and from Joseph McCarthy to George Wallace—but never before has a major political party nominated for presidency an individual who so thoroughly questioned widely accepted democratic norms of their era. “In terms of liberal democracy and constitutional order,” Andrew Sullivan wrote, “Trump is an extinction-level event.”<sup>86</sup> And then the unthinkable happened: Trump was elected president of the United States.

*Pronounced Success with Less-Educated Voters*

It has been broadly noted that Donald Trump performed particularly well with working-class white voters who lack college degrees. In a July 2016 poll, for example, this group supported Trump over Clinton 60 percent to 33 percent, compared with college-educated whites who polled 43 percent for Trump, 42 percent for Clinton.<sup>87</sup> Working-class whites constituted Trump's base, providing between 58 percent and 62 percent of his overall support.<sup>88</sup> At one point during the primaries, Trump himself memorably observed that he loved “the poorly educated,” who supported him so strongly.

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Of course, these voters have every right to make the political choices they would like in a democracy. And they have a right to be angry about a political establishment that has ignored their economic needs and created a vacuum for right-wing populism.<sup>89</sup> To be clear, people can legitimately agree or disagree with candidates on a variety of issues. Trump may be right or wrong on world trade, American involvement in NATO, taxes, gun control, or abortion. What sets this election apart, however, is the attack on the very principles of liberal democracy. And an authoritarian candidate's resonance with less-educated voters in particular raises the critical role public education can play in supporting democratic values and norms. The point, then, is not that Trump supporters are all “deplorable”; rather, what is deplorable is the failure of our education system to instill an essential belief in the values of constitutional democracy.

## **Policy Recommendations for Putting Democracy Back into Public Education**

On the heels of a presidential election in which an authoritarian candidate captured the country's highest office—with especially strong support from less-educated voters—we are faced with an urgent question: Moving forward, how can public schools do a better job of educating students to be responsible citizens who sustain America's experiment with constitutional government for future generations? Put differently, how can we put democracy back into education?

Below we outline several ideas for state, local, and federal policy makers. The first set of ideas has to do with directly improving the civics curriculum that students are taught; the second set of proposals has to do with improving the “hidden curriculum”—the messages sent to students about democracy by the critical choices we make about how we value and treat parents, community members, teachers, and students in our education system.

## *State and Local Recommendations*

### *Prioritizing Civics Education*

To begin with, schools must do a much better job to directly enhance students' appreciation for liberal democratic values. Exposure to existing civics classes is not enough. Ninety-seven percent of twelfth-grade students already report taking a civics or government class in high school.<sup>90</sup> State policies on civics have not been found to be associated with greater informed political participation by young adults.<sup>91</sup>

But quality of instruction does matter. Research finds that “done right, school-based civic education can have a significant impact on civic knowledge,” notes William Galston, and that such knowledge, in turn, “enhances support for democratic principles and virtues, promotes political participation, helps citizens better understand the impact of public policy on their concerns, gives citizens the framework they need to absorb and understand new civic information, and reduces generalized mistrust and fear of public life.”<sup>92</sup> Three reports—one from the Albert Shanker Institute, one from the Education Commission of the States and the National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement, and one from social psychologist Jonathan Haidt—provide important guideposts for improving civics education.

In 2003, the Albert Shanker Institute outlined a strategy for civics education that remains compelling today. The blueprint was endorsed by a wide variety of civil rights advocates, business and labor leaders, and public officials from various ideological backgrounds who were all committed to supporting democratic values. Signatories included progressives such as Bill Clinton, Henry Cisneros, Wade Henderson, John Lewis, and Richard Riley, but also conservatives such as Frederick Hess, Harvey Mansfield, and Norman Podhoretz.<sup>93</sup> The group eschewed relativism by declaring their conviction “that democracy is the worthiest form of human governance ever conceived.” They went on to suggest that because we are not born democrats, “we cannot take its survival or its spread—or its perfection in practice—for granted. We must transmit to each generation the political vision of liberty and equality that unites us as Americans, and a deep loyalty to the political institutions put together to fulfill that vision.”<sup>94</sup>

The group asked: how will young people be instilled with “an understanding of and an appreciation for their stunning political heritage? How do we educate citizens? How do we raise democrats?”<sup>95</sup> The Shanker Institute outlined a four-part strategy that called for:

1. A robust history/social studies curriculum, starting in the elementary years and continuing through every year of schooling;
2. A full and honest teaching of the American story;

3. An unvarnished account of what life has been and is like in nondemocratic societies; and

4. A cultivation of the virtues essential to a healthy democracy.<sup>96</sup>

The first prong—a robust history curriculum—is critical. “A serious engagement with history is essential to the nurturing of the democratic citizen,” the Shanker Institute noted. “Only history can give students an appreciation for how long and hard and tangled the road to liberty and equality has been.”<sup>97</sup> Through history classes, students learn to recognize the realities of human nature that protects them from “utopian fantasies” that mask antidemocratic ideas. Mastering a common core of American history can also bind us together and create “a common civic identity based on a patriotism of principle.”<sup>98</sup>

