

2008

# Agenda for Education in a Democracy

John Goodlad  
*University of Washington*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/jec>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Goodlad, John (2008) "Agenda for Education in a Democracy," *Journal of Educational Controversy*: Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 2.  
Available at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/jec/vol3/iss1/2>

This Prologue is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-reviewed Journals at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Educational Controversy by an authorized editor of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact [westerncedar@wwu.edu](mailto:westerncedar@wwu.edu).

## PROLOGUE

### Agenda for Education in a Democracy

John I. Goodlad  
University of Washington

Words are fascinating. The frequency with which we use in conversation words of varied meanings without defining them both surprises and troubles me. “Education” is one of these. A very large percentage of people are thinking only of schooling in using the word, even though other components of our culture far exceed schooling in their educating. I have attended many “educational” conferences but recall only one session wherein education was defined and that definition discussed.

For me, “controversy” is a word that begs definition. It embraces a condition that is essential to the human conversation: disagreement over the major issues embedded at any given time in a culture, community, or family. Lacking controversy, that culture, community, or family is placid or perhaps tyrannical to the point of punishing dissent. Unfortunately, too many people view controversy as the fatal step toward conflict and eschew it to the point of remaining silent or faking agreement—a condition that certainly should not characterize educators. As silence in the face of controversy grows, democracy declines.

As the deadline for writing a foreword to this issue of the *Journal of Educational Controversy* drew near, I became increasingly interested in and comfortable with the journal’s intent. Characteristically, I sought out definitions of “controversy” in available dictionaries—one of my many old-fashioned habits. The *Concise Oxford* gave me “prolonged public disagreement or heated debate.” I liked better my battered *Webster’s New Collegiate* that offered up “a discussion marked especially by expression of opposing views.” The latter is much more comprehensive and relevant to the intent of this journal.

The journal has, I think, a more precise purpose of great contemporary importance. This purpose joins with that of the Institute for Educational Inquiry (IEI) that a couple of colleagues and I created in 1992: the advancement of the Agenda for Education in a Democracy that grew out of inquiry conducted with these and other colleagues over a period of nearly three decades. It was suggested to me by the editor of this journal that I introduce the reader to the past, present, and perhaps future of this work. The very name of the *Journal of Educational Controversy* provides a convenient door of entry.

The research referred to above produced an array of disturbing findings. I select a few that appear to me to be particularly relevant to the foreword I was invited to write. First, our system of public schooling has increasingly given up over the past several decades its commitment to democratic public purpose. As the late Neil Postman (1996) put the matter in his *The End of Education*, our schools have been taken over by the god of economic utility. In his *Excellence Without a Soul*, Harry R. Lewis (2006), former dean of the college of arts and sciences (the very soul of Harvard University), writes about prestigious universities losing education to consumer satisfaction. Whatever happened to the educational system that was once regarded as the source of our enlightenment and the bastion of our security?

Second, a partial answer to this question is that the historical, philosophical, and sociological foundations of education, once regarded as the intellectual core of teachers’ education, are fast disappearing from the curriculum. This situation has grown worse during the relatively short period of time since colleague Kenneth Sirotnik (1983) presented our disturbing findings in his paper “What You See Is What You Get.” Even if school boards were to charge our schools with advancing the mission of preparing the young for informed, responsible citizenship, we would be hard-pressed in seeking to recruit the necessary informed teachers.

Third, the inquiry-based ideas that forward-looking teachers carry away with them from our best educational conferences fail to be implemented in more than a few schools and, in these, only for a short period of time. We have seen in recent years how quickly the ill-conceived No Child Left Behind Act forced even the best-established innovative schools into the one-size-fits-all pattern imposed upon them. The book edited by Nicholas Michelli and David Lee Keiser (2005), *Teacher Education for Democracy and Social Justice*, encourages us to believe that determined educators in supportive settings are capable of sustaining and teaching democratic values even in the face of restrictive mandates.\*

Fourth, few schools function in the renewing mode necessary to both sustaining a democratic environment and educating the young in the understandings, principles, and behavioral characteristics of a democratic public. In our comprehensive studies of school change and of a purposefully representative sample of elementary and secondary schools across the United States, we found neither clearly articulated public democratic purpose nor the ongoing total staff dialogue, decision making, action, and evaluation (DDAE) necessary to the renewing process. Principals are rarely able to provide the necessary leadership. Nor is there an expectation in the infrastructure of schooling that principals will provide the kind of leadership likely to create a unique renewing identity in each individual school.

