Pathways to Reform: Start With Values

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Educators' deeply held philosophical beliefs point to many diverse pathways, all leading to school excellence.

The Northtown Academy campus of Chicago International Charter School (CICS) combines a commitment to classical learning with innovative citizenship education grounded in public debate. KIPP Academies rely on academic pressure and tough love to help students meet state standards. At Withrow University High School in Cincinnati, Ohio, students wear uniforms and boys and girls attend separate classes. The Francis Parker Charter School in Harvard, Massachusetts, boasts a democratic-communitarian ethic in which students take an active role in school governance and pursue learning through thematic group projects. Students at The Met in Providence, Rhode Island, pursue a curriculum composed entirely of self-designed projects and internships. At the Oakland School for Social Justice and Community Development in Oakland, California, students learn community organizing and critical theory. And at High Tech High in San Diego, California, students pursue project-based courses of study keyed to careers in technology industries.

These are just seven of the many great small high schools that I have had the privilege of getting to know through my work at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. These schools differ profoundly in their curriculum, instruction, and culture. An individual teacher or student might feel at home in one or a few of these schools, but certainly not in all of them. Yet these small schools have important things in common. They all have high percentages of minority and low-income students. They all strive to offer students a supportive, rigorous, and coherent learning environment in compliance with state standards. They all aim to prepare students for higher education, work, and citizenship.

Common ends, diverse pathways. School reformers have embraced this vision, but we still face the question of how to achieve it. We know most of the structural conditions necessary to make such a vision a reality: site-based autonomy, family and faculty choice, performance-based accountability, data-driven decision making, and research-based practice. But these structural features only get us so far. They explain what these schools have in common, but they don't account for what makes them distinctive.

Belief Systems and Practice

One crucial but often overlooked source of the distinctiveness among high-performing schools is philosophy—the beliefs and values that create our sense of what makes life worth living, and therefore what is worth teaching and how we should teach it. In our drive to be “research-based,” we tend to forget that between the science of learning and the practice of teaching lie important value judgments that color our reading of the research and the implications for practice we derive from it. These value judgments reflect deeply held philosophical worldviews.

Few of us went into education out of a burning desire to raise students' test scores. We went into it out of a deep sense of what's good for kids and society, what's worth knowing and thinking about, what it means to be a good citizen and person—indeed, what it means to lead a good life. Philosophy matters.

In fact, education's fiercest and most intractable conflicts have stemmed from differences in philosophy. Take the 100 Years War between “progressives” and “traditionalists.” To oversimplify an already oversimplified dichotomy, progressives incline toward pedagogical approaches that start with student interests and emphasize hands-on engagement with the physical and social
environments, whereas traditionalists tend to start with pre-existing canons of inquiry and knowledge and emphasize ideas and concepts mediated through words and symbols.

The evolution of these differences is not grounded in science, but in history, philosophy, and ideology. So-called progressivism evolved over the 19th and 20th centuries out of a complex interaction of romanticism, socialism, pragmatism, and progressive politics. So-called traditionalism has Aristotelian origins refracted through Renaissance humanism and later through romanticism, as well as pre-libertarian forms of conservatism. The former could be described as populist, small-d democratic, and attuned to the flux of modern life; the latter could be characterized as aristocratic, small-r republican, and attentive to the continuities that underlie and influence modern change.

Notice that romanticism appears as a source for both philosophies. This is not the only point of overlap. Education progressives and traditionalists from the 19th century to the present have shared certain overarching perspectives. For example, all espouse liberal democratic values inherited from the Enlightenment, such as rights, liberty, and popular government. All subscribe to a developmental theory of childhood and learning. All strive to produce young adults who are good citizens, caring people, critical thinkers, and productive contributors to the economy. All believe that learning should be relevant to students. They simply disagree about the exact meaning of these ideals and their curricular and pedagogical implications. Does a relevant education start with student interests and backgrounds, current needs of the job market, and current events? Or should we teach students to recognize the relevance of ancient Greek thought, the Copernican revolution, and Shakespeare’s soliloquies?

How can we devise a study to adjudicate these different views empirically? We can’t. Normative questions are not easily settled by empirical means because our normative points of view color how we understand empirical evidence.

