



Disrupting the Discourse: An Insight Labs Inquiry into the Rhetoric of School Reform

Abstract

Public education reform is a vexing challenge. Many authorities on the subject admit that after years of grappling with the problem, they still don't know what projects are worth undertaking or how reforms should be initiated. Insight Labs sought to investigate the question of what is stalling momentum for reform in an area that directly affects so many people. A strategic session convened to address the question suggested that a major limiting factor was the assumption that the core purpose of school is to increase individuals' human capital in order to serve the goal of economic development. Questioning this notion of a school's purpose seemed nearly impossible within the contemporary discourse surrounding education. Therefore, the Labs team crafted an incendiary manifesto designed to disrupt that discourse and see what emerged. The manifesto proposed that instead of economic development, the primary goal of schools should be to create citizens who can best serve the common good. Responses to the manifesto highlight the many difficulties with arguing for such a scheme. However, they also indicate that a discourse of education reform centered on community involvement and the social context of learning could be a more productive way of moving forward.

The Insight Labs Methodology

Insight Labs is a philanthropic think tank. Each year, the organization partners with non-profits, governments, and businesses invested in the public good in order to take on some intractable challenge. The Labs team spends several months learning about the problem and framing it in a way that will provide for a fruitful discussion. Next comes "the Lab," an intensive strategic session involving the leaders of the partner organization and 12 to 15 thinkers and doers from a wide variety of fields to which the organization might not otherwise have access. The goal of the

session is not to “brainstorm” but to continually iterate on one big idea that gains the consensus of most of the group. The goal is for everyone to uncover the missing concepts or bad assumptions that have unknowingly held back some social good.

After the Labs’ leaders determine the insight yielded by the session, they do their best to articulate it in a way that will benefit not just the partner organization, but anyone concerned with the problem at hand. They then determine what actions may be necessary for everyone to gain a greater understanding of the possibilities opened up by the insight. Content generated by these actions is published at <http://www.theinsightlabs.org>.

Taking on Education

In early 2012, Insight Labs partnered with the CAA Foundation and Chicago’s Academy for Global Citizenship to consider what exactly was holding back movements for national education reform. Something seemed wrong about the math; tens of millions of parents are directly invested in the quality of their children’s education. For many of them, it is no doubt their most important personal and political priority. Yet movements to encourage radical improvements to the education system don’t seem to catch fire. This Lab sought to discover why.

In preparation for the session, the Labs team spoke with many colleagues involved with education and education policy. We also published three interviews relevant to this topic on the Labs web site. We spoke with T. V. Reed (a historian of social movements), Jeremy Heimans (a leader in creating social change through technology), and Ben Austin (founder of the Los Angeles-based Parent Revolution movement). While offering many different perspectives on the subject, our interviewees seem to agree on one key point: a reform movement in education would not succeed without a coherent theory of change. Austin in particular insisted on the existing education system’s ability to absorb most proposals for reform while remaining essentially unchanged at its core.

Informed by these ideas, we convened the Lab on February 24, 2012. Participants included Eileen Bartholomew (X Prize Foundation), Bruce Tizes, (Galt Capital), Seth Matlins (That Was Then Enterprises), Susan Crown (SCE Foundation), Stefan Weitz (Bing), Sharon Ann Lee (Culture Brain), Nedra Kline Weinreich (Weinrich Communications), Marc Mertens (Seso Media), Yosi Sergeant, Christian Long (Cannon Design), Jim Jacoby (Manifest), Jacob Soboroff (Why Tuesday), Darnell Strom (CAA Foundation), Rachel Kropa (CAA Foundation), Sarah Elizabeth Ippel (Academy for Global Citizenship), Dan Schnitzer (Academy for Global Citizenship), Liz Dwyer (GOOD Magazine), Jeff Leitner (Insight Labs), Howell J. Malham Jr. (Insight Labs), and Andrew Benedict-Nelson (Insight Labs).

The group quickly came to a consensus that many well-meaning panels and committees on the subject would not have considered: parents have good reasons not to invest their time and energy into education reform movements as they currently exist.

The problem, many in the room observed, was that the core purpose of school did not naturally lend itself to the kinds of passions that create national movements. Most school reform proposals, as well as policies current among the status quo, were measured by fairly narrow criteria: will more students be prepared for college? Will they have the skills they need to pursue remunerative jobs? Will they form a workforce that will keep the United States competitive? If you take the shining faces of children out of the equation, these are goals that most people understand to be important, but not ones that are likely to bring them to the streets - particularly when the targets are 20 years in the future. And given that the highest ideal offered by the model was the economic success of individuals, it would be illogical for most parents to commit their time and energy to the future of children besides their own.