Fifth, moving out into the cultural context of schooling, the several subcultures of the enterprise share no common public purpose (Bellamy, 2007). Even though there are differences in the policy-making and reform cultures, they commonly come together in advancing the corporate economic purposes of preparing workers. Since the fruits of this purpose are so unequally distributed, this is much more a private than a public purpose. The subtitle alone of the book by political scientist Benjamin R. Barber (2007), *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole*, conjures up disturbing images of how this all-encompassing subculture is affecting our total culture and, of course, the conduct of our schools. Studies and polls tell us that the subculture of communities overwhelmingly expects of its local schools a comprehensive mission of personal, social, vocational, and academic development of the young.

These five conclusions from years of study could readily be multiplied several times from our data. They should be sufficient to convince the readers, as they convinced colleagues and me, that there must be a major turnaround in the mission and conduct of our nation's functioning. The American people have been sorely misled by the rhetoric of school reform. But "the changes" offered up in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education were not changes at all. Like most such reports, *A Nation at Risk* proposed that teachers work harder and schools do better what they already do.

As educator TheodoreSizer (1999) insightfully points out, the Commission saw no political traction in making recommendations that ran against the existing routines and symbols of the familiar place called school. Since the Commission paid little or no attention to several major studies of schooling conducted at the time that showed the need for major change, one must wonder whether its members saw no greater need than for the familiar recommendations of a stronger academic curriculum and better-prepared, harder-working teachers.

Clearly, our schools must not be solely blamed for the shortcomings of our culture. Rather, there must be a major turnaround in the mission and conduct of our nation's functioning. If our democracy is to take care of us, we must take better care of it. Embedded in this charge is a *non-negotiable public agenda*.

There are clear signs that this turning has begun. Traditionally, the first of these signs appears in the spoken word—in town hall gatherings, political debate, and the marketplace. Then come the printed

words that, said communications specialist Neil Postman, are essential to our understanding of democracy. In 2006, the Kettering Foundation published the book of its president, David Mathews (2006), *Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy*, a title proclaiming the close relationship between education and democracy in our society. That same year, David Korten's (2006) book, *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*, addressed the historical development of a democratic alternative to Empire through its course to "the American experiment," work still very much in progress. In 2007, a speech by cultural analyst Bill Moyers (2007) was published in *The Nation*. I cite from his closing paragraph:

Here in the first decade of the twenty-first century the story that becomes America's dominant narrative will shape our collective imagination and hence our politics. . . . It is that the promise of America leaves no one out. Go now and tell it on the mountain. From the rooftops tell it. . . . Tell it where you can, when you can and while you can. . . . Tell it—for America's sake. (p. 17)

On completing the third of three comprehensive studies—of educational change, schooling, and the education of educators—in 1990, colleagues and I were not content with leaving behind between the covers of books and articles the story that had steadily emerged for us over a quarter of a century. We were not content with either the spoken or the written word as adequate outcomes of our work. An agenda of action was taking shape in our minds. A timely grant, managed by the Education Commission of the States, and collaboration with the Commission and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education enabled us to launch a near-national conversation in some twenty-five states. These conversations produced an invitation to educator-preparing colleges and universities to join with neighboring school districts in partnerships that would serve as "proofing sites" for simultaneously renewing their programs in line with the Agenda for Education in a Democracy that was now taking firm shape in our publications. These partnerships came together in what is now the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER).

It became apparent to us early on that this tripartite collaboration—of colleges of education and arts and sciences departments in the universities and their partner schools—all guided by a common agenda, is incredibly complex. Although all three educating groups participate in the same teacher education programs, they are different cultures that have had, at best, only casual relationships over the years. And the Agenda for Education in a Democracy presented the challenge of understanding the four-part mission, a set of twenty conditions (referred to as postulates) thought necessary to its advancement, and strategies of renewal that also emerged from our years of critical inquiry.