Not that empirical research is meaningless. On the contrary, research has produced many insights that help us distinguish between good teaching and bad. We know, for example, that the mind constructs knowledge—that people learn by connecting new information to existing understandings and conceptual frameworks. We know that teaching needs to attend to both basic and higher-order skills, and to both cognitive and noncognitive development. We know that students learn best in safe, challenging, personally supportive, and authoritative communities.

These findings, however, must be interpreted and translated into practice. For some educators, constructivist learning theory justifies discovery learning driven by student interests; for others, it merely describes what happens whenever a learner’s brain takes in information, even “passively” through a lecture. Which interpretation is correct? On this question and many others, even the most rigorous and credible research provides little guidance.

Within the bounds of shared values and research-based principles lie a range of legitimate practices, and between science and practice lie a number of judgments that are irreducibly values-based. This idea was once cause for concern, because it belied the quest for the single code of “best practices” that would certify teachers as true professionals. But we need not view the influence of philosophical values as an embarrassment anymore. As reformers and education professionals have moved away from large, tracked, one-size-fits-all comprehensive schools and toward small, focused schools of choice that offer multiple pathways to postsecondary opportunity, we have begun to recognize what should have been obvious all along: There are many ways for a school to be “good” (see Cuban, 2000).

**Reflecting on Key Questions**

From time to time we remind ourselves about the importance of values, beliefs, and culture to education. But we are not conditioned to take them seriously in our deliberations about what schools should be. We need help, because enabling educators, parents, and other constituents to be more articulate about their convictions and the philosophical judgments behind them is a crucial
step in forming effective learning communities. This step involves answering key questions both individually and collectively.

The following questions can help educators and their constituencies organize into philosophically and pedagogically coherent learning communities. The process of reflecting on these questions is especially useful for groups of educators who are creating new, small high school learning communities, such as schools-within-schools, but it applies to any school community striving to transform practice around shared goals.

*What motivated me to go into teaching?* We all know that teaching is a vocation. We don't do it for money or glory, but for some intrinsic reward. Was it a passion for a particular subject? A social service mission? A desire to help young people realize individual talents? This gut check will tease out your deep motivation and basic orientation toward practice.

*What do I think students should know and be able to do?* We need to answer this question as concretely as possible; otherwise everyone's answers will sound the same. We all believe in developing students' literacy, mathematical facility, critical thinking, citizenship, workforce competence, and commitment to lifelong learning. This level of collective affirmation is important; it reminds us that whatever our differences, we are ultimately on the same side. But these broad values need to be unpacked with more pointed questions.

To become literate, what kinds of books should students read, and why? What should be the ratio of printed text to other media? Who should choose the medium—student or teacher? Which comes first in teaching literacy—decoding skills or comprehension? What should take priority in teaching mathematics—numeric manipulations or mathematical reasoning? Regarding science, is it OK if students graduate from high school without knowing what gravity is as long as they have mastered the scientific method? When it comes to citizenship, does living in a North Atlantic democracy like the United States mean that a student should leave school with a deep knowledge of the history and traditions that made North Atlantic democracies possible, or do immigration and globalization necessitate a more multicultural curriculum?

Notice that many of the foregoing are questions of priority rather than forced choices. Most sober educators would argue “both” in many instances—at least in the abstract. But priorities imply choices and different ways to organize learning. Our broad affirmations of consensus values usually degenerate into unproductive bickering when the hard work of constructing an instructional program begins.

*Who are the influences on my education philosophy?* Because our deep motivations and priorities tend to form without conscious reflection, they often remain inchoate. One good way to become articulate fast is to read. I would start with books that survey thought and debate about education in a schematized way. My favorites, because of their clarity and even-handedness, are Gerald Gutek's textbookish but readable *Philosophical and Ideological Voices in Education* (Allyn and Bacon, 2004) and Herbert Kliebard's *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893–1958* (Routledge, 1995). Such books will furnish your group members with a common vocabulary and framework for situating themselves in the landscape of modern education thought.

Most participants will identify quickly with certain philosophies. They can then choose from a menu of books that represent and develop those points of view. (See "Readings on Vision," p. 14, for a selection.) Browse around for the book that gets you most excited, and pay close attention to its vision of the ideal school. Chances are that the kind of school the book describes or suggests is the kind of school in which you would feel most fulfilled.