The second prong—telling the American story in an honest way—also helps prepare democratic citizens. This historical accounting should include the warts—slavery, the *Dred Scott* decision, the Triangle Shirt Waist fire, the Chinese Exclusion Act, Japanese internment, lynching, the persecution of gays, among others—but also discuss the movements to abolish slavery, to gain women’s suffrage, to establish worker safety, and to promote civil rights. The Shanker Institute notes,

From the accounts of these transformations—and of the individuals, the organizations, the movements that fought for them—students will recognize the genius of democracy: When people are free to dissent, to criticize, to protest and publish, to join together in common cause, to hold their elected officials accountable, democracy’s magnificent capacity for self-correction is manifest.<sup>99</sup>

In the past, textbooks have failed at this balance: in the early years, providing a whitewashed celebration of America; and in recent years, suggesting America’s sins are its essence, the Shanker Institute notes, leaving students concluding that the world is a hopeless place. A new balance must be struck.

The third prong—teaching students what life is like in non-free countries—will give students something to which American society can be compared. Children should be taught to realize that in many societies, there is no assumption that leaders should be chosen by the people, that governments can be freely criticized, or that trials must be fair. Exposure to these realities will generate questions among students—“How could these things happen?”—and will also provide students with “armor against antidemocratic ideas.”<sup>100</sup>

The fourth prong—cultivating the virtues essential to a healthy democracy—recognizes that formal democratic institutions are not enough for the survival of self-governance; we also need a citizenry equipped to grapple with important moral questions. History, literature, and biography can train “the heart as well as the head”; it can help students avoid the moral relativism that suggests it is only a matter of opinion whether, say, Hitler’s gas chambers are to

be condemned. While religious instruction is forbidden in the public schools, moral education is critical as “the basic ideas of liberty, equality, and justice, of civil, political and economic rights and obligations are all assertions of right and wrong, or moral values.”<sup>101</sup>

A 2014 report of the Education Commission of the States and the National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement also provides important guidelines on practices that can make for effective civic learning.<sup>102</sup> The groups suggest incorporating discussions of current issues—such as global warming, gun control, racial profiling, and immigration—into the classroom to make civics feel relevant to the lives of young people. The organizations say service projects and extracurricular activities, such as speech and debate and school newspaper, should be encouraged. Students also should be given the opportunity to participate in school governance. In New York, for example, students took on a project to reverse budget cuts to programs they deemed important—and won.

Finally, 2016 research by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt of New York University and Australian political scientist Karen Stenner sheds light on how civics education can help nurture democracy—and thwart authoritarian appeals—by emphasizing what we have in common as Americans. As Robert Pondiscio of the Fordham Institute notes, research by Haidt and Stenner suggest that the “authoritarian button on our foreheads” is pushed when people believe that society is “coming apart.”<sup>103</sup> While the old civics emphasis on the “melting pot” has serious problems, Pondiscio notes, swinging to the other extreme, where students only learn about differences, can feed a frightening backlash that promotes white nationalism and undermines inclusive democratic norms. While it is important to respect and honor ethnic, racial and economic differences, Pondiscio suggests, democratic impulses are fed when schools teach all the things that bind Americans together as well.

### *Modeling Democracy through School Governance and the Allocation of Opportunity*

Modeling democratic practices is as critical as explicitly teaching them in the curriculum. To reinforce the message of the civics book, students should be able to see firsthand that parents and community members and teachers have a role in democratic decision-making in schools; and that students are given genuinely equal opportunity.

### *Giving Parents and Community Members Voice in School Governance*

Do students see that parents and community members have input on key issues such as where new schools are built, or does a remote state actor or outside consultant make these decisions unilaterally? Below are three examples of inclusion.

- *The D.C. Compact.* In the years before Washington, D.C. schools chancellor Michelle Rhee implemented her motto that “collaboration is overrated,” district schools took a more democratic approach. As explained below (see

Washington, D.C. case study), in 2004, Clifford Janey created the D.C. Education Compact (DCED), made up of government leaders, community activists, foundation officials, business leaders, teachers, unions, and teachers and concerned citizens to be part of a dialogue for improving education and informing the district's strategic plan.<sup>104</sup> The group was given major responsibility for adopting in D.C. a version of the highly rated Massachusetts standards and accountability system. Michelle Rhee subsequently disbanded the DCED.

- *Newark Public Engagement Strategy*. In Newark, New Jersey, where residents felt disenfranchised by a state takeover of the district schools in 1995, Superintendent Janey sought to build community trust through an extensive public engagement strategy. (See Newark case study). Although the district had an elected school board that exercised only advisory power, Janey honored the group by meeting with them to discuss key decisions. His successor, Cami Anderson, by contrast, stopped attending advisory board meetings in the final year of her tenure as superintendent.<sup>105</sup>
- *St. Paul's Inclusive Bargaining*. Parents often feel excluded from important decisions made in collective bargaining agreements between teachers and management, and in preparation for the 2011 negotiation, the St. Paul, Minnesota teachers union sought to remedy that concern. The union met with parents to find out what sort of provisions they would like to see in the union-district contract and incorporated community goals into the bargaining process. In the negotiations, teachers sought smaller class sizes, less standardized testing, and the hiring of librarians, nurses, social workers, and counselors to better serve students. Although management initially rebuffed these concerns, calling them a matter of management prerogative, community support of a threatened teachers strike allowed the community and educators to prevail on the key issues at stake.<sup>106</sup>

### *Allowing Teachers to Participate in Workplace Democracy*

Do students see that teachers are part of democratic decision-making or is power concentrated in a single person—the principal? Are democratically elected teacher union leaders key players, or are they publicly denigrated? What do students observe?