There was a desperate need for technical assistance and discretionary money. It was impossible for us to provide either of these out of the Center for Educational Renewal at the University of Washington, which we had created in 1984 as the fulcrum for the work that followed.

The financial support of a couple of philanthropic foundations made it feasible for us to create the independent Institute for Educational Inquiry (IEI) to provide matching grants and technical support to the NNER settings. Today, this network stands on its own feet as a nonprofit educational agency. After an intensive six years of conducting leadership programs for the NNER settings, we were able to concentrate more on the inquiry implied by the name of the IEI.

Whereas the book by David Mathews addressed the necessary connecting of education and democracy from the perspective of renewing public education through renewing our democracy, we have constructed our Agenda from inquiries into renewing educational institutions. We come out very much in tandem. Mathews writes about rebuilding "the public" and "public building," with part of this building being the establishment of trust and collaboration between public schools and their communities. We see the engagement of the community and its schools in the fundamental issues of

educational policy and practice as a major step toward educating a democratic public (IEI, 2006). Mathews concludes his book with a chapter titled “Ideas in Practice: What Professionals and Citizens Can Do Together.”

Although the Institute’s intensive leadership program of the 1990s focused on adults—educators in schools, colleges, and universities—the curriculum was addressed to the enculturation of the young in schools into a social and political democracy. We were engrossed almost exclusively with the education of tomorrow’s public; for the last several years, we have sought to make our Agenda more accessible for today’s. Our book published in 2004 (Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley & Goodlad), *Education for Everyone: Agenda for Education in a Democracy*, was written with the hope in mind that leaders in the NNER and other educators would use it in cultivating community discussions of educational and cultural issues, some controversial, of our time. Our most recent book, *Education and the Making of a Democratic People*, was written with the intent of contributing to the turning around of our nation called for by Postman, Mathews, Lewis, Korten, Barber, Moyers, and other keen analysts (Goodlad, Soder & McDaniel, 2008).

The agenda for tomorrow’s democratic public is also the agenda for today’s public, an agenda of strengthening the moral grounding of the democracy designed to be of, by, and for the people. Clarifying the ideas and implementing the public mission of schooling is a natural place to begin.

## References

Barber, B. R. (2007). *Consumed: How markets corrupt children, infantilize adults, and swallow citizens whole*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Bellamy, G. T. (2007). *Principal accomplishments: How school leaders succeed*. New York: Teachers College Press, 20-25.

Goodlad, J. I., Mantle-Bromley, C. and Goodlad, S. J. (2004). *Education for everyone: Agenda for education in a democracy*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Goodlad, J. I., Soder, R. and McDaniel B. (Eds.; 2008). *Education and the making of a democratic people*. Boulder CO: Paradigm Publishers.

Institute for Educational Inquiry. (2006). *Engaging with the community: Developing networks of responsibility to educate America’s youths*. Seattle WA: Institute for Educational Inquiry.

Korten, D. C. (2006). *The great turning: From empire to earth community*. Bloomfield CN: Kumarian Press.

Lewis, H. A. (2006). *Excellence without a soul*. New York: Public Affairs.

Mathews, D. (2006). *Reclaiming public education by reclaiming our democracy*. Dayton OH: Kettering Foundation Press.

Michelli, N. M. and Keiser, D. L. Eds.; 2005). *Teacher education for democracy and social justice*. New York: Routledge.

Moyers, B. (2007). For America’s sake: A new story for America. *The Nation*, January 22, 17.

National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk*. Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Postman, N. (1996). *The end of education*. New York: Knopf.

Sirotnik, K. A. (1983). What you see is what you get. *Harvard Educational Review*, 53, 16-31.

Sizer, T. R. (1999). Back to *A place called school*. In K. A. Sirotnik and R. Soder (Eds.), *The beat of a different drummer*. New York: Peter Lang, 103-116.

## Notes

\* Authors in the book edited by Nicholas M. Michelli and David Lee Keiser, *Teacher education for democracy and social justice*, provide examples of creative teaching taking place under conditions of restrictive mandates imposed from without. Schools in the League of Democratic Schools assembled by the Institute for Educational Inquiry are having great difficulty in retaining programs strongly supported by parents while under pressure by the No Child Left Behind Act to produce high test scores in mathematics and reading.