*Which colleagues share my vision?* Once people have made their initial self-identifications, they might want to do their vision readings together with like-minded colleagues. Teachers in a school probably know some colleagues well and have already gravitated toward those who share certain core beliefs about their work. Forming reading groups on the basis of these affinities can extend
and deepen those networks, help members develop a shared normative vocabulary, and form the
basis of design groups for small schools or school-within-a-school learning communities.

*What do parents, students, and local citizens want, need, and believe?* Ideally, other constituents
would engage in the same exploration that teachers and administrators do. If that proves
unrealistic, the school should conduct some kind of outreach to ascertain the degree to which
parents and students share the points of view that emerge among educators. Reaching out to the
community early helps create broad ownership and ensures that there will be demand for the
learning communities that are likely to grow out of this exercise.

Initially these reflective and deliberative exercises will be self-initiated and self-guided—hence the
heavy dose of reading. School change consultants, coaches, and workshop leaders are no more
proficient at disentangling the empirical from the normative than the typical faculty. In fact, like
most of us, education consultants are so habituated to reading research through the lens of their
own normative value systems that they are more likely to steer school communities in a preferred
direction than to help them identify their own direction. After the nascent learning communities
have organized themselves, they can choose consultants with more care and begin the usual
planning efforts.

**Grappling with Dilemmas**
The shift to a true system of distinct pathways for students will likely heighten anxiety over certain
issues. When we introduce candid talk about values and pluralism, the following questions are
likely to arise almost immediately.

*Won't this lead to segregation?* It certainly can. Suppose that after deliberation, educators and
parents at a comprehensive high school agree to create the following four small learning
communities: a women's leadership school, an International Baccalaureate (IB) school, a high-tech
school, and a school of African American and Latin American Studies. Each small school reflects a
significant group of constituents within the existing school, among whom it enjoys strong support.
But the women's leadership school will draw more girls, the IB school more affluent Asian American
and white students, the high-tech school (probably) more boys, and the African American and Latin
American Studies school more black and Hispanic students.

It is possible to mitigate this problem, but not to eliminate it. Educators and other constituents
must address up-front how much separation by race, gender, and aptitude they are willing to
tolerate. If the tolerance is low, then schools that explicitly target gender, cultural, or racial groups
will prove too divisive; the planners must rule out women's leadership and African American and
Latin American Studies schools and recognize that authentically integrating IB and high-tech
schools will require aggressive outreach. If constituents are willing to accept less-than-perfectly-
integrated schools in the interest of better serving different constituencies and drawing on teacher
strengths, it will be crucial to monitor those schools for resource equity and academic quality and
to provide students with frequent opportunities to interact meaningfully with students from the
other learning communities.

*What about the common school?* Underneath the anxiety over segregation lies the ideal of the
common school as a crucible where children of diverse backgrounds come together to forge a
common citizenry. If we allow schools to reflect our pluralism, what institution will bind us together
as a people?

This question, although important, underestimates the degree to which both research and
consensus values can enforce certain common goals and common learning for all students,
regardless of school type. We should prohibit all schools from teaching anti-liberal values, such as
ethnic hatred or the rejection of secular government; we should require all schools to teach the
principles of the U.S. Constitution and to provide civic education that goes beyond the minimal
expectations of tolerance and cooperation. But schools need latitude with regard to how they
accomplish these goals. Some will emphasize service learning, others critical theory, and still
others immersion in the traditions of Western political thought. All of these approaches reflect credible ways of thinking about democratic citizenship.

Those who still recoil at the thought of schools designed to teach different things in different ways to different kids might ask themselves this: Do I want a national curriculum? Not my national curriculum, but the one we’d likely get if one were developed? The United States has rejected a national curriculum for good reasons, and these include the pedagogical pluralism we’ve been exploring (see Gardner, 2000, pp. 222–228).

*If we base pedagogical choices on value judgments, won’t we undermine teacher professionalism?* For a century now, educators have sought recognition as a profession on par with medicine—self-governing, restrictive with respect to who can practice, and scientifically based. This aspiration has abetted the suppression of philosophical differences in education decision making by derogating these differences as “ideology” and “politics.” If only we could eliminate such distractions, say the professionalizers, we could enact evidence-based policy and practice. But as we have seen, the research isn’t enough.