- *Inclusion of Employees and Unions in Decision-Making in Newark*. Some leaders routinely vilify teacher unions and seek to bypass them. By contrast, in Newark, Clifford Janey treated the union as a valued partner and every employee—whether a principal, teacher, or custodian—was invited to make suggestions and toward a comprehensive strategic plan for the schools (see Newark case study).
- *Peer Review in Toledo, Ohio and Rochester, New York*. Another powerful way to model democracy for students—and improve educational outcomes—is through peer assistance and review programs for teachers.<sup>107</sup> Teacher union

leader Albert Shanker acknowledged that “some teachers are excellent, some are very good, some are good, and some are terrible.”<sup>108</sup> But how can schools weed bad teachers out of the profession without giving undue power to principals who often have very little knowledge of a teacher’s particular field and might play personal favorites? In places such as Toledo, Ohio, and Rochester, New York (see Rochester case study), expert teachers from outside a school work with struggling teachers in the same fields, seeking to provide assistance where possible, but ultimately recommending termination of employment in certain circumstances.<sup>109</sup>

The idea of teachers—and their unions—being involved in recommending termination of colleagues is controversial. Some critics liken union involvement in firing teachers to the fox guarding the hen house, while some hardline unionists object to a practice that chips away at teacher solidarity. But unions need a credible answer to the charge that they protect incompetent teachers; and in practice, teachers have been even tougher on colleagues than administrators have been in several jurisdictions, from Cincinnati, Ohio to Montgomery County, Maryland.<sup>110</sup> And in places that have peer review, students see workplace democracy in action: where teachers, like professors, doctors and lawyers, have a strong say in how their profession is policed.

- *Teacher-Run Schools in Newark, New Jersey and Elsewhere.* In Newark, New Jersey, Henderson, Minnesota, and elsewhere, teachers extend the democratic principle of peer review in the area of dismissals to virtually every realm of school affairs: teachers make decisions about hiring, curriculum, scheduling, and many other facets of schooling that are left to principals in most schools. Under his tenure in Newark, for example, Clifford Janey arranged for a contract waiver for teachers to start the Brick Avon Academy, a teacher-led traditional public school in which rank and file staff members elect fellow teachers to make decisions about curriculum, budget, hiring, and other school governance issues.<sup>111</sup> (See Newark case study.) The school, which draws on Newark’s poorest community, saw steep test score increases in subsequent years.<sup>112</sup> At teacher cooperatives such as Minnesota New Country School in Henderson, Minnesota, and Avalon School in St. Paul, teachers are given unparalleled say in running their schools. “Twenty-four brains are undoubtedly more powerful and smarter than one,” said one teacher at Avalon. The schools perform well academically, and the emphasis on democracy and collaboration filters through to students.<sup>113</sup>

### *Providing Students Equitable Access to Educational Opportunity*

Do students see that classmates of all races and economic backgrounds have access to the best schools and the most academically advanced tracks or do race and class appear to be highly predictive determinants of opportunity? Does the assignment of students to schools and academic tracks send the message that in a democracy, people of all backgrounds are equally valued, or that some are more worthy than others?

- *School Integration in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Rochester, New York; and Elsewhere.* The socioeconomic and racial

integration of schools is important to the health of a democracy for three distinct reasons: (1) integrated schools underline the democratic message that in America, we are all political equals; (2) integrated schools promote tolerance and acceptance and make demagogic appeals that scapegoat minorities less likely to be effective; and (3) the opportunity to attend integrated schools raises educational attainment, which, in turn, is directly correlated with democratic participation rates.

One key principle undergirding American democracy is that we all have not only an equal vote in elections but also an equal right to feel a part of the nation's democratic heritage. Because Americans are bound not by blood but by a set of democratic ideals, everyone—no matter what race or national origin or religion or length of time in this country—can lay equal claim on the ideas of Jefferson and Madison and Washington.<sup>114</sup> Of course, American history is riddled with examples of these ideals being trampled for certain groups, which is why it is important that we as a nation remain vigilant in the fight to preserve these ideals for all Americans. When American schoolchildren are educated in what are effectively apartheid schools—divided by race and class—the democratic message of equal political rights and heritage is severely undermined.

