INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATIONAL INQUIRY

AGENDA FOR EDUCATION IN A DEMOCRACY (AED) SCHOLARS

OVERVIEW OF THE AED SCHOLARS PAPERS:

THE CREATION OF A WISE AND HEALTHY PEOPLE
AND A CULTURE FOR SUSTAINING AND RENEWING
THIS POPULACE

Work in Progress by

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For the second half of the twentieth century into the present one, the United States of America has been awash with proposals for "reforming" its system of public schooling. Over these years, trillions of dollars of local, state, and federal funds and philanthropic foundation grants have gone into efforts to change and improve various pieces of the whole. But the deep structure, systemics, and regularities of the schooling enterprise and local elementary and secondary schools that hardened into place during the first half of the century have changed in their aesthetics but little in design, substance, and daily practice.

One of the most comprehensive inquiries into this sluggish passage of American schooling through the twentieth century is that of educators David Tyack and Larry Cuban of Stanford University. Their aptly titled book, *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of School Reform*, was published in 1995.[1] Their conclusions were similar to those of John Goodlad and his colleagues whose comprehensive research studies concentrated on the century's concluding three decades.[2] They found little change in the systems and regularities of schooling and the public symbols of its structure and conduct. They also noted that the longstanding layered structure of authority and responsibility inhibits change and innovation. Promising ideas for improvement come and go, they observed, and sometimes return for brief attention but rarely dent the deep structures.

The range of research-based reasons for little change over the years in the schooling enterprise and individual schools provides in itself *the major reason* for this desultory condition: many multilayered, disconnected, differently staffed and managed, modestly causal pieces, combined with some enormous differences in their degrees of influence on the system. And educators with the least agency for determining the specified outcomes carry the heaviest load of accountability.

One need only cite a few of the realities, differing in character and impact, that frustrate processes of continuously renewing our schools to begin to understand why reform has failed and compelling innovation has stalled and then faded. Perhaps the most important of these is the absence of common purpose for education and individual schools among the major players: policymakers, business leaders, academics, schooling personnel, and the other community members that make up the moral ecology that holds this nation together. Our failure to reach agreement on the question, "Why do we educate in a Democracy?" is one serious problem in seeking real change. How can we effectively assess any societal institution if we don't know the sought after outcome?

While we are hopeful that a new perspective on education in the current administration will broaden the view of the purposes of education moving away from only emphasizing that which is easily measured, but there are no signs yet that this will happen. In fact, one major piece of new funding, "Race to The Top," includes as proposed conditions for funding a focus on mathematics, science and technology; a removal of barriers to using valued-added measures to assess teachers; the implementation of alternate routes to teacher certification, including those offered outside colleges and universities; a reliance on standardized test score data and a stipulation that such data be available to teachers within 72 hours of the test; and a removal of all limits to the number of charter schools.[3] Many of the more than one thousand responses to these proposed regulations filed with the Department of Education raised concerns about the narrow view of education represented by the regulations.[4] The issue papers that are presented here, especially the first one, also express concerns about what we might expect from the current administration. On a more positive note Secretary Duncan has committed publically to examining No Child Left Behind and building a law that "respects the honored, noble status of educated—who should be valued as skilled professionals rather than mere practitioners and compensated accordingly."[5]

In addition to concerns raised about proposed federal policy, there are other contributors to our society's failure to provide the education our youth require:

- The absence of mission-directed ongoing renewal in almost the entire schooling and teacher education enterprise.
- The misfit between repeated reliance on a consistently failing linear, input-output model of school "reform" and the complex, differing ecologies of the nation's schools often characterized by fragmented structures and thoughts.
- An inexcusable range in the quality of institutions of higher education and their programs for the education of teachers of teachers and school leaders.
- The widespread lack of knowledge and informed community dialogue about education and schooling and, consequently, the absence of the necessary informational and intellectual context for the wise choices and guidance of voters, school board members and other policymakers.
- A system of schooling put together in different pieces at various times, never assembled into a smooth sequence geared to the realities of child and youth growth and development. Some question whether schooling can even be characterized as a "system."
- The failure to dramatically increase the graduation rate in urban schools or to close the achievement gap present for those we now label as "minorities." This is especially significant as we approach, over the next 25 years or less, the end of a majority.[6]
- A grossly inadequate range of educational alternatives for imminent graduates of secondary schools. Going on to college is not the only possible outcome.
- An almost complete absence (other than the production of textbooks) of resource centers for the knowledge-based renewal of school curricula.
- Inadequate attention to and elimination of the gross inequities in the educational capital children and youths bring to school that lie outside the scope of schools to redress.
- The widespread failure of faculty in schools, colleges, and departments of education; faculty in arts and sciences; faculty in K-12 schools; and members of the broader community to collaborate to solve educational issues or even to deliver educational services let alone conceive of the purposes of education in a democracy as broader than transmitting content knowledge.