This wasn't the only problem. Entrepreneurs and business minds in the Lab pointed out that students loaded down with abstract, pre-packaged knowledge and skills would not be well-suited to a future economy requiring imagination, initiative, and the ability to educate oneself. Others argued that a public education model oriented toward college and white-collar jobs simply did not serve the interests of many communities in the United States - why would they work collectively to improve a system that only seemed to care for those who were already upwardly mobile? Several representatives of the philanthropic sector admitted that while many inspiring education programs exist, there was no compelling new paradigm for funding systemic reforms. What seemed clear before long was that something was broken in American education, perhaps more broken than even many activists would like to admit.

We all think we can imagine a "broken school." Gangs, truancy, illiteracy, shortages, a decaying foundation - we've seen it all on TV. But what do we do if our fundamental idea of school is actually what's broken? What if, in some sense, the fluorescent-lit showcases of the suburbs are as broken as the inner-city shells? What if the basic method that underlies American schools - load up kids with knowledge and skills so they can be successful future workers - is a sham? And if it is, what are we supposed to do with schools instead?

The members of our session had a few ideas. But in the weeks that follows, the Insight Labs team decided that our most urgent priority was figuring out how to have this conversation, which we felt was sorely lacking even among the most intelligent education reformers and policy wonks. How could we get people to stop asking "how" about education and instead ask "why"? And how could we sustain that sort of conversation in a world obsessed with test scores and college entrance quotas?

The Experiment

American public education is a complex system where no single idea or paradigm can be said to hold total sway. But the paradigm that governs most thinking about education is known as human capital theory. The basic idea is that by adding to the knowledge and skills of children, we will increase their potential as adults. This paradigm is normally paired with ideals of both individual success and national or global economic development.

If our schools were to pursue some other goal, what would it be? The Lab suggested that if a desired outcome was broader political support, it would be necessary to pursue something with more specific connections to community values than the abstract acquisition of skills for economic development. One participant pointed out that there are ways to think about the acquisition of skills and knowledge besides human capital theory. For example, instead of accumulating knowledge to apply toward some future, unknown purpose, a group can decide on a big goal and then encourage members to acquire the skills necessary to achieve it (which they could presumably retain and then apply to later projects). It rarely happens in math class, but the football team does it all the time. Could this method, more common to entrepreneurial ventures and extracurricular activities than traditional education, become the core of school?

Together, we thought up one way it might look. Schools, instead of being training facilities for some future project, would pursue actual community goals in the neighborhoods in which they existed. Whether the problem the community chose to tackle was poverty around the globe or gang violence around the corner, the education and effort of the adults and young people would be focused on achieving a common goal, not individual development. We knew that a similar model had worked at one of Chicago's most successful charter schools, the Academy for Global Citizenship, founded by Lab participant Sarah Elizabeth Ippel. But what would it take to turn a few great examples into a national platform for transforming education?

We decided our first experiment would be one in rhetoric. We decided to craft an uncompromising, emotional appeal that asked readers to completely discard the existing idea of school and embrace a new one. We were not naive enough to think that this manifesto would have any effect in itself. Nor did we consider it a rigorous statement of the problems faced by public education or the best solution to them. Instead, we hoped to gauge the reactions of a broad community of people invested in education in order to see how radical proposals for change along these lines might be received.

The document was posted anonymously at <http://www.schoolisnotschool.org> on April 12, 2012. Members of the Insight Labs team then encouraged contacts from the education field to visit the page. By the close of the experiment on April 24, the page had received 2,411 unique visitors, was shared by visitors on Facebook at least 429 times, and was promoted on Twitter at least 124 times. An article covering the ideas of the document was also published on the website of GOOD

Magazine and subsequently shared by readers 1,066 times. (<http://www.good.is/post/what-if-schools-weren-t-schools-anymore/>) The manifesto also elicited 85 comments from visitors.

What follows is the full text of the manifesto and an analysis of significant themes that arose in visitor comments.

The Manifesto

School isn't school.

It is the birthplace of the citizen ideal.

It's where we learn to live a life of selfless service on behalf of the community; it's where we find the path to virtue, subordinating innate self-interest as individuals to the interests of the community, the good of the whole. And where, on graduation day, the highest possible title in a free society is conferred upon us: citizen.

