

The Challenge of Change

Making Community Connections for Meaningful & Lasting Change

By Ian Jukes

Originally written in 2001, some things have changed, but most has stayed the same.

Synopsis

Something really weird is happening - graduation rates are at an all time high, SAT and NAEP scores are up, participation in AP courses is up. Many of our traditional indicators say that education is making great strides, and that, without a doubt, students graduating from our schools today are the best educated in the history of the nation. And yet, these same students are also the least prepared for the world that awaits them. As a result, the heat is on education and educators to change. How can our students simultaneously be the best educated and the least prepared? Why is it happening? Why and how do schools need to change? What are the challenges ahead for public education? What can we do about it? What do our communities need to know? How can we effectively communicate this important message to them? What are the elements of a successful community connection campaign? And what critical role do educators play in making it work?

This provocative presentation forces participants to step back from the tyranny of everyday life and take a careful look at the bigger picture as to where education is, where it needs to go, how we can get there, and what role the community must play in this process.

Background

Have you ever heard the cry "what's the matter with you guys?" Have you ever heard someone say, "if we ran our business the way you run your schools we wouldn't be in business very long?" Most people outside of education just don't understand the profound differences between private enterprise and public policy

What do you do about it?

If we could give you one tip you could take home, it would be that you should spend whatever time you could afford in helping the business leaders of your community

understand this difference. You need to get them to come inside your buildings. We don't mean for some grand executive tour where people walk around with hands in their pockets and nod approvingly. We mean get these folks to commit a whole day and then make sure they spend this time in the classrooms at the elementary, middle and high school levels

Why?

In doing this we can almost guarantee you that you will buy a tremendous amount of good will from a vocal and sometimes very vocal member of your community. We've been through this process during that last 15 years and while this is not a conversation about our personal transformation, We will say to you now that no grown up in America has the right to take cheap shot at what goes on inside your school all day unless she or he has spent a warm, preferably Friday afternoon locked up with 8th grade. We've had that experience - there's an interesting smell in that room as those little hormones with legs go scuttling around.

A pat on the back

We believe that you and your staff have never done a better job in the history of American schools than you are doing right now - and we have the facts and figures to back up that statement. But this does not mean that the system doesn't have to change. It does, and a lot. Let us explain. In the early days of our involvement with K-12 education reform, We spent much of our time thinking about and talking about the question of what. We must do to prepare our students for the "post-industrial society. Over the last 7 years one must characterize our professional life as a journey backwards. Backward away from the highly differentiated discussions of "what?" We need to do to the more basic question of "why?" - why our schools need to change.

Hold on a minute

Now we can just hear some of you groan - particularly those of you "" type personalities who are sick to death about talking about "why" and want to get on with the process. We empathize - heaven knows there's been enough talk over the years about the need to change, some of it quite emotional, but we maintain that not everybody has been included in this talk. Some very important constituencies have been left out - the people of your communities

The New Public Agenda foundation's report shows clearly that Americans are reluctantly but surely turning their backs on public education out of frustration

with the status quo while at the same time expressing a marked suspicion of and resistance to efforts to transform their local schools. These statistics became real to me last year - a superintendent friend of mine in a district of about 1800 students was forced out of his job. On the surface it appeared that he had done all the right things. He had done the prescribed strategic planning - the research, the in-servicing and training prior to implementing a significant reform package in his district only to see the majority of his supportive board replaced on election night by a group of angry people who ran against the changes

Now please, don't conclude that the best thing to do is hunker down, do nothing and wait for retirement - that would be a huge mistake because the pressure for change is just going to increase over the next few year years from the enemies of public education

Who are the enemies of public education?

- drive-by critics
- entrepreneurs
- short-sighted political opportunists
- religious zealots
- tax fanatics
- talk show hosts
- they all thrive on our paralysis and use it to undermine the public trust in our schools

Showing leadership

The Millennium is here. We're convinced that the senior management of the K-12 system must lead our schools into the 21st Century but we believe that part of your activity must include a conversation with your community. You must reach out to everyone in the community and have an in-depth conversation regarding the need for change. And not to put a fine point on it, to outline what's at stake for them if their schools (not somebody else's schools) don't change to meet the demands of a rapidly changing society

The goal of this exercise as far as we're concerned is not primarily to increase community involvement. There's a lot of talk about community involvement today and we admit that it's a good thing, but our experience is that people are very busy and hard pressed to become more involved with their schools.