One could go on and on with the listing of longstanding, much-discussed and little successfully addressed issues and problems that seemingly haunt both reform from the outside and renewal from the inside of schooling and school.

For this work, we argue that there are three necessary conditions that characterize the good society. All others are derivative. The necessary three are wise people, a healthy populace, and a culture for which sustaining and renewing the first two conditions are its top priorities.

We argue that there are these fundamental elements necessary to achieve a successful democracy:

- The most promising and legitimate cultural agency for creating and sustaining in the United States of America a wise, democratic people is its system of public schooling. But that system has hardened into place and requires comprehensive purpose and complete rehabilitation, and the absence of a shared public view on the purposes of education extends to education outside of schools. What must be done has never been done.
- What makes what must be done unique is that the necessary reconfiguration must be *of the whole and simultaneous*, not linearly and not in *disconnected* pieces. Each piece must have its own integrity but always as part of an integrated whole. And each piece must have easy access to all the other pieces of the whole.

- There has been considerable inquiry over the last several decades into the change process in virtually every field of endeavor, including schooling, mostly in the business community but little sharing of lessons learned. Change attempted, research conducted, and lessons learned have commonly favored what exists, not boundary-breaking innovation. Nonetheless, think-tank development of systems, complexity, and chaos theories have brought attention to the need for all walks of life to break out of cultural domination of machine-age principles of top-down management.
- Even though literature on the schooling enterprise over the past century provides a picture of sluggish change, the brush obscuring the paths to a renewing mode are steadily being trimmed away. And, although the nature and configuration of those paths have come out of small-scale interventions, there are now enough of these to provide considerable guidance to large-scale ventures

The papers that are included in this collection have been prepared to provide grounding for other initiatives undertaken by either the Agenda for Education in a Democracy (AED) Scholars Group or the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER) to deal with four of the larger issues that frustrate our efforts to develop the good society: one in which the people are both healthy and wise and the culture as a whole—a democratic culture—is supportive. The four issues:

1. Gross **inequities** in virtually every component of this nation's system of public education accompanied by a large element of nonintentional education: financial support; beginning school; advancement through the grades; segregation by race, academic performance, curriculum, and instruction; diversity of opportunity; deliberate intent; and more.

2. Inattention to the huge body of information we have about **individual differences** among humans and about human development in general. In addition to the inattention are the disrespect addressed to individuals who appear not to fit cultural norms and the tyrannical behaviors of so-called leaders in many of our corporations and institutions.

3. The general **failure** of policymakers, professionals, and the general public to work together in a **common vision** for the public purposes of education in a democracy and the continued and little-challenged bureaucratic structure and leadership of our entire system of elementary, secondary, and tertiary schooling.

4. The continued failure of our society, especially at the policy level, to comprehend that the conventional wisdom and dominant behavior of our people stem from **nonintentional and intentional educating** by forces other than our schools.

The papers that have been prepared on each of these four concerns seek to conceptualize elements of the issues and raise questions such as the following for our consideration.

From issue paper 1, with a focus on **inequities**:

> Do the concepts of equity and equality mean the same thing? What are the implications of noting any differences?
> How can we renew our democracy so that issues of equity and social justice become defining characteristics? What is the role of education in this work?
> How can we center equity and social justice as primary purposes in schools, which is a fundamentally different answer to the question "Why do we educate in a democracy" How has the question been answered the question historically and contemporarily?

Have schools focused on equity or, as we would assert, have they mostly served to support and sustain the status quo, reproducing in schools the very inequalities evident in the broader society? Is there any hope of changing this direction?

Why have we not examined the issue of the re-segregation of our schools in a meaningful way? Does segregation no longer matter?

Why do we allow graduation rates to be counted in ways that exaggerate the success of schools, especially urban schools? Have we taken advantage of research that demonstrates the connection between leaving school, incarceration, and poor health? Given the cost of prisons and the current debates on health care, dropping out can be viewed as a public health and economic issue. Do policy makers see it that way? Do we?

Is there any reason to be hopeful with a new administration in Washington? Since the paper was drafted details of proposed criteria "Race to the Top" funding (noted above) includes the removal of any barriers to using standardized tests to assess individual teachers with an emphasis on mathematics and science. Will this not further extend high stakes testing and the concomitant narrowing of the curriculum?