To become a citizen, one must learn how to live and participate in a community — the most attractive ideal for any society, in religious or secular terms. It is one of the pillars of civilization. We cannot hope to endure without it.

School, then, is the place where we're inspired to forget ourselves and become aware of the hopes and needs of somebody else—our neighbors, other citizens.

It's where we begin active, deliberate and rational participation in a citizen community; and learn how to use the instrument of citizenship to manage, if not eradicate, our inner selfishness, our petty private passions, our personal interests. It's where we feed and nurture the better part of our natures by channeling the collective efforts toward a higher, nobler purpose: the common weal.

But, somewhere along the way, school became school...

...a diurnal detention camp where children are framed up as human capital, livestock actually, not human beings. School, where bitter, resentful educators — who are almost always underpaid and, as a result, incited only to underperform — shy away from teaching any form of critical thinking; and indoctrinate students through rote memorization with the most basic, backward-looking knowledge, reconstituted as trivia and delivered through canned lesson plans. It's a place where an education is still measured by a test score; and future success is defined only by the placement of the decimal point on a paystub.

Far from developing necessary skills and natural talents, this kind of school prepares students only for one possible future: college — school by another name. A pricey, pointless weigh station where students, future members of the work force, are scouted and sized-up with the wrong metrics; and where successful students, model students, acquire the knack, often times accidentally, to package and sell their skills in the form of labor to the highest bidder in a free market economy, which helps to maximize consumption among the lower and middle classes, while increasing the capital of the upper class, shielding the present establishment from ruin, protecting the economic wealth of the one percenters, and perpetuating the cycle of school.

Somewhere along the way, we detected a problem. Former students, now adults, became gainfully employed, living and working the way their parents lived and worked. They worked hard to make it big by doing something, anything in the world but not anything for the world. By and large, these former students were ambitious to be sure, but also unhappy and depressed and unfulfilled.

Communities fell apart.

“Enlightened” self-interest led to self-destruction.

We began to think that maybe the problem wasn't school itself; maybe it was the school building. Naturally, we thought the answer was a sustainable school, an environmentally friendly school, a Green school, retooled and refitted for LEED certification, tricked out with ergonomic chairs and desks made from recycled materials. A different, healthier skin for a fetid, festering form.

But school remained school...

...It's still “all about the kids” who are still learning old lessons the old way. It's still school, that prepares young, choice-conscious consumers for a Market, not citizens for a Society; it shows students the old path to an old idea of prosperity, only now under energy saving bulbs in a cost-efficient, climate-controlled building.

The problem persists. It won't go away until school stops being school.

It won't stop until we start designing for school as a community-wide resource; it won't stop until we start creating school as a dynamic social engine for entire towns and cities that drive every citizen toward a higher, greater good: the public interest.

It's a platform that enables children to self-actualize not only as individuals but also as citizens; who learn and live and thrive by thinking and doing, not just for themselves, but for the entire community, for all citizens.

The logic that we must solve for, then, is neither fiscal nor physical, but moral:

No schools without citizens. No citizens without schools.

Analysis

What follows is an analysis of the major themes of the 85 comments made on the manifesto. Commenters are identified only by the name they used on the site. Spelling and grammar errors in quotes have not been corrected.

The comments are grouped around four major themes: Rules for Radicals (arguments for and against radical reform in education); The Self and the State (concerns over whether schools as described in the manifesto would lead to political repression or indoctrination); Citizens, Skills and Communities (comments that address learning in a social context); Not My Job (comments that question whether schools are the appropriate place to create community values).

Rules for Radicals

The intent of the manifesto was to learn more about how to articulate ideas for radical education reform, and a superficial examination of the comments suggests that support for such a change is strong. Whether they agreed with the idea of the manifesto or not, commenters tended to applaud it for suggesting a need for major changes. "I think part of this idea is genius and part of it is, well, idiotic," wrote M.A. in a typical comment. "On the other hand, I totally agree that what we teach and how we teach it is broken."

Before exploring what this apparent support for radical reform means, we should visit the few comments that questioned it. A few commenters expressed a general contentment with the system and students' experience of it. "My kids LOVE school," wrote Christine B. "They love their teachers, the experience of being at school, and the community the school fosters." Commenter Angelo Loumbas also argued that schools already do a sufficient job at creating citizens, even if they are not making the grade in giving students knowledge and skills. Of his children's public school, he wrote: "The school has the kids collect canned goods for the poor; they've learned about how to recycle and how important the environment is; and what I've come to realize is that they have a community at the school in which they are involved and within which they are learning to interact and contribute."