We believe that the goal must be community permission. You need the people in your community to understand why our schools need to change and what you plan to do to change the schools so that they can grant you their permission as taxpayers and voters to make the necessary changes.

A community connection campaign

This community connection campaign must incorporate certain basic elements: Point one of this campaign is that it must be designed to ensure that you reach everyone in your community - please note that we're describing a much different sort of community outreach campaign than is currently practiced in most districts. Now when it comes to inviting the public into a discussion of school issues, the typical procedure is to schedule a meeting to be held at the school. When you do that, you have automatically excluded some of the people in the community from this conversation.

Why? It's because there are a lot of grownups that are afraid of school and don't like coming into the buildings. They feel uncomfortable and they avoid it. Once you've picked the school site, what usually happens is that you promote the meeting by sending notes home with kids, putting an announcement in the school newsletter, or perhaps placing an article in the local paper. When you invite the public in this way, who comes? It's the same 5 people who always come. Once upon a time this was good enough. It's not any more. We'll tell you what. If you don't get to your community, you can be assured that your critics will. We're suggesting an aggressive campaign that reaches out into the community and meets with the people on their turf and at their convenience. This campaign must be thorough and inclusive - you must reach everyone - everyone in the boardroom, the church basement, the senior citizens centers, down at the coffee shops, even people you don't like. The campaign must also be ongoing. We're not talking about a one shot deal - the content will change over time, but we're convinced that it is part of business as usual for senior educators from now on

Telling it like it is

You need to tell them that you have never done a better job than you are doing right now. This is not a widely appreciated fact. In fact, some teachers don't even believe it. But it's true - and you must make sure that everyone in your community knows it. Why? Because you have a lot of people out there on the radio, TV, as well as in magazines and the newspapers saying the opposite and it's not true. Check out Gerald Bracey's book *Setting the Record Straight*. Literally every single traditional

indicator of student achievement shows you that you've never done a better job graduation rates at high school and university are higher, average IQ scores of junior and senior high school students are up NAEP scores are up, student participation in Advance Placement is up - the list goes on.

But what about the decline in SAT Scores?

A careful examination of even the much-discussed decline in SAT scores proves the point. Critics of public education point to the decline of SAT scores over the last 20 years as clear proof of the decline of public schools. Well it turns out that these is one of those times in life that you can accurately report a statistic and not tell the truth. It's accurate that the mean score is down 3.5% over the last 25 years - but the principal reason for this has nothing to do with the decline in the quality of your schools or your work. The reason is that there are now many more students from the bottom half of the class taking the test. If you've got kids from the bottom half of the class, guess what - they're going to pull the mean score down - and they have by 3.5%. But if you disaggregate the numbers - if you look by race, by gender, by ethnic origin, in fact even if you look by class rank, you find that every single sub category of test taker in America is up - everyone!!!!

There's even more!

Beyond these statistics, you offer a substantially better school experience to America's poor and minority children than ever before while at the same time, the curriculum for all of America's children is stronger & broader and it is taught in more creative & dynamic ways than ever before - even the way it was 25 years ago.

The fact is that you have never done a better job and you must clearly and repeatedly let everyone in your community know this. Then, when you've got everyone together and told them what a good job you're doing, you have to tell them why you want to do things differently and why we need to change.

We know that there are several reasons why schools must change but we want to focus on three that you might want to propose to the public.

Faulty sorting

The first is fundamental. The current system is built on the faulty premise of selecting and sorting. This system of education that we have today began to be built a hundred years ago. In 1893 a group of Ivy League presidents gathered for the purpose of reshaping American schools. They called themselves the Committee

of 10. This group believed that a new system was needed to replace the loose network of small locally controlled schools that were spread across America. Their basic premise was that the new system needed to be designed for the purpose of sorting young human beings according to their academic abilities and, this is no small point, they believed that academic ability was based solely on intelligence. From the late 1800's through the first half of this century education reformers worked diligently to accomplish this goal of selecting and sorting. They began to standardize every aspect of the K-12 environment. As a result, the theories of scientific management that swept corporate America in the 1930's invaded the schools. The cry of greater efficiency was heard from commentators and educational reformers alike. Step by step they built the educational system that we have today

So what?