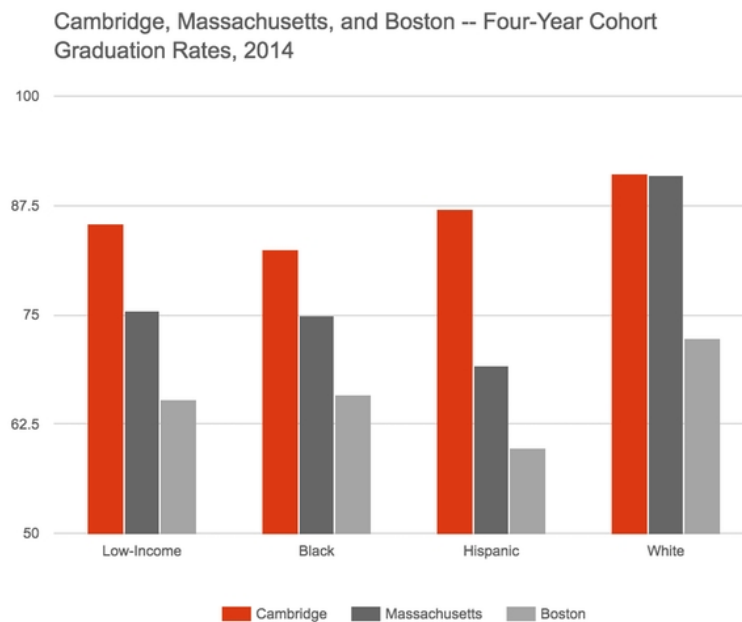
Likewise, demagogues can more effectively inflame passions against those they deem as “others”—Muslims, Mexican immigrants, or African Americans—when there are large audiences who do not personally know many members of these groups, partly because they were raised in communities and schools that were almost exclusively white and Christian. The profound lesson of the gay rights movement, for example, is that only when gay Americans openly came out as neighbors, coworkers, and classmates did efforts to demonize homosexuals lose their potency. So too, a large body of research finds that integrated schools can reduce prejudice and racism that stems from ignorance and lack of personal contact.<sup>115</sup> As Thurgood Marshall noted in one case, “Unless our children begin to learn together, then there is little hope that our people will ever learn to live together.”<sup>116</sup>

Providing an excellent, integrated education also promotes democracy by improving educational attainment, which increases political participation. Controlling for family socioeconomic status and academic achievement, a 2013 longitudinal study found that students attending socioeconomically integrated schools are as much as 70 percent more likely to graduate high school and enroll in a four-year college than those attending high-poverty schools.<sup>117</sup> Political philosopher Danielle Allen has suggested that denying an adequate education to low-income and minority students, as we routinely do, is another form of “voter suppression,” given the strong correlation between educational attainment and voter participation. In 2012, Census data show that 72 percent of adults with a bachelor's degree or more voted, compared with less than 32 percent of those with less than a high school education.<sup>118</sup>



Today, one hundred school districts and charter schools consciously consider socioeconomic status as a factor in student assignment, up from two in 1996.<sup>119</sup> In 2001, for example, Cambridge, Massachusetts adopted a plan to produce economic diversity through school choice. The schools have also proven remarkably integrated by race. Graduation rates in Cambridge for low-income, African American, and Latino students are as much as 20 percentage points higher than in nearby Boston (see Figure 3). A similar choice program for socioeconomic diversity has been adopted in Rochester, New York, among other districts (see Rochester case study).

**Figure 3**



Download

- Addressing Within-School Integration in Rochester, New York.* In many communities, school buildings are integrated by race, socioeconomic status, and special education status, but individual classrooms are not, a phenomenon which often denies opportunity to disadvantaged students and runs counter to the democratic message that public schools are designed to impart. In the early 1980s, for example, most students with disabilities in Rochester, New York schools were taught in separate classrooms, triggering a complaint to the Office of Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Education and, ultimately, a consent decree. In 1997, the inclusion rates were still below 20 percent, and superintendent Janey set a goal of 70 percent inclusion.<sup>120</sup> Between 1999 and 2002, the inclusion of students with disabilities into regular learning environments rose from 32.8 percent to 71.4 percent, and performance of students with disabilities in fourth grade English Language Arts exams exceeded similar students statewide.<sup>121</sup> Strong efforts were also made to make sure that special education and minority students had access to rigorous AP and

International Baccalaureate classes (see Rochester case study).

- *Giving Students a Chance to Practice Democracy in Newark, New Jersey; the State of Maryland; and Elsewhere.* Students throughout the country are taught democracy and civic engagement by running for office in student government, writing for school newspapers, and engaging in volunteer activities to strengthen the community. In the state of Maryland, for example, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend spearheaded the first effort nationally to require all students to engage in community service as a requirement for high school graduation.<sup>122</sup>

In Newark, New Jersey, many people had for years held low expectations for disadvantaged students, but under Superintendent Janey, the district placed a major emphasis on speech and debate and service learning. The school district converted an old high school sheet metal shop into a distinguished courtroom with mahogany furniture and hosted mock trials so students could learn the judicial process. Debate was expanded to every high school in the district. Students, who were stereotyped as gang members, volunteered in local hospitals in a service program that was nationally recognized (see Newark case study).

#### *Creating Charter Schools that Model Democracy*

Finally, there are a small but growing number of charter schools that are fulfilling Albert Shanker's original vision as vehicles for promoting democratic values by giving teachers voice and integrating students of different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds. My colleague Halley Potter and I profile several of these schools in our book, *A Smarter Charter: Finding What Works for Charter Schools and Public Education*.