Commenter Joan Gallagher-Bolos, a high school teacher, responded to the manifesto by rejecting the narrative of a fundamental crisis in American education or a one-size-fits-all approach to combat it. "Sweeping, national education reform is not appropriate or doable," she wrote. "The complexities of education reform require much deeper investigations and a woolly-mammoth-level paradigm shift on the part of society." Gallagher-Boos also linked to an insightful article by Paul Farhi in *American Journalism Review* that critiques the "failing schools" narrative that predominates in mainstream education reportage. (<http://www.ajr.org/Article.asp?id=5280>)

Other respondents, while admiring the ambition of the manifesto and other new visions for education, cautioned against a radical approach to fixing the system. "The urgency of a re-think seems clear to me," wrote Graham Webster. But he also wrote that regardless of whether job preparation is the highest and best use of schools, these institutions are still connected with an economy that fails many vulnerable people in society. "The discussion above suggests that these moving parts in the community are tied to other moving parts—things like employment, the broader economy, and the necessary aggregation of resources for education," he wrote. "To move one part and not the other would be extremely difficult, and might only benefit those communities with the greatest resources to begin with."

Elementary school teacher Ben made another argument against radical, unilateral change. If the education system is underfunded or otherwise neglected, he wrote, then even the most brilliant proposal will prove ineffective. "I completely agree that massive reform is needed," he wrote. "I also agree that starting from scratch would be wonderful for reform. . . . However, such reform will be incredibly expensive to create and implement. While I know it's worth it, I also know it will not happen. As such, we need to do our best to improve our teachers and administrators within the current system, making large changes as we can." He also argued that in many communities, problems unaddressed by existing schools or other institutions (such as drugs and violence) would equally hamper a re-imagined system.

Some commenters also feared that without better data, any major reform of the education system would be ill-advised. "The yardsticks by which we measure education today are outdated," wrote Eileen Bartholomew, Vice President of Prize Development at the X Prize Foundation and a participant in this Lab. "Subject proficiencies, standardized test scores and graduation rates no longer accurately define what it means to be 'educated.' Nor are these current metrics sufficient predictors or gauges for an individual's or a society's capability, happiness, or success." Still others pointed to the failure of the manifesto to account for changes in technology or the latest pedagogical techniques.

Given these many concerns, it may come as no surprise that some positive comments about the manifesto almost served as a rhetorical pat on the back for potential reformers. "The diffusion of constructive change (adoption of new, constructive ideas) is always slow," wrote Bruce Randolph Tizes of Galt Capital, also a Lab participant, before encouraging the authors to keep at it. But what do such concerns over radical reform mean for those pursuing changes in education?

As a tactical matter, it seems prudent for reformers to remember that a system as crucial as education cannot be altered independently of many other systems connected to it. Those who have taught in inner-city schools are all too familiar with the way that ideas that have proven effective in well-funded schools fail in less affluent areas because the system cannot bear the costs in a sustainable way. Yet at the same time, the empirical successes and failures of past reform efforts do not negate the need for fundamental, theoretical grappling with the system. If it is true that school ought to be something radically different than what students presently experience, it may be that some apparent victories are in fact failures, some liabilities are in fact assets, and some aspects of our existing system are entirely irrelevant.

"School Is Not School" was intended to ask such questions. But the vision of school it proposes is not utterly alien - indeed, the manifesto suggests that in the past that vision may have been better understood. This eye on the past turned off several commenters; Ryan B wrote, "I'd be interested in reading the case for school as a place to improve the community and create better citizens, but you don't make that case here. You just reference some prior, nonexistent historical utopia." A rhetorical tactic designed to make a new theoretical basis for education feel familiar instead made it seem inaccessible.

It may be that a more fruitful strategy would be to rally allies to the cause by showing them how a different basis for schooling might make some activities more meaningful or render some obstacles less insurmountable. For example, in many schools problems like drugs and gangs are currently viewed mainly as impediments to the goal of cultivating students' knowledge and skills. Teachers who choose to address these problems may do so at the expense of the educational attainment of the classroom as a whole; indeed, many urban teachers are familiar with this kind of classroom triage. But if ending violence in a community were in fact the goal of a school, the time teachers spend working against the culture of gangs might be positively valued. Teachers who might have previously viewed such problems as limits on reform might be enlisted as supporters of the new paradigm.