Now you might say, what's the problem, where's the faulty premise - aren't some people smarter than others? Yes absolutely - as a matter of fact in the general population intelligence is distributed across a bell curve like the one with every graduating class. The problem is so fundamental that we have a tendency to look past it and treat it's symptoms

The problem is that the Committee of 10 and all of their followers were wrong. The purpose of education is not to select and sort human beings according to intelligence (which we affectionately call intellectual apartheid.) Rather, the purpose of education is to help people learn what it is that they will need to know in order to be successfully assuming the various roles of an American adult. We don't have such a system in our educational system today

Want proof?

If you have any doubt about this selecting process we will tell you that the smoking gun of a sorting system, is the fact that time is held constant. Everyone goes to school the very same number of hours and the same number of days. Why does this prove the point? Because some people take longer than others do. Notice that we did not say that they were slow. There is a stigma attached to the word slow in a learning environment. Some people take longer not because they are less intelligent but because they have different learning styles

But the Group of 10 and schools today have set up a system that more closely resembles a race than a development - and a race, we might add, that favors

certain learning styles. Therefore, even if you adhere to the notion that the purpose of an education system is to sort on the basis of intelligence, we don't do that. We sort on the basis of who's good in school - and that is not the same as who is intelligent unless you define intelligence in very narrow terms. One suggestive indicator of the fact that our schools are not identifying those who are more intelligent and those who are going on to lead society is that you often find people who graduated in the middle or sometimes even the back of the class employing people who graduated at the front

A need for change

Our schools need to change from the rigid, factory like institutions that we have today to places where we provide universal literacy of a high order to all students - well beyond what literacy meant forty years ago - and a system that promotes in every individual a motivation to learn and the discipline for continual learning.

This does not mean, as some have suggested, that everyone will emerge from this sort of a school system the same. There will always be a variation of quality in our graduates. But if we create a system of education where everyone clearly understands what the students are expected to learn and where the schools are flexible enough both from the perspectives of time and teaching styles to help virtually everyone graduate knowing what it is she or he will need to know to be successful as an adult, then we will serve the true purpose of education and in the process will eliminate the tremendous indignity and unfairness that a selecting and sorting system produces.

Getting beyond this

At this point in the conversation a fair question might be - if our schools of education are so flawed and unfair, why have we put up with it for almost 100 years? One answer is that from the perspective of the American economy, the system worked. Until recently, we've never needed a lot of highly educated human beings in order to make the American economy go.

Historically, a small percentage of people were paid to think for a living. The vast majority of American workers were paid to do exactly what they were told to do. And our schools were specifically designed to produce these two kinds of workers in proper proportion and they have done and continue to do an excellent job to succeed in America's great industrial machine

But now it's a new world out there!

Now, the problem is that America's industrial economy is disappearing before our eyes and being replaced by an economy that is driven by information and knowledge. The kind of worker that is needed in order to advance this economy is dramatically changing and our schools must change as a result. Knowledge is to this economy what natural resources and capital were to yesterday's. Knowledge has become the decisive factor in corporate production and personal success.

Gone are the days when low skills would garner high wages. It is clear that the only jobs worth having will require our graduates to constantly learn new things and mobilize the knowledge they already possess if they are to be successful. If too many of them are unprepared or ill prepared to do this, not only will they struggle in their lives, it will be bad for the entire community, even those people who are well off. Unfortunately not enough of the people in your community know this. Too many of them think that it was okay for me, it's okay for our kids

It's not. Too many of them think that their children can succeed in a knowledge age armed only with the skills that their parents received in the Industrial Age. They can't. All children need to learn the traditional basics to high levels and to know the new basics because today it goes beyond just reading, writing and arithmetic.

You need those things to be functionally literate but today's society demands that in addition to the three R's We have to teach all of our students the three T's related to thinking, technology and teamwork skills - and one of the revolutionary notions of our time is that all students must have these skills.

The success of your community depends upon the ability of your students to release their full intellectual and creative potential, so part of your conversation with the community must convince them that your schools needs to change because they were not designed for this purpose.

Greater expectations for schools than ever before!

