A Personal Vision Of a Good School

BY ROLAND S. BARTH

IN THE PAST two decades, we educators have seen the major question before us shift from the depressing "Do schools make any difference?" to the far more hopeful one, "What characteristics of schools are associated with what desirable outcomes for students, teachers, and principals?" Everyone seems to have a distinctive response.

For several years I, too, have been struggling to clarify and articulate my own vision of what makes a school good. I have discussed, analyzed, and celebrated personal visions of a good school with many schoolpeople on many occasions. Little by little -- from these conversations, from my own work in schools, from visits to other schools, and from reading, writing, and teaching -- the important pieces of my personal vision have emerged.

I see a good school as one in which I would like to teach or be a principal. I see it as a school that I would like my daughters to attend. I see it as a school that I would be proud to be remembered for helping to create. Mine is a personal vision -- a conception of what might be, what could be, perhaps what should be -- rather than a projection of what will be. I find this continuous exercise in vision-making to be engaging, often useful, and, above all, hopeful. And those of us who work in or near public schools always welcome hope.

A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS

A school as a community of learners is the coatrack on which I hang the many supporting components of my vision. There is much talk these days about the importance of student achievement, of staff development for teachers, and of professional growth for principals, as if all these learners inhabit different planets. A good school for me is a place in which everyone is teaching and everyone is learning -- simultaneously, under the same roof. Students are teaching and learning; principals are teaching and learning; teachers are teaching and learning. Everything that goes on in a good school contributes to this end. School need not be merely a place where big people who are learn*ed* teach little people who are learn*ers.*

In a school that is a community of learners, the principal occupies a central place, not as the headmaster or "head" teacher, suffering under what has been called the "burden of ascribed omniscience." Rather, the principal occupies a more important position of leadership as the *head learner*, engaging in, displaying, and modeling the behaviors we want teachers and students to adopt.

What it is that individuals are learning is important, but the very fact *that* teachers, principals, and students are learning is, I believe, far more important to the development of a community of learners. Thus a major responsibility of the adults in a community of learners is to engage actively in their own learning, to make their learning visible to others in the community, to enjoy and celebrate their learning, and to sustain it over time -- even (especially) when swamped by the demands of their work.

Individuals usually enter into collaborative relationships only after they come to realize that they cannot achieve their goals by acting alone. I think that many teachers and principals have reached this point. Principals alone cannot "inservice" teachers any more than teachers can insure that all their students will be voracious learners. On the other hand, principals, teachers, students, and parents learning together can create within their schools an ecology of reflection, growth, and refinement of practice: in short, a community of learners.

My years in schools suggest that the quality and character of a school and the accomplishments of its students have more to do with the nature of the adult relationships in a school than with any other factor. In too many schools, personal relationships tend to be adversarial: teacher against student, teacher against teacher, principal against teacher, schoolpeople against parents. The most memorable schools I visit are the ones that have begun to find ways of transforming these adversarial relationships into cooperative and collegial ones.

While out bluefishing last summer with a professional charter captain (also a high school teacher), I was impressed by his response when we found ourselves in the middle of a school of blues. He immediately got on the marine radio and reported our good fortune and position to the hundreds of other fishermen on Nantucket Sound. I commented on the difference between this generosity and what we often find among teachers and principals in the schools. "Oh," he said, "that's what I do for bluefish. But with the striped bass -- that's another story."

The kind of school that I would like to work in and have my children attend -- and the kind of school that I suspect most teachers and principals would

like to be associated with -- would be a school in which teachers and principals talk with one another about practice, observe one another engaged in daily activities, share their knowledge of their craft with one another, and actively help one another become more skillful. In a collegial school, adults and students are constantly learning because everyone is a staff developer for everyone else.

TAKING RISKS

In my vision of a good school, students and adults are encouraged to take risks, and a safety net protects those who do so. The nation and many of our students may aptly be described as *at risk*, but the phrase doesn't describe the cautious culture of our schools. The lives of teachers and principals more closely mirror the cultivation of mushrooms: "You're kept in the dark most of the time, periodically you're covered with manure, and when you stick your head out it gets chopped off." But if we want students to be less docile and more adventuresome in their thinking, then adults must model risk-taking as well as learning. If we want to improve schools, we must risk doing things differently. New and unusual ideas must be viewed not as nuisances or embarrassments but as signs of life and growth.