Speaking of paradigms, it is also worth considering whether accepting a radically different *raison d'être* for schools necessitates the kind of top-down policy changes many readers inferred. The motion of the planets looked much the same from the perspectives of Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein; it was the differences in their account of the very small that led to the atomic bomb. It may be that many activities currently undertaken by teachers would not be completely abandoned if schools viewed their purpose as making citizens rather than increasing human capital. But an improved sense of their purpose could lead to better decisions at the moments when it matters most. In any case, it makes sense for proponents of such reforms to portray the status quo in a way that recognizes the aspects that could become much more valuable following the shifts they propose.

The Self and the State

Perhaps the most common theme in responses to the manifesto was concern over how schools should balance students' development as individual thinkers and their roles as members of a community. This theme elicited a large number of positive and negative comments.

The key goal of the manifesto was to question an educational system that mainly seeks to increase human capital through the development of individuals' skills and knowledge; it was never meant to question individualism as such. Nevertheless, many readers saw in the document a creeping collectivism. Thomas Clemmons asked: "How long would it take in a world where schools are teaching students to be a better citizen for the good of the community to decide that the community no longer needs artists or musicians or writers but instead needs street sweepers and garbage men? How long would it take the community to override what makes a free world worth contributing to? How long before freedom takes a backseat to utilitarian conformity?" Tania Luna responded and raised the stakes: "Agreed, Thomas. I'm from the former Soviet Union, and this was essentially the thesis statement of our schools. ... "

Some took the manifesto's criticism of the current way of developing human capital as a critique of capitalism itself. "I disagree with the author's apparent distaste for market economies," wrote Tim C. "...[S]chool should not be a place that indoctrinates differently; school should not be a place that indoctrinates /at all/." Others feared that the manifesto would enable the machinations of the right instead of the left. "If the notion is that our schools should be 'community driven,'" wrote Johanna Berkson, "I am concerned the more religious areas would capitalize on that by assuming schools need only teach only about G-d — not expand the human mind as I believe is the intent of this article."

Aaron M. Renn spoke to the tension that underlay many of these comments: "[L]et's be honest, schools are vehicles not just for education but indoctrination. ... The ideal of citizenship is not a content free one for any of us. Our idea of what constitutes the 'selfless' citizen interested in the common weal no doubt includes many specific ideologies, methods of engagement, and even public policies. ... It's staggeringly dangerous to attempt to instill some 'public interest' criterion in the educational content of children by the state since as a society we don't have anything remotely like consensus on what the public interest consists of. ... I think public schools should take a fairly minimalist stance towards this, in which citizenship is the basics of our government and civic society and how to engage in a diverse society, while the main focus is on basic skills and knowledge."

Renn argues that enshrining any notion of the common good at the center of education is potentially dangerous because we are unlikely to agree completely on what "the good" means; therefore, many students and parents would feel alienated no matter what community goals the school pursued. Yet he also suggests that all schools inevitably do this to some extent. This tendency is to be "minimized" in the same way that a reporter is supposed to minimize bias in

news coverage. This would be good advice to, say, a high school government teacher trying to treat liberal and conservative students fairly. One can teach the concept of limited government or the social contract without letting on that one believes the sitting president is betraying it.

Yet it is also difficult to see how one would build an educational system without *some* notion of the common good. The system we have now seems to be predicated on the notion that adding to individuals' skills and knowledge will eventually help everyone through increased economic productivity. We are so used to this idea of the common good that we assume it is natural; hence the insistence by Renn and other commenters that schools stick to the "basics."

But "basics" could mean something radically different depending on the notion of the common good that is built into the school and the society in which it exists. If the ideal were religious obedience, "the basics" might be prayer and meditation; if it were teamwork, it might be the ability to form relationships (with the ability to do math as a fortunate byproduct). Those who hope to argue against whatever social good informs the education system's paradigm must remember that the link between that good and school has likely been deeply naturalized. Opponents will inevitably argue that schools should just do whatever in their essence without admitting that that essence is something human beings decided upon.

That being said, the concerns many commenters expressed about "indoctrination" may point to a weakness of the manifesto's rhetoric. The ideal of the citizen is key to the document's argument. While the word's origin suggests membership in a relatively small community (the city), today the word is almost inevitably associated with loyalty to the state. Many readers naturally assumed that the endurance of the state must necessarily be the common good that the manifesto's re-imagined schools would serve, and as Tania Luna observed, "that didn't go so well" in the Soviet Union. It may have been more effective to specifically state that the community in which students learned to become members is not the same as the state or national government; it would likely be much more local. Whether even these local polities can agree on a notion of a common good (Renn's concern) is another question.