Our schools have tried to adapt to massive social change over the course of the past 50 years, and in doing so, they have become very confused. For hundreds of years all that our schools were responsible for was teaching reading, writing and arithmetic, then we began to add things to the list

1900

- reading
- writing
- arithmetic

1900-1910

- immunization
- nutrition
- health

1910-1920

- citizenship

1920-1940

- vocational arts
- practical arts
- physical education
- school lunch

1950's

- safety education
- driver's education
- foreign language education
- sex education

1960's

- consumer education
- career education
- peace education
- traffic safety education
- leisure education

1970's

- special education mandated
- drug & alcohol abuse education
- electrical safety education
- parent education
- character education
- environmental education
- school breakfasts

1980's

- keyboarding
- computer education
- global education, ethnic education
- multicultural education
- non- sexist education
- ESL education
- full day kindergarten
- pre-school programs for at-risk students
- after school programs for children of working parents
- stranger danger education
- sexual abuse prevention education
- child abuse monitoring.....

1990's

- state standards
- career education
- HIV AIDS education
- bus safety education
- gang education
- death education

2000???

Yet it's the same school day and school year as 1950

When America had the longest school day and school year in the entire Industrial World - now in the new millennium, we have the shortest. We've not added a single minute to the school day or school year in decades. Consequently schools can't do it. Schools were not designed to rear America's children.

And yet, in even our best towns, we know that there are parents who are parenting by remote control. They drop them off for Pre-K or Kindergarten and expect to pick up 13 years later and find fully developed human beings. But they didn't play a role in the process

What's the problem?

The system is trying to be all things to all people and it can't work. It must be changed. And if you say to me change to what we suggest that part of the conversation with the community is just that question. What is the role of school in the new millennium? Furthermore, we will tell you that if you attempt to implement major changes without having that conversation with your community you're going to be frustrated in your efforts

Finally.....

As part of this process, we don't want to just talk about a piece of content, we want to talk about delivery. When you talk with the people of your community, you must communicate in clear simple terms. We live in an over-communicated society. There's a lot of noise and information coming at us. Human beings react by erecting filters in the mind to screen information. Clear simple messages get in while complex, ambiguous messages do not. Think of how politicians get out their message. Think of some the signals your critics are sending out. Many of them are wrong, many of them are mean-spirited, many of them are outright lies - but let's face it, they're simple and effective.

To overcome this, you must understand that when it comes to you and your schools, you are the experts. No one is better able to explain the realities of school life and the challenges that you face better than you are...but you are educators - and our experience is that when you go out to talk to the public, you don't try to talk, you try to teach. The problem with this is that compared to your detractors, you use so much jargon that it sounds like you are speaking in educational tongues. This has got to stop

How do you do it?

We're not suggesting that you trivialize the issues or dumb down the content, but what we are suggesting is that today's communication environment, less is more. Your messages to the public regarding your successes, your challenges, and your needs must be honest and brief, clear and simple. In a dialog with the public, when

confusion walks in people walk out - and in too many cases, that's just what's happening.

Now, we know that this campaign we're suggesting is adding a burden to an already overloaded plate, but we believe that it is absolutely essential if you want to effectively and professionally lay the groundwork for the futures of your schools, rebuild the public trust, and generate the support you need and the appreciation you deserve. We believe that the best is yet to come both for our K-12 educators and consequently from them -

We are fast approaching the day in America where you are given the support you need and the high status you deserve. The eternal moral reasons for this that have been for too long been ignored, are now being powerfully being combined with a list of pressing practical reasons springing directly from the growing needs of the American economy. Together the practical and the moral form a compelling, irresistible set of motives for us to finally do the right thing.

We know that it might be hard to see from your vantage point as you fight daily to keep a system of a hundred sometimes hostile constituencies from flying apart at the seams, but the trends of time are in your favor. Beyond the political rhetoric, beyond the tug of war between the left and right, looming before us is the undeniable fact that we must become a nation of learning communities if we are to survive let alone thrive in the 21st century. Everyone must participate in the creation of these communities - it is ludicrous to think that you can do it alone

What is your role?

The fact is that you are and will remain the most important individuals in the process. If we are going to unfold the full intellectual and creative genius of all of our people, you and your staffs are going to do it. If we are going to continue our march through the 21st century, and continue our long tradition of success, you are going to lead us. You are the knowledge givers for millions of Americans in the Knowledge Age. You take the pieces of the world and put them together so that your children can feel whole. You stand in the gap between the present and the future between failure and fulfillment and with your energy, your creativity, your commitment, and your hard work you build a bridge for children to cross this gap and as our children cross this gap, so does our entire nation. You are America's hope - you are America's most important professionals

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