One such school is City Neighbors Charter School in Baltimore, which opened in 2005. The schools' founder, Bobbi Macdonald, explains that "democracy and public education" are at the heart of the schools' philosophy. Teachers are part of a union (as are all charter teachers in Maryland), which is something Macdonald embraced rather than resisted. And teachers are represented on the board of the charter, providing them with substantive voice. Most key decisions are made through collaborative committees that include teachers, parents and administrators. The school also intentionally located in a diverse neighborhood. Today, the student body is richly diverse by race (54 percent black, 42 percent white) and income (42 percent low income).<sup>123</sup> While charters are generally more likely to be segregated and less likely to provide teacher voice than traditional public schools, City Neighbors stands as an example of how charters can embody the best democratic ideals.

### *The Federal Role in Supporting Democratic Values*

It is unclear whether a Department of Education under Trump will urge reforms in civic education. But in the long haul,

what steps can be taken to strengthen the civic health of the nation? How can we expand the focus of public education to include not only being “college and career-ready” but also “civic-ready”?<sup>124</sup> Broadly speaking, federal policies should support the state and local efforts outlined above—to prioritize a rich curriculum in civics education; and to encourage schools to model democratic practices for students, by giving parents and communities voice in school governance, enabling teachers to participate in workplace democracy, and ensuring students are given access to integrated schools and integrated classrooms. Meeting those various goals will take sustained effort, but in addition, we outline three specific recommendations that can be acted upon in the years to come: (1) federal and state accountability measures should include civic knowledge alongside math, reading, and science; (2) schools should be rewarded when adults model democratic practices for students; and (3) federal charter school programs should encourage those schools that promote democratic practices.

#### *Include Direct Measures of Civic Readiness in Federal Accountability*

If we believe the role of public schools in sustaining our democracy is important, then civic literacy should be given equal weight to that provided to math, reading, and science test scores in education accountability schemes. No Child Left Behind defined success very narrowly, but the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) allows states to broaden the concept of what makes a school a success, an important step in the right direction (see below).

When the underlying federal law—the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—is next reauthorized, Congress could elevate the importance of civics education. In the meantime, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) should restore civics education testing for the fourth and twelfth grades. It is critical to know, as soon as reasonably possible: Do students have civics knowledge? In the long term, it would also be good to begin tracking a more robust set of outcomes: Do graduates of a school vote, volunteer, and get involved in democratic activities, such as public service and political campaigns? A democracy cannot thrive without active citizens, so just as there is a push to link schools to wage outcomes, so too, we should find creative ways to track post-high school civic participation.

#### *Give Credit for Modeling Democracy under ESSA's Framework*

ESSA requires, for the first time, that schools be judged not only by standardized test scores, but also based on “School Quality or Student Success Measures” that might include items such as student engagement, student access to and completion of advanced coursework, school climate and safety, or “other indicators” that might include measures such as physical fitness, access to the arts, climate surveys, and social-emotional skills.<sup>125</sup> This development involves a proper recognition that reducing schools to a few test score results fails to capture the rich set of goals which public schools are charged with meeting.

In the future, states should develop—and the U.S. Department of Education should approve—assessments that measure the degree to which schools are modeling democratic practices for students. How involved are teachers in decision making? Parents? Community members? How racially and socioeconomically integrated are the schools?<sup>126</sup> Is access to a high-quality curriculum and AP classes widely available, or constrained mostly to advantaged students? We cannot expect public schools to do a good job of teaching students to be thoughtful citizens who embrace democracy if the schools do not themselves reflect democratic values and norms.

### *Supporting Charter Schools that Model Democratic Practices*

The federal government provided \$333 million to charter schools in fiscal year 2016, and has provided more than \$3 billion since charter schools were first created in the 1990s.<sup>127</sup> Federal funding properly focuses on schools that are likely to improve academic achievement and work skills, but little recognition is provided to the role that charter schools can play in promoting democratic values. Do students observe a democratic structure in which their teachers, parents, and broader members of the community have a say in how the school is run? Do students enjoy a racially and economically integrated environment? Alongside academic criteria, this hidden curriculum about democratic values should be a part of what the federal government supports in charter schools.

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**Do students observe a democratic structure in which their teachers, parents, and broader members of the community have a say in how the school is run? Do students enjoy a racially and economically integrated environment?**

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Federal funds for starting up new charter schools should provide a priority to those that (a) are likely to promote academic achievement; (b) provide teachers with democratic voice in the workplace (either by providing an automatic opportunity to vote to bargain collectively and/or provide teachers a role on the charter government board); and (c) have plans to promote socioeconomic and racial integration (such as enrolling students across a region, employing targeted recruitment, or using a weighted lottery to ensure student diversity).<sup>128</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Public education in the United States has always been justified in large measure for its role in supporting America's grand experiment in self-governance. In recent years, we have let that goal slip as economic concerns have all but

subsumed the democratic purposes of public education. The 2016 presidential election should serve as a powerful impetus for action. New policies and investments are needed to ensure that our nation, which has been a shining example of democratic values for the world, can continue to play that role for generations to come.