Considerable research suggests that risk-taking is strongly associated with learning. Indeed, when I consider my own most profound learning experiences, I find that they were occasions when I went out on a limb -- when the boat was heeling and water was washing over the gunwales. Learning seldom comes from passively sitting still in the water with the sails flapping.

I see evidence that many adults and children in the schools would like to take more risks. Yet the prevailing school culture seems preoccupied with caution. I am reminded of the doctoral candidate who came into the elementary school where I was teaching many years ago. She was writing a dissertation on the little conversation (little dance, really) that takes place when a teacher approaches a principal and asks permission to try a new idea -- say, to take a field trip by boat around the Farallon Islands, seaward of the Golden Gate. Her research revealed remarkably consistent responses.

The initial response of the principal was visible in body language: furrowed brow, worried look, bent shoulders. If this posture wasn't enough to stifle the idea. the next response was a litany of reasons why the idea would not work: "What about the other fourth grade across the hall? How does this fit into the scope and sequence of the required curriculum? The last time we

took a field trip by boat two children got seasick, and I'm still hearing from the school board." We all know the list.

If the beleaguered teacher still retains her enthusiasm, the principal's next response is, "Well, let me think about it. Get back to me in a couple of weeks." Stall. Should the teacher, somehow undeterred, return in a couple of weeks, she is then apt to hear, "Okay, you may take the field trip. But if anything happens, I want you to know it's *your* responsibility."

Such an extraordinarily discouraging series of responses is, of course, not confined to relations between teachers and principals. It's what the principal who wants to develop a new pupil evaluation system hears from the superintendent; it's what the student who wants to interview merchants in the neighborhood (rather than read books) for his social studies report hears from the teacher. This pathologically cautious behavior is endemic in our schools. What kind of climate for risk-taking -- and therefore for learning -- are we promoting with these responses to new ideas? A healthy climate for mushrooms, perhaps, but not for a community of learners.

The Chinese use the same ideograph to represent the concept of danger as they use to represent the idea of opportunity. They recognize that, since opportunity and danger always occur together, the symbols representing them should also be inseparable. This ancient culture, unlike the culture of our schools, recognizes that it is impossible to make a significant move forward without encountering risks. The scent of danger and risk should alert us, therefore, to the fact that we may be headed in the *right* rather than the wrong direction.

The only good question to ask of the teacher who would take that risky field trip is, "What do you think the children might learn from it?" Should the teacher respond casually, "Well, the kids have worked hard all year. . . , " the principal would be justified in proceeding with caution. A considered response that integrates geography with biology and connects both with a writing assignment is more convincing. And a convincing response is the cue for the principal not only to approve the trip but to provide a safety net for the risk-taking teacher by sharing responsibility for any problems.

Why do we persist in banishing risk-taking from our schools? If we're serious about learning, for ourselves and for others, then we must become serious about risk-taking. When the risks are high, and when a safety net is in place, the learning curve goes off the chart -- as any participant in Outward Bound will attest.

CHOICE AND COMMITMENT

A good school, for me, is one that each adult comes to by choice. Pupils live under a compulsory attendance law; they must attend school. Most adults feel every bit as conscripted. I recently overheard a teacher lamenting, "Only 18 more years till I retire." We all know that people who are simply going through the motions don't make very good teachers or administrators.

The crisis in education for schoolpeople may be less one of commitment than one of recommitment. The highly routinized nature of work in schools tends to make automatons of us all. A vital question to ask is, "Who can do what to provide opportunities for periodic recommitment for those who work in schools so that they will continue to view their work as a vital profession and not as a tedious job?"