In contrast to those who feared indoctrination, many commenters were encouraged by what they saw as the manifesto's call to build a system in which students are called to be less selfish. "Right on!" wrote Tasneem Goodman. "What a wonder schools could do if they taught people to be other-centered, generous and passionate—both for students and for our world."

But even commenters who endorsed the goal of reducing students' selfishness still worried that the kind of system suggested by the manifesto would fail to serve students as individual people. Kim Storeygard worried that unity of purpose would lead to uniformity of methods. "Not all children learn the same way at the same pace, and not all of them want the same things for their futures," she wrote. "Communities are made up on individuals and we must allow those individuals to develop along their own paths..." Andrew Benedict-Nelson feared the loss of school as a safe place in which each child feels individually valued. He asked, "If love and

respect for each individual child is not included as a design principle, is there a chance we will lose some of them in the cracks?" but also argued that this same risk exists in the current system.

A commenter going by the name Brooklyn Parent pointed out that even if serving the community is the goal of schools, communities are still made of individuals. "I think that neglecting the individual needs of each person does not only do a disservice to community building, it destroys community building," the commenter wrote. "There ARE schools that create democratic citizens while embracing the individuality of each citizen: Democratic Free Schools like the Brooklyn Free School, Sudbury Valley Free School, and the Albany Free School. If it weren't for high stakes testing and the phenomenal destruction of real ideals of learning, these schools could be public schools."

Citizens, Skills, and Communities

Brooklyn Parent's comments point toward another common theme among readers of the manifesto: the potential compatibility of cultivating skills and making students into members of a community. In this view, creating citizens is the "natural state" schools would return to if freed from restraints like standardized testing.

Andie Thomalla was one of several commenters who endorsed this point of view, arguing that schools that serve the moral needs of citizens rather than the market needs of consumers would preserve all the learning happening in the existing system, then add to it: "The question for me is not the kind of citizen our schools should be aiming to produce, but rather the foundation they should be laying to understanding the meaning citizenship in a democracy. (And by the way, under skillful teaching, laser-focused on these concerns, the 'basics' of education — the reading, writing, reasoning — are seamlessly addressed, because they are the critical tools to achieving and articulating deep reflection.)"

Other commenters echoed Thomalla's idea that learning best takes place in a community. But they disagreed that "citizenry" was the best way to think about that community. "Citizenry for me is not specific enough," wrote Jim Gerry. Instead, he argued for a learning community whose form would be informed by brain science and developmental psychology. "Our new system of learning must emulate systems found in nature," he wrote. "These living systems learn and adapt based on what is going on around them. Yet, they are deeply rooted and cannot flourish without these roots..."

Others imagined the ideal school community in more personal or spiritual terms. Johanna Berkson invoked the metaphor of "a circle of trust ... A place to push, challenge, and learn from each other." Patrick O'Connell wrote: "Some may dismiss the notion of community. But the fact is human beings are naturally inclined toward community and we need each other to be fully human. ... Perhaps we need to dream school again. Perhaps we need to dream that school

become the place where one learns to be fully human by understanding the concept of self in the context of community. And this means much more than finding and training for the right career." Lennon Flowers imagined a system in which these skills add up to a sense of personal empowerment: "It's about having the knowledge, wisdom, and sense of agency to recognize a problem and do something about it. It's about recognizing that in a deeply interconnected world, there is no 'my interest' and 'your interest'."

Carolyn Chandler also argued for such a balanced approach between treating students as individuals and as members of a group. Furthermore, she suggested that teaching students how to balance their self-interest with the needs of the community could in fact be the new paradigmatic educational goal the manifesto was searching for. "The hardest thing, which a truly self-actualized person attains, is handling that gray area between the individual and the community in a way that leads to the betterment of both," she wrote. "I think this is the heart of ethics, something that's rarely part of a school's teaching plan."

The optimistic spirit of many of these comments suggests that while suspicion of collectivism, the state, and "citizenry" may abound, the notion of a school community is also a fertile source of ideas for reform. While they have many different ideas of what a proper learning community might look like, there seems to be broad support for the idea that learning has more meaning when it takes place in such a context. The trick may be figuring out how to discuss "community" in such a way that is not so specific that it suggests some particular set of policies, but not so broad as to be meaningless. Striking that balance could earn an education reform movement many allies among the diverse groups who see community as key to education.