Acknowledging that teaching isn’t a science in no way implies that it isn’t a profession that requires considerable apprenticeship and skill to perform well. There remains a body of empirical evidence that teachers must internalize, and centuries of accumulated craft knowledge that they must master. Between the ideal of the teacher-as-physician and the notion that anyone with a bachelor's degree, a high SAT verbal score, and a clean arrest record can teach lies a craft model of professionalism that upholds rigorous quality standards while honoring diverse approaches. A more philosophically informed self-understanding can help the profession flourish within this zone.

Recognizing the value judgments that both guide research and color the multiple legitimate inferences that we draw from it could generate several favorable outcomes for the education profession. First, such recognition would defuse a lot of the internecine bickering—the Reading Wars, Math Wars, Culture Wars—that make us look silly and faddish to outsiders. Second, it would facilitate the formation of communities of practice capable of developing coherent courses of study in settings where parents, students, and teachers share a common understanding of the enterprise—all qualities associated with teacher satisfaction, parent approval, and high student achievement. Third, the resulting system would require certain policies that educators have long championed—such as site-based autonomy, streamlined performance standards, and flexible approaches to state assessment—because multiple pathways depend on an accountability system supple enough to support all of them.

*If we allow educators to organize schools around coherent philosophies, won’t those educators be imposing adult values on students?* We like to tell ourselves that schooling is about the kids, not the adults, and that the needs of the former must trump those of the latter. Hence we naïvely strive for a pose of dispassionate diagnosis and treatment in our work and advocacy. But whether we like it or not, schooling is an extension of child-rearing. We’re not aiming to produce high test scores; we’re striving to create good people. This aspiration is by definition normative.

Take the goal of helping students become autonomous, self-governing persons—the same goal that makes us uncomfortable “imposing” adult values on them. The importance we assign to personal autonomy itself reflects a philosophical point of view stemming from our liberal democratic worldview. In many cultures, past and present, qualities such as deference to elders and loyalty to tribe or nation have held higher priority. So the expectation that children grow up to be autonomous and critical is itself an imposition of values. We’re fooling ourselves if we think we can meet our highest aspirations for students without seeking to shape them according to a normative ideal.

*Isn’t conflict educative?* If we permit students to self-segregate on the basis of education philosophy—to attend schools where everyone else shares their values—won’t we deprive students of exposure to differing points of view? This would be a serious drawback. But it overstates the case I’ve been arguing.
First, there's a practical limit to how far we can take this. If our goal were to form learning communities where everyone agreed on all normative questions, we would end up with universal homeschooling—and even that would work only until children were old enough to start questioning their parents' worldviews. But there's a more principled reply: The point here is not to create homogeneous communities of value, but rather to create homogeneity with respect to certain core beliefs concerning curriculum, instruction, norms of comportment, and civic virtue. This arrangement leaves plenty of room for students to encounter diverse points of view on substantive matters. Every philosophy of education, every approach to every curriculum, generates disagreements and provides a shared framework for deliberations about them.

**Diversity as Opportunity**

I recognize how strange all this talk about philosophy and pluralism must sound. We have become so accustomed to thinking of our work as a service commodity, in which adult professionals provide student-clients with diagnoses and treatments, that we sometimes forget that schooling is always and inevitably about cultivating persons. Not that the standards movement is misguided, or that we don't need research to guide practice. Both common standards and research, along with certain broadly shared societal ideals, help us define good schooling and provide necessary limits to diversity. But these boundaries still admit a rich variety of approaches.

The move to small, distinctive schools of choice provides an opportunity to exploit that richness. Such schools will not make a difference if their goal is merely diversity for diversity's sake. Rather, we should treat the creation of these schools as a means to enhance the reflectiveness of educators, develop authoritative communities of practice, provide meaningful options for families, and improve academic, civic, and personal outcomes for young people.
Readings on Vision

One way to become more articulate about one's deep motivations is to read the books of authors who have formally expressed kindred beliefs and translated them into ideal school models. Below, a small sample of readings represents the range of thought within the “traditionalist” and “progressive” visions.

**Traditionalist**

**Progressive**
- George S. Counts, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1978).

References


Endnote

† I dislike the terms “progressive” and “traditionalist” because they paper over a lot of diversity and disagreement that exist within the two philosophies. Of the seven schools mentioned in my introduction, three are traditional and four are progressive, but all are philosophically and pedagogically distinct—in many cases, profoundly.

*Editor’s Note:* This article originally appeared in the February 2005 issue of *Educational Leadership*. 
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