For example, a request by any teacher for a leave of absence for any purpose should be granted automatically. That teacher is requesting an opportunity to stop, reflect, replenish, and consider other options. If the teacher chooses to return to the school, everyone wins -- the teacher, the students, the school. If the teacher decides to leave, everyone wins again. Paid sabbaticals would be preferable, but the automatic availability of leaves without pay can help diminish the trapped feeling so prevalent among schoolpeople. A school filled with indentured servants is not the school I would like to work in or be remembered for.

A good friend of mine was for many years principal of an inner-city school in New Orleans. I remember visiting her one day, when, out of the blue, she said, "Let's go for a walk." As we walked along the Mississippi River, she told me that once each week she leaves her building during school hours and declares a "one-hour sabbatical." During this time she contemplates her career, the students, the teachers, and her school. Then she decides whether to return or not. She creates for herself the sense of choice. And, choosing to return, she is recommitted to her important work.

Principals in Newfoundland -- a bright, willful, ornery, independent lot -- have worked out a creative solution to the problem of feeling conscripted. Some choose to work for reduced pay -- say, three-quarters of their salary for three years -- and then may take a leave of absence the fourth year, also at three-quarters pay, to build their boats, go fishing, or travel. Others take four-fifths pay for four years and have the fifth year off at four-fifths pay. It costs the system no more, and everyone wins. Schoolpeople badly need a repertoire of strategies to enable them to recommit themselves to their work, to make deliberate choices to be in school. The only difference between a rut and a grave is the depth of the hole.

RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY

In my vision, a good school is one that respects differences. Teachers, parents, students, and principals feel better and learn better in such an environment. Individual differences are often unacknowledged in schools, thus placing the burden of complying with the uniform expectations of the school squarely on students and faculty members. Sometimes differences are accepted as painful facts of life as, for example, when each teacher must "live with" the bottom ability group or with the children from the "wrong" side of the tracks or when a principal must live with a "lemon" of a teacher. More often, we furtively use grouping to eliminate differences as fast as we find them.

I would prefer my children to be in a school in which differences are looked for, attended to, and celebrated as good news, as opportunities for learning. The question with which so many schoolpeople are preoccupied is, "What are the limits of diversity beyond which behavior is unacceptable?" That is an important question, but the question I would like to see asked more often is, "How can we make conscious, deliberate use of differences in social class, gender, age, ability, race, and interest as resources for learning?" Like risk-taking, differences hold great opportunities for learning. Differences offer a free, abundant, and renewable resource, as we observe at the Principals' Center at Harvard when leaders from urban, rural, and suburban schools; from elementary, middle, and high schools; and from public, private, and parochial schools all sit around the same table.

Similarly, I would like to see our compulsion for eliminating differences among schools replaced by an equally compelling focus on making use of these differences to improve schools. Differences of philosophy, style, and passion are remarkable sources of ideas for school improvement. What is important about people -- and about schools -- is what is different, not what is the same.

A PLACE FOR PHILOSOPHERS

The good school that I envision is one that provides a special place for philosophers, for people who ask why things are the way they are. Nothing is more important to building a culture of inquiry and a community of learners. Why are there 25 children in every class? Why are the upper

grades upstairs and the lower grades downstairs? Why do adults talk 80% of the time when students outnumber adults 25 to 1? There are philosophers in schools -- usually the 5- and 6-year-olds. But very soon they turn from philosophers into producers. Too bad -- for everyone.

How can we come to see common practices in schools not as "wallpaper patterns" but rather as tentative decisions that are subject to continuous examination and review? I think it's possible to set up mechanisms in schools that allow us to examine and question our routine ways of doing things. For instance, teachers and parents new to a school, instead of subtly being told to be seen and not heard for a couple of years, could be asked to convey what they so clearly see and hear -- about the curriculum, the use of space, grading and grouping practices, the place of specialists, discipline policies, and anything else they happen to notice. Above all, philosophers residing under the roof of a schoolhouse can continually juxtapose the way things are with fresh visions of ways they might be.