## Notes

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# CASE STUDY: ROCHESTER

## Case study to Richard D. Kahlenberg and Clifford B. Janey, “Putting Democracy Back Into Education”

Clifford Janey | November 10, 2016

In the wake of growing tensions among leaders of the education reform movement, the debate about democracy in public schools gets lost. Such was the case in Rochester, New York. When I arrived in 1995, Rochester—the poorest city in upstate Monroe County—still had high expectations for its children, families, and communities. It was clear to leaders representing unions, city hall, the business community, the school board and, of course, the media that great teaching will always matter. But how do you create equal access for great teaching, grounded in the principles of democracy? And how do we ensure equal access to challenging classes?

### **COLLABORATION TO IMPROVE TEACHING**

Rochester City School District (RCSD), like other urban districts, explored lots of ideas and innovative practices through district policy and collective bargaining agreements. However, variation in learning persisted. Without a sufficient supply of quality

teachers, opportunities to close the teaching gap were diminishing as the inequality divide widened. And, high stakes testing accelerated the divide, denying equal access to rich curricula, exceptional pedagogy, content knowledge, and instructional strategies that characterize the foundation of excellent teaching. But how do you create access to great teaching?

Upon arriving in Rochester in the sweltering summer of 1995, the city was embroiled in heated debates and discussions around its status as the twelfth-poorest urban center in the country. Poverty, given its reach and depth, presented formidable challenges to schools, families, and communities. There was a pressing need to inspire the general public with an agenda that was not grounded in good will alone. Parents and residents had witnessed a series of union-led, district-supported education reforms. At the center of the reforms was improving teaching quality, mentoring new teachers, and upgrading skill sets of veteran teachers. Creating good schools requires more than good teaching. Good

communities require more than family health support systems, continuous education for career employment opportunities, and access to nurturing environments. Good schools in good communities have a clear intersection, but do not always find the preferred route to collaboration. It was within this context that I sought a sustainable source of change.

In 1987, RCSD had adopted a path-breaking peer assistance and review program to support struggling teachers and remove ineffective ones. But by the mid-1990s, the program needed to be updated. So in 1996, the district introduced a “professional support” program that provided confidential mentoring to any teacher who wanted it.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the district’s best recruitment efforts, it suffered an inexcusable loss of good teachers. The plan to stem this loss involved collaborative strategies between the teachers’ union and the district leadership, which resulted in a new collective bargaining agreement. In my view, the mentoring program was in business terms a clear return on investment. For parents, it meant their child had a good teacher, and one less worry. In 2000, the mentoring program provided instruction, guidance, and support to 593 new teachers, which enabled the retention rate for Rochester’s teachers to reach an average of 86.6 percent, well above the national norm. While realizing the benefits of mentoring, I also had concerns about the selection process. What I found was that mentors were selected more for how they mentored, and not enough for the ongoing excellence that they demonstrated as a teacher. In my mind, they needed both.

## **INCLUSION OF MINORITY AND SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS**

The other major area for improvement involved the inclusion of minority and special education students

in challenging and enriching classes. In 1995, when I arrived in Rochester, it was not considered a bustling-growth city, but it was still in the midst of a highly attractive regional economy. For students, college and career opportunities meant being academically ready, and being ready meant having access to courses and curricula that facilitated a successful high school narrative and graduation.

However, in a response to community complaints about access and inequality, the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights conducted an investigation and confirmed three findings of major concern:

1. over-representation of black and Hispanic students in out-of-school suspensions;
2. over-representation of black and Hispanic students referred to and classified in special education; and
3. under-representation of black and Hispanic students in high level academic course sequence for college honors, independent study, and advanced placement.

My briefing by the Department of Education was comprehensive and compelling, but did not require any affirmative action on my account. More precisely, the findings that were confirmed about eighth grade academic performance of black and Hispanic students were that, even when those students’ performance was equal to or higher than their white classmates, no corrective action was required.

When I arrived in Rochester, the eighth-grade minority students who in the report had been deemed eligible for higher level courses were now in the tenth grade. Two years had lapsed since the release of the report, and while the district had not been required to take

any affirmative corrective action, I did so immediately. The rules of fairness would not indicate otherwise. In retrospect, to do nothing would have relegated high schools to segregation holding pens for talented minority students, where the legacy left by Thurgood Marshall would find its way to darkness. It was Marshall who said “history teaches that grave threats to liberty often come in these times of urgency when constitutional rights seem too extravagant to endure.” Through collaboration, Rochester became a better place to live and learn.

By law, public school districts must serve all students, regardless of race, income, and ability. But in today’s urban environments, there are notable exceptions. Issues of race, income, and ability become not just a state of being, but a matter of policy with unintended consequences.

Another lesson learned from the RCSD is its concern for social justice for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities are protected against discrimination under the Individual Disabilities Education Act and section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. The Rochester narrative makes the case for students with disabilities to have reasonable accommodations when included in effective classrooms, as well as their involvement in extra curricula activities, that were not inclusive of them before. I was encouraged by the shared value of social justice among parents, advocates, and school staff, especially teachers and principals. Their indefatigable efforts account not only for the high inclusion rates, significant reduction of the achievement gap and confidence by the Federal District Court that we had the will and capacity to continue democratic principles of inclusion in support of students with disabilities.

## ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

While I was serving as superintendent of schools in Rochester from 1995–2002, academic achievement was universally defined as having demonstrated a

pattern of appreciable growth among all subgroups on the English language arts (ELA) and mathematics state assessment tests in grades four and eight. The data show that, over a three year period (2000, 2001 and 2002) the RCSD had more consistent and greater gains for two minority subgroups (African American and Hispanic) as compared to the same subgroups at the state level. Also, RCSD made great strides in closing the achievement gap between white and African American students on the eighth grade ELA in New York State. The gap between African American and white students for eighth grade ELA was 12.1 percent in 2000, and 6 percent in 2002, compared to the state level at 16.6 percent in 2000 and 12.3 percent in 2002. At that time, the new assessments did not set the school district back; rather, they gave us a new challenge that proved to be within our reach.

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## Notes

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# CASE STUDY: WASHINGTON, D.C.

## Case study to Richard D. Kahlenberg and Clifford B. Janey, “Putting Democracy Back Into Education”

Clifford Janey | November 10, 2016

The communities of Washington, D.C.—residents, and particularly their children—endured inequalities by race and income long before my time as superintendent of schools, and sadly, they are still felt today, if less so. Inequalities have had a long history of discussion in the nation’s capital, via the Supreme Court—from the landmark case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 to and beyond *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. In Washington, D.C., inequalities by income and/or race had been compounded over the years by financial scandals in various levels of government. When I arrived, I knew dramatic action was needed, and suggested the creation of a new strategy. I was personally not unfamiliar with segregation in public education. Growing up in a segregated section of Boston public housing, I came face to face with the effects of segregation. My departure from the infamous Dearborn school and entrance in Boston Latin School was more a result of exception at the classroom level and continued family support, than the Boston Public School System providing equal access to excellence in

teaching for all. The Boston experience was not unique, as Colby King (the *Washington Post*’s Pulitzer Prize recipient) recently wrote: “second class status can go beyond the use of books and materials discarded by elite schools in a district.”

### THE D.C. COMPACT

Building a new compact between District of Columbia Public Schools for both its local and state responsibilities required a community commitment in which collaboration became a value shared and practiced by members of the compact. The D.C. Education Compact (DCEC)—with more than three hundred members and one hundred stakeholders, including Mayor Anthony Williams, School Board President Peggy Cooper Cafritz, and City Council Chair Linda W. Cropp—worked side by side with parents, teachers, principals, representatives from local foundations, social service agencies, community-based organizations, and local community colleges and universities. It was from a sector of D.C. education Compact that I was able to present a new set of state learning standards based on the

nationally recognized standards of Massachusetts. We formed a collaborative relationship with the Office of the Commissioner of Education in Massachusetts, led by Dr. David Driscoll. This collaboration proved to be vital for a citation from the Council of Great City Schools as one of the fastest-improving districts in the country on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. It formed the framework for a different sector group to determine the formation of a new state student assessment system; that is, the District of Columbia Assessment System (DCAS), modeled after the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS).

## ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Moving forward, turning community good will into results became the mantra of the district. With the creation of the Master Education Plan, I was able to move the district academically forward while repairing out of date, inefficient support business systems. During my tenure from 2004 to 2007, I began implementing the Master Education Plan which led to some strong results. The outcomes were more positive, in fact, than for my successor, Michelle Rhee, who claimed to improve D.C. public schools with such fanfare.

Diane Ravitch, writing in the Washington Post, noted: “From 2005–07, under Janey, black fourth-grade students made a five-point gain in reading, but only a three-point gain under Rhee; Hispanic students made a 13-point gain in reading during Janey’s tenure, but only a one-point gain from 2007–09.”<sup>1</sup>

These academic gains made during my tenure were not achieved with half of the district’s teachers and a third of the principals having resigned, fired, or retired, as was true under Rhee.

People who think education reform is going to happen with a walk-off home run are sadly mistaken; there’s no magic bullet, no single, untested remedy. In its laser focus

on teacher quality, the reform movement is ignoring the economic and social health of urban neighborhoods. Turning around schools means doing the same with the communities in which those schools reside.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Diane Ravitch, “Richard Whitmire’s account of Michelle Rhee’s schools tenure,” Washington Post, April 8, 2011.



# CASE STUDY: NEWARK, NEW JERSEY

Case study to Richard D. Kahlenberg and Clifford B. Janey,  
“Putting Democracy Back Into Education”

Clifford Janey | November 10, 2016

Today’s urban school districts are challenged not only by the socioeconomic factors that fuel inequalities, but also by the language of pain heard so often in the voices of the poor. When those voices are met with indifference, it creates an adversarial climate conducive only to education reform by disruption. For those school district leaders who view the value of public engagement on a nuisance meter, both transparency and collaboration have high ratings and therefore, are routinely ignored. Instead, governing through a silver-bullet approach—say, adapting everything to a business model—has become a political solution for “fixing” things that need a more-enduring cure.