Indeed, even commenters who generally rejected the manifesto responded to the idea of a community of learners. "I will agree with one key point in the essay," wrote Chuck Vecoli. "We are a species who live in a society, selfishness is not in one's best interest and learning to work among the others in our society is a learned skill that does get further development in the classroom environment. ... When I look at the public school system of today vs. the one that I experienced as a child, it is not the building that has changed, nor is it the capability of the students, but it is the value system of the society that supports the schools that has changed."

But Vecoli's comments point to another frequent concern expressed why those who read the manifesto: what if school is not the proper place to teach children how to live in society?

Not My Job

Several teachers and parents who read the manifesto approved of the goal of teaching students to become good citizens, but felt that schools were not the most appropriate nor the most effective site for this learning to take place. "You seem to indicate that school is the only and most appropriate place to learn civic values," wrote Paul Lamb. "Shouldn't this also be taught by

parents, spiritual communities, and civil society organizations – and who is to say the greater responsibility shouldn't lie with them?"

Many of these commenters argued that the success of schools, whatever their purpose, would depend on greater investment in early childhood health and education outside of schools. Wrote Eric Patnoudes: "It seems so obvious that the potential of a child's education is based on the foundation that is built in the early years of life. Again a calling to parents to spend time with their children, read with them, teach them how to play and interact with others." Lindsay Benedict, a high school teacher and administrator, also argued that students' character could not be altered without also altering the society that shapes their values before they enter the classroom: "By the time a student makes their way to us they are already imprinted with all the information they need to know in how to behave and operate in the world. They are what their parents show them. They are what MTV shows them. They live in a society where celebrity is celebrated for the sake of celebrity, where education is sneered at, where values are old fashioned, where empathy is weak."

However, other commenters who viewed parents as the source of the values of citizenship and also endorsed the manifesto's message. Courtney S. wrote that the document gave her hope that schools could be better partners with parents in the shaping of children's character: "I view my role as a parent to shepherd my children in discovering and nurturing their God-given gifts and modeling a way of living and believing that will inspire and guide them into their roles as citizens, friends, leaders, etc. I do not expect schools to play that role, but I will do everything in my power to be co-collaborators with them in the process of helping my children develop critical skills and grow into their unique gifts and callings."

Commenter Jason viewed schools as playing a complementary role to religious institutions and parents. "School is where you memorize your multiplication tables," he wrote. "Church is where you learn to be selfless. Home is where you are given the freedom to be yourself. Mix all those together and you have a chance at becoming a worthy citizen." But Tanarra Schneider disagreed, pointing out that children spend so much time in school that it is bound to influence their ideas about society. "I think that our environments – all of our environments, especially at that age – shape who we are and who we become," she wrote.

Other commenters felt that the kind of educational experience described in the manifesto is valuable, but cannot be meaningfully paired with an institution such as "school": "Maybe we ask too much of 'school' and not enough of ourselves to create a learning society," wrote Kristina. "Learning should be continuous — formal, informal— throughout our lives." A commenter going by the name "Edu Widget" went further, calling the ideals of schooling and citizenship totally incompatible: "...what led to the transformation of these mythical citizen schools into worker-in-a-box schools? Surely, this transfiguration did not occur because we at-some-point-in-time forgot the purpose of school! Perhaps school has always been a tool, used by schoolmasters to

indoctrinate and control. Then a 'citizen school,' is – in fact, an oxymoron. ... Education is necessary, but school is not."

Commenters who were primarily concerned with the issue of where values ought to be learned were also concerned about how exactly schools would be re-designed around a citizenship ideal when they are also complex institutions that serve multiple social purposes. High school teacher Joan Gallagher-Bolos pointed out that "being a 'good citizen' (which has as many definitions as there are communities) might be the welcomed consequence to a positive formal education, but cannot be the only goal. And the assumption is made that because a child does not turn out to be a good citizen, s/he must not have been taught how to be a good citizen in school...Not true."

Lindsay Benedict felt that it would be difficult to teach students to be citizens when many schools are struggling just to keep them alive. The rest of society also needs to step up in order to realize meaningful results: "In a world where students and teachers are beaten, stabbed, and shot on school property, where students are bullied into suicide, where teachers are lucky to wrangle a student into a classroom, let alone with completed homework, because they could not find a babysitter for the baby, they had to hitchhike to school, or mom told them they had to stay home and sell drugs-you cannot tell me that it is the main responsibility of schools to grow a citizen. Do not blame schools for the downfall of society. Blame society for the downfall of our schools."