From issue paper 2, **individual differences**:

How far have we come in our thinking about what schooling in America should be since the onset of the industrial revolution?

Have we relinquished our desire for perfect control over the behavior of our children?

Have we ceased to view our children as raw materials, and to expect, first and foremost, that their education should turn them into diligent economic producers?

Have we renounced ritualistic performances that erase individuality in the classroom in favor of authentic experiences that enable individuals to discover and reach their full potential?

Have we lost track of trends in American education? Do the terms "progressive" or "traditional" still apply? If so, towards which is the country moving? Where does the Agenda for Education in a Democracy fit in?

From issue paper 3 on reaching a **shared vision of the public purposes of education** in a democracy:

Why is it important that we reach some consensus among policy makers, schools, and communities on the public purposes of education in a democracy?

What tools can groups use to define the common purposes?

What examples exist of constructive efforts to engage stakeholders in efforts to reach agreement on the purposes of education that are reflected in specific schooling practices?

NOTE: This group is developing a digital "tool box" including a blog, study circles, and scenarios to assist in the process – see "tools of engagement" on the NNER web site.

From issue paper #4 on **nonintentional and intentional educating:**

Again, the question, what are the goals we generally try to reach in schools, especially public ones? Can schools possibly address the trinity of purposes for schooling that has recently included: individual fulfillment, career attainment, and the education of citizens who both behave themselves and take moral action when needed.

Do we take into account and build upon the educative role of the media and civic institutions? For example, do we help students understand that "The Daily Show" is not a newscast?
What about the role of family and workplace?
What is the role of religion in education, both positive and negative?
Do we help students assess the learning they gain from peers: in school, in the neighborhood, online, and at work?
Do we help students make the most of experiences and travel that occur outside schools?

The position papers in this collection have been authored by individuals identified as AED Scholars because of their long-term ongoing efforts as individuals and group members to advance the mission, create its necessary conditions, and develop strategies for implementing the Agenda for Education in a Democracy. These Scholars include school leaders and professors from colleges of education and the arts and sciences. We consider the papers to be works in progress and welcome your comments and input.

As they prepared the papers, the Scholars were challenged to examine a common set of general questions, beginning with the overriding question of "Why do we educate in a democracy?" Included in the answer to this question must be attention to preparation for life in a democracy including developing the ability to argue for one's position, perspective on others positions, empathy for points of view, and a commitment to nondiscrimination and nonrepression. For each of the four issues, we asked:

- What is the issue and why is it important relative to why we educate in a democracy?

- What are key elements and current conditions that define the issue and how do the issues define the practices?

- How did the current issue and attendant conditions come about?

- What is the ideal/possibilities/conditions we seek to achieve relative to resolving this issue? Whose interests are served by the ideal?

- How do we move toward the ideal? What actions are necessary and possible?

They were also asked to consider in the papers or in discussions more specifically the implications of their analyses for:

- Teacher education,

- P-12 education, and

- Local, state, and national policymakers

As this comprehensive set of papers is refined and made generally available, it is intended that each AED Scholar will look for the issue that connects most closely with his or her ongoing interests and work. Each will then become part of a communicating system that includes periodic meetings with Scholars who identify with the same issue. Such communication efforts may include meetings that move from home setting to home setting; envision a kind of moveable intellectual feast. The small groups (as well as individuals) will work together to develop a number of ways to publish, promote, and implement

their conclusions and recommendations. Borrowing from Dewey, inquiry will arise out of ongoing practice, and the results return to the renewal of practice.

As noted above, these papers will also be used in broader conversations as part of an extended initiative designed to produce understandings and actions nationwide on how best to proceed to create and sustain the presence of a wise and healthy people.

Notes

Note: Additional references appear in the individual issue papers.

[1] David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of School Reform* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

[2] See John H. Goodlad, *A Place Called School (*New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984; 20th Anniversary Edition, 2004).

[3] Federal Register/Vol. 74, No. 144/Wednesday, July 29, 2009, pp. 37804-37837.

[4] "Criteria Seen as Too Restrictive in Quest for Race to Top Funds," in *Education Week*, published online September 15, 2009.

[5] "Obama Education Chief Duncan to Push Schools Reform," *USA Today*, accessed September 24, 2009 at http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2009-09-23-duncan-education-reform_N.htm

[6] McKinsey and Company, *The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools* (Washington, DC: McKinsey, 2009) and David Orfield, et. al., *Losing our Future: How Minority Children are Being Left behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Civil Rights Commission, 2004).