

Democracy & Education

Renewed Commitment to Democratic Schools

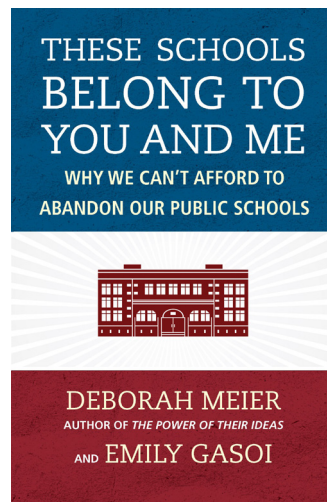
A Book Review of *These Schools Belong to You and Me: Why We Can't Afford to Abandon Our Public Schools*

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Holding fast to the democratic promise of public education requires something hard but simple: a steadfast belief in the power of democracy, warts and all. It requires rejecting both the dictatorship of the marketplace and the dictatorship of the expert. (Meier, 1995, p. 79)

IN *THESE SCHOOLS Belong to You and Me* (2017), renowned educator Deborah Meier partnered with a younger former colleague, Emily Gasoi, to offer both a multigenerational perspective of their successful work in small, autonomous, democratic schools and a rich commentary on the evolution of the small-schools movement in light of the recent press for high-stakes accountability. Writing in alternating chapters and reflecting on their decades of experience, MacArthur award winner Meier and Gasoi present a compelling argument for renewed support for democracy and equity in all our public schools. The strategies and rationale find their roots in Meier's leadership at Central Park East elementary and secondary schools, her long partnership with TheodoreSizer and the Coalition of Essential Schools, and Meier's and Gasoi's work at Boston's Mission Hill School, founded by Meier in 1997.

The book builds substantially on Meier's (1995) earlier work, *The Power of Their Ideas*, and her response to the advent of high-stakes testing described in *In Schools We Trust* (Meier, 2002). This latest publication appears to complete a trilogy, with Meier and colleague Gasoi coming full circle, reigniting the hope and inspiration of the small-schools movement of the 1980s and 1990s. The



authors inspire the reader to renew commitment to democratic schools and classrooms, equity of opportunity for all students to succeed and to build public awareness of what Meier calls the “false Promise of high stakes accountability” (Meier, 2017, p 91). Meier and Gasoi effectively argue that schools cannot be successful for all students in a political environment of increased privatization, with private funders fulfilling their own agendas under the guise of narrowing the achievement gap and providing increased choice, while in reality increasing the socioeconomic divide.

The powerful arguments for democratic schools reinforced in the book are grounded in Meier's and Gasoi's experiences in small public schools of choice, schools where classrooms provide students with an “apprenticeship for citizenship” in a democracy and where each student and teacher is an equally valued member of the school community. The authors argue that in an age of social media and less true dialogue, students need to learn how to make a case for their viewpoints, defend their ideas and value the ideas of others in a small, safe and nurturing environment where teachers have the highest expectations and aspirations for each student, no matter their socioeconomic status or race. If our democracy is to survive, students must live in a learning community that expects and nurtures full participation of each member.

As discussed in Meier's earlier works, the key conditions for cultivating democracy and equity include small size, autonomous governance, connection to family and community, and choice. Schools must be small so that each student is well-known and

uniqueness honored. Governance must be unencumbered by politics and central office red tape. Teachers and leaders must be free to develop their own culture, curriculum, and accountability. Further, as the authors learned from earlier errors, schools work best if parents and the community have an authentic role in making the school a valued center of the community. A notable shift from earlier thinking is the role of choice and its impact on public schools. Meier and Gasoi worked in schools of choice that were part of a larger public school district and whose leadership allowed the first three conditions to thrive. Today, they warn us to be aware of the new and potentially destructive direction of school choice under the influence of private, deep-pocket funders. The book clarifies the negative impact of this new model of school choice, charter schools, and the march toward privatization on our most vulnerable populations. Financial support from the private sector has demanded increased accountability with a focus on standardized tests scores to close the achievement gap. The increased influence of the ultra rich on the increased privatization of schools is based upon the belief that a free-market business model would be better. The downside of the increased influence of private funders is that wealthy funders, according to the authors, have a distorted view of what works for kids in schools. This shift, from choice within public small schools to a reform movement based upon high-stakes teaching to the test, is a dangerous move for democracy, for teaching students to think and evaluate ideas and to be engaged in content of their own personal interest. The authors further point out that private funders are redefining the meaning of personalization, a foundational underpinning of the small-schools movement.

The increased role of the federal government and deep-pocket funders to increase privatization and to redefine personalization and ultimately the purpose of education should give public educators pause. Personalization, using Ted Sizer's language (Meier & Gasoi, 2017), originally meant learner-centered classrooms where each student is known well, where curriculum and instructional strategies are planned to build upon the unique qualities of each student. Today, personalization "refers to students moving through standardized instruction on a computer—no teachers or human relationships needed" (Meier & Gasoi, 2017, p. 154). This powerful example is but one disappointing outcome of the charter school movement, largely influenced by private business interests draining funds from public schools and with the public having no influence on policy. Though not specifically addressed in the book, the nation's 9 million rural school students are ill served by competition, school vouchers, or privatization (Walker, 2017). When rural schools flounder, there is no alternative other than the local community school. The authors' criticism of these current trends is well-founded. The big question is what can be done to restore the public and the spirit of democracy to our public schools? Solutions are needed.

The authors provide compelling new evidence that high-stakes testing is ineffective in accurately measuring the true talents and potential of students, particularly those of minorities and the poor. Extending the typical discussion of the cultural flaws of

standardized tests, Meier's chapter entitled "The False Promise of High Stakes Accountability" offers new data and a detailed rationale for abandoning what she calls a "rigged ranking strategy" (Meier & Gasoi, 2017, p. 98). Educators have a responsibility to fully understand the flaws of standardized testing and its negative impact on students and to build the case for more authentic assessment. This is where the recapturing of democratic ideals in education begins: partnering with communities to identify an accountability system that ensures potential success for all students. Narrowing the achievement gap among students is not the same as narrowing the difference in test scores. Meier and Gasoi would argue that closing the achievement gap requires a democratic learning environment that believes that all students can succeed and should be given the personalized environment to do so.

This book is a must-read for both beginning teachers and veteran educators. To appreciate the full richness of the ideas, and to understand the history the school improvement movements of the past 40 years, reading Meier's earlier works would be useful. Gasoi brings the fresh perspective of a practicing teacher to the messy work of living and working in a small, autonomous school. The authors importantly call us to abandon practices that perpetuate social and academic inequities. They point to racism as a powerful force preventing schools from becoming more democratic. The authors compel us to reinvest in democratic practices that value the contributions of all learners and leaders. They remind us that unless our public schools are places where democracy can thrive, democratic ideals in our country could be lost.

My career in public education, including leading a Coalition of Essential Schools high school, crossed paths with Meier's a number of times over the decades. I have a deep appreciation of her relentless pursuit of equity of opportunity for all students. The small-schools movement of the 1980s and 1990s offered a largely unencumbered opportunity to figure out the principles upon which these schools should be founded. In this new political age of accountability, public educators need to find new common pedagogical ground regarding the meaning of democracy, equity, personalization, and high expectations for all. The school improvement legacy of the 21st century must not be privatization. For public schools to "belong to you and me," educators must create both compelling public school learning environments that communities are eager to embrace and dynamic community engagement models to ensure that happens.

References

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