Of course, many of these comments again make the assumption that there is something natural about schools developing individuals' knowledge and skills; it is too simple to argue that schools should simply be left alone to be what they "ought" to be. But they also draw attention to the fact that if schools were to be re-tooled for community purposes, the nature of those communities cannot be ignored. Such re-imagined schools would not be built in distant laboratories; they would inevitably require a sophisticated understanding of the resources and values of the families and institutions that make up the community the school would serve. This would suggest that the institutions we now call "schools" might not be the appropriate target for reformers at all; it may in fact be the surrounding community where most of the reform needs to take place.

Indeed, a commenter named Adrian Acosta argued that no educational success is possible without teachers addressing the classroom *and* the community in which it resides: "To me, a community cannot advance if it is not part of the plan. Education is the answer to many of our problems, but we need the support of the people if we are actually going to make change. ... I was in the classroom for 5 years and knew very little about the community I served. I have come to realize I was doing a disservice to my children(students) ... Now as I've learned to work within the community, I am able to see all the resources available to children in the community that NEVER made it to my campus. I now see that by considering the community separate from the school, I was creating more challenges for my kids to navigate through without giving them the appropriate support. There wasn't a support network, just individuals pushing the kid different ways, making it harder for them in the long run. We need to unite for our children. The gap between schools and the community needs to close..."

A Way Forward: Community as the Key Element

The "School Is Not School" manifesto was intended to provoke a discussion of how the American public education system might look if built for a radically different goal than it now serves. Many responses to the document highlight how difficult it is to dislodge the idea of human capital development that is currently seen as schools' natural purpose. Even when readers were sympathetic to a greater purpose for schools, they pointed to many obstacles that would prevent reform on this basis from occurring. Given these responses, what would be a logical next step toward imagining a public school system that could enjoy greater legitimacy and support? What would be the best way to articulate the vision of such a system?

The manifesto set up a strong dichotomy between schools that develop students as future economic producers and those that would serve community goals. This approach was chosen because of a fear that if the manifesto merely argued that schools should serve their communities, many readers would assume that this is what they already do through human capital development, failing to critically examine the assumptions built into the system. We also thought that many readers would feel that the piece was simply an argument for some program or policy that could be grafted on to the existing system. Indeed, some commenters made this assumption, taking the piece as a call for improved civics education or mandatory community service.

The manifesto aimed to go further, arguing for community life (rather than human capital development) as the primary goal of education. But it may be that it is more fruitful to argue for community as the critical *element* of school without arguing that it is school's exclusive *purpose*. As the comments make clear, people in our society expect schools to accomplish many different things. Still, there seems to be broad support for the idea that all these purposes, from teaching skills to inculcating values to simply making sure kids survive, are more effectively executed in a meaningful social context. Right now, even advocates for greater community involvement in schools tend to view community as a mere external resource that supports schools' essential activity of adding to students' skills and knowledge - this human capital development is seen as what the school "is." But the fact that so many commenters pointed toward the necessity of community involvement to accomplish this purpose would suggest that the key element of school is actually providing this social context for learning. In this model, the school *is* the community's collective efforts - human capital development would just be one of the many things that it *does*.

This notion of community as school's essential element has an intuitive appeal. It acknowledges that school is not the exclusive site for learning - toddlers constantly absorb new words from their parents, and many young people can acquire all the knowledge they would in school by reading on their own. School is simply the primary site to do this learning in a *social* context. Yet virtually none of our policy discussions of schools (whether it's about standardized testing or curriculum or teacher's unions) acknowledge that the social is education's constitutive element.

A future iteration of the manifesto, then, might not take as its goal the proposal of a bold new system based on the social ideal, but draw attention to the fact that the social is being ignored in so many aspects of education. It could then ask how we might re-discover it and improve upon it.

Such an orientation toward the world would allow reformers to propose radical changes while also highlighting some of the best unacknowledged efforts of the status quo. It would insist that schools determine their relationship to the community's well-being without inviting charges of indoctrination. It would seek to supercharge learning by connecting it to a meaningful social context without insisting on what specific form that context would take. And it would provide a meaningful way to talk about how to simultaneously carry out reforms in schools and communities, since the real object under consideration would be the relationship between them.

In short, the “School Is Not School” experiment did not yield a specific answer of what schools ought to be. But it did teach us a great deal about the ways in which the subject of radically better schools ought to be approached. We remain persuaded that having that conversation about the fundamental purpose of our educational system is essential to building schools that are greater than anything we presently imagine.