HUMOR

Schools are funny places. A lot of funny things happen in schools. I would like to be part of a school in which a great deal is made of humor. Humor is sorely lacking in this profession -- in textbooks and in educational writing, in research, in state departments of education, in universities, and in schools. Yet humor, like risk-taking and diversity, is strongly associated with learning and the development of intelligence, not to mention its importance to the quality of life. Moreover, humor can be the glue that binds an assorted group of individuals into a community. People learn and grow and survive through humor. We should make an effort to elicit and cultivate it, rather than to ignore, thwart, or merely tolerate it.

One principal I know keeps a journal of ridiculous things he hears within his school. I borrowed it recently and found some memorable entries. For example, a physical education teacher instructed children on the playground to "line up in a circle." Another teacher told a class to "pair up by threes." When I was a principal, during one cold New England March heated only by the ire of teachers who had not been reappointed, I was working in my office late one afternoon when a group of boys on bicycles assembled briefly under my window. As they made ready to depart, the smallest yelled, "Hey, wait for me; I'm your leader." That was precisely how I was feeling as leader of the school! Those words, pinned to my bulletin board, helped get me through the rest of the year.

For a science class, one middle school student purportedly wrote this description of the human body: "The body is composed of three parts: the branium, the borax, and the abominable cavity. The brainium contains the brain; the borax contains the lungs, the liver, and the other living things; the abominable cavity contains the bowels -- of which there are five -- A, E, I, O, and U!" Unlike other professions -- law, architecture, engineering -- our clients regale us with an abundance of humor. We should make better use of it.

The medical profession also has something to say about humor. Laughter causes the lungs to pump out carbon dioxide, the eyes to cleanse themselves with tears, the muscles to relax, the flow of adrenaline to increase, and the cardiovascular system to be exercised. Perhaps most important for those in schools, endorphins, the chemicals produced by the brain to relieve pain, are released into the bloodstream when a person laughs. Clearly, laughter is good for schools and for those who inhabit them.

A COMMUNITY OF LEADERS

A definition of *leadership* that I like is "making happen what you believe in." Principals believe in many things and make many of them happen. And most people view principals as leaders. But others in schools -- teachers, librarians, guidance counselors, parents, and students -- also want to make things that they believe in happen. The kind of school I'd like my children to attend is one in which everyone gets a chance to be a leader. Schools are not very good at helping students assume responsibility and feel self-confident, instrumental, and worthy. But a school can become far more than a place that allows only some students to serve on the student council or encourages only a few teachers to be department chairs. A school can work to insure that everyone becomes a school leader in some ways and at some times. A school can fulfill no higher purpose than to teach all its members that they can make what they believe in happen and to encourage them to contribute to and benefit from the leadership of others.

ANXIETY AND STANDARDS

A final characteristic of a school in which I suspect many teachers, parents, and principals would like to work (or to have their children enrolled) has to do with the relationship between anxiety and standards. Some schools -- perhaps those that use entrance exams and many elite preparatory schools -- are characterized by high anxiety and high standards. Other schools --

e.g., some "free" schools -- are characterized by low anxiety and low standards. However, all too many schools are characterized by high anxiety and *low* standards, a no-win combination. The condition of *modest* anxiety and *high* standards is hardest to attain and least often seen. Yet I believe it offers the greatest possibilities for learning. Considerable research suggests that attention, learning, performance, retention, and recall all diminish when the anxiety of the learner is high. Yet, in an attempt to control student behavior, we schoolpeople seem particularly adept at deliberately heightening anxiety through grades, homework, notes to parents, threats of failure, and exams.

While the spate of recent national and state efforts to reform the schools may have raised standards a bit, I suspect that such efforts have raised anxiety far more. Extraordinary anxiety bombards the schools from without in the form of parents, school boards, superintendents, the media, and state departments of education. This makes it all the more important for those within the schools to be anxiety-reducers rather than anxiety-generators. Yet one high school student I met remarked (after negotiating months of 55-minute periods, bells, papers, homework, reports, unmet obligations, late passes, and detention slips), "I feel like a phonograph record, designed for 33 1/3 RPM, constantly being played at 78 RPM."

Schoolpeople tend to assume that all parents want their children to learn more and harder material and to learn it faster and earlier. Not all of us do. I suspect that, if they set their minds to it, teachers and principals might twist a number of knobs that would reduce anxiety within schools while maintaining or even raising standards. Yet we seldom look for these knobs, let alone use them.

For example, I recall my daughter being demolished each June by final exams. Each spring she faced tears, sleepless nights, anger, fear, and anxiety, all of which could only have damaged her learning as it did the peace of mind of the rest of the family. However, last June she came home relaxed, happy, and industrious. She met with classmates and studied into the wee hours each night without a tear. Curious, I asked her what was going on. "Well, this year," she said, "our team of teachers decided that the final exam scores could only raise our grades for the year; they couldn't lower them." Simple. The students studied, they cooperated, they remained sane, and, I daresay, they learned. I wonder how many other knobs might be out there waiting to be turned?

THAT'S THE essence of my personal vision of a good school. It's not the same as yours or as anyone else's. Perhaps it doesn't stress the basics, or excellence, or equity strongly enough. Perhaps it's too long-winded. It certainly doesn't capture the eloquence of one delightful vision expressed in the motto of a Minnesota school: "We Care; We Share; We Dare." But it's mine -- and a personal vision is, above all, personal. Our visions are part of us. They accompany us wherever we go.

I share my vision because good schools are important to me. Improving schools so that they will become good is important to me. I find that a useful vision has widespread applicability. The characteristics of a good school that I have described above are not confined to elementary or secondary schools. I suspect that their realization could help transform colleges, schools of education, and state departments of education as well.

Observers in schools report that the lives of teachers, principals, and students are characterized by brevity, fragmentation, and variety. During an average day, for instance, a teacher or principal engages in several hundred interactions. So do many parents. A personal vision provides a framework within which we can make use of the many prescriptions and conceptions of others. More important, these ideas -- built on the foundation of the school as a community of learners and leaders -- have provided me with a road map that has guided me through the hundreds of daily situations in schools (and now in a university) in a less random and more thoughtful way. Without a vision, our behavior becomes reflexive, inconsistent, and shortsighted, as we seek the action that will most quickly put out the fire so that we can get on with putting out the next one. In five years, if we're lucky, our school might be "fire free" -- but it won't have changed much. Anxiety will remain high, humor low, and leadership muddled. As one teacher put it in a powerful piece of writing, "Without a clear sense of purpose we get lost, and our activities in school become but empty vessels of our discontent." Seafaring folk put it differently, "For the sailor without a destination, there is no favorable wind."

On the other hand, if we learn to look on each hectic occurrence in school as an opportunity, to seek the "good news" in each event, and to focus on using each occurrence to further our own vision, it may take longer to extinguish a particular fire. Indeed, some fires may continue to smolder for some time. But in five years our school will be closer to our vision than it was before.

I offer my personal vision here to contrast it and the many similar visions I hear from schoolpeople with the recent wave of national reports. I find that the personal visions of most school practitioners need no apology. Certainly,

they differ in important ways from the lists of desirable school qualities constructed by those outside the schools. But the visions for their schools of insiders deserve to be taken as seriously as those of outsiders.

A final reason that I attempt to convey my personal vision here is to suggest that the task is not impossible and to emphasize the importance of tackling it. The visions of schoolpeople are badly needed in efforts to improve schools. However, setting down on paper what we stand for is not easy. It has not been easy for me, nor do I expect that it is for others.

Yet I don't believe that any teacher, principal, or professor can be a serious agent of change in a school while only responding to someone else's vision. Implementing the ideas and ideals of others will always be a half-hearted enterprise. To be sure, finding ways to comply with the needs and goals of the larger organization is important to the survival of that organization and to everyone who is a part of it. But developing ways to foster the elements of teachers' and principals' personal visions is a wholehearted and badly needed form of school improvement.

The Zen master advises us that "to train a bull it is sometimes necessary to enlarge the fences." Expanding the vision within the schoolhouse is an enterprise that will create schools with room enough for all of us to live and work and have our children learn. When we create schools that we value, for our children and for ourselves, we will have created schools of value to others as well.

A school can fulfill no higher purpose than to teach all its members that they can make what they believe in happen.

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