

Future Directions for Public Education Reform

Summary and Analysis of Interview Responses

During the Spring of 2009, students enrolled in *Re-envisioning Education & Democracy* interview 30 students, teachers, parents, professors, and community activists regarding public education reform. Responses to individual interviews were summarized and then collated, analyzed, and interpreted by student research groups.

Question 