In an unparalleled national effort to support targeted accountability—aimed almost exclusively at disadvantaged communities and their classrooms—mayors and governors continue to lobby for the control of schools and their funding, but in the end bear little to no responsibility for their fate. With public engagement, transparency and collaboration seen as

virtues of past, more muscular approaches have been flexing their way through city halls and state legislatures. Despite growth in the business model of governance, there has been little yield in making a case for change. For too many district leaders and their partners, it has become simply a matter of what you believe and not what you know, while students, teachers, and families are left floundering waiting for the next wave of reform to be imposed. In Newark, I took a different path and implemented a new strategy.

## **PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK**

While I had ten years of experience as a superintendent when arriving in Newark, I was an outsider. Yet, not being a “Newarker” was not always a curse, sometimes it was a blessing. Not being from Newark afforded me leadership insights into seemingly frozen policies in critical areas such as student attendance, sports, college/work readiness, and advanced placement courses, all of which were areas essential to the reclamation work

begun by my predecessors. I was an outsider, yet I had insider urban leadership pedagogy that led me to embrace a public engagement framework that involved community engagement as a strategy for problem solving; and community engagement as a resource to build civic capacity.

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AS A STRATEGY FOR PROBLEM-SOLVING**

By thinking in terms of system change, vetted through community conversations and affirmed after debate at advisory board meetings, I was able to enact policies that had a chance to survive and flourish. A principle for building relationships that were aligned with system change promoted the understanding that tolerance of dissent is an attitude that is learned; but when it is perceived as disingenuous, it can contribute weightily to disruption. Even when the dissent is arguably unfair and personal, district leaders cannot choose to vacate their seat at the table. And neither toleration of dissent, nor outright disregard for it, are acceptable rationales for dishonoring the advisory authority of an elected school board. By contrast, inclusive public engagement is deliberately transparent and promotes opportunities for problem solving, as does inclusive leadership. Courting conflict and taking heavy dosages of me-too-ism, guarantee the erosion of “public” in public education.

An advisory board is a unique thing. Its legal authority over consequential decisions regarding budgets, union and service contracts, and so on, was consultative, and their vote was not legally binding. In fact, the superintendent had the authority to override and or change the advisory vote of the school board. However, it was a mistake to underestimate the board’s political clout. With some exceptions, advisory board members saw their role as legitimate advocates of support for public education in Newark, and connected

daily with other public elected officials. During budget deliberations, it was a mighty challenge for them to suspend feelings of grief and loss about board-supported programs that had achieved only limited success.

However, working with the corporate community, I was able to bring to the district an innovative, sustainable initiative that required no financial contribution from the State of New Jersey or the City of Newark. Developing authentic partnerships with the academic, corporate, and social service communities became essential to the work ahead. For example, the partnership which began in 2010 was between The Newark Public Schools and Public Service Electric and Gas Company of New Jersey (PSE&G) recognized the intersection of interests between career plans for Newark students, environmental challenges, and innovative leadership on the part of Ralph Larosa, CEO of PSE&G. The model program afforded no cost to the district and would reduce carbon emission through the installation of solar panels that were housed on the roofs of five schools. In effect, the carbon footprint would be reduced by three thousand tons of carbon dioxide per year. In addition, more than four hundred local homes in the area of the designated schools benefitted from this nontraditional partnership. Students benefitted as well by learning to design, install and maintain solar panels under the tutelage of staff from a local minority business.

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AS A RESOURCE TO BUILD CIVIC CAPACITY**

In an already crowded and competitive landscape for talent, Newark had been existing within the state administrative boundaries as a dependent district for well over a decade. I chose to begin my tenure with an inclusive plan, holding a town hall meeting where every employee, no matter what position, could attend, as they all were acknowledged as important contributors

to the education of our children, welfare of our families, and the renaissance of our community. Over seven thousand employees and community activists attended this historic convocation. In reflection, Lucille Davy, former Education Commissioner for the State of New Jersey, commented that she herself never had an experience like this. She said “it is rather overwhelming to see all seven thousand plus of you make magic this year. . . . If teachers are going to truly prepare students for the future, they need support from everyone.” A teacher, Fathiyyah Salaam-Mott, at American History High School, expressed her optimism this way: “I look forward to [Janey] putting everything in place that he talked about. I hope it works out the way he plans, and I hope everyone is on board.”

Over the next several months, I established with the support from the school board and the community a series of round table community conversations to lay out the critical issues and pathways for success in schools, and families without economic security. The series of round table conversations led by school and parent leaders was intended to listen to every voice keeping in mind the counsel of Salaam-Mott, “I hope everyone is on board.” That every voice should matter at all in increasingly power-centric education reform environments was indeed a radical idea then and still is now. I can recall and being approached by a first time participant who asked, “Doc, I am allowed to speak?” I said reassuringly, “of course, and let me know how things go.” During the course of conversations across the city over five hundred voices were heard whose context became the framework of Newark’s first comprehensive strategic plan Great Expectations.

## ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

During my tenure of the Newark public schools, I helped boost high school math scores by 10 percentage points. From 2009 to 2011, the percentage of high school students passing state language arts increased by 14.8

percentage points,<sup>1</sup> and the proportion passing state math tests increased by 8.3 percentage points. Among students in grades 3-8, Newark students outpaced the gains of students statewide in four or six grades in mathematics.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Patrick L. Kennedy, “Beating the Odds,” Boston University School of Education, Spring/Summer 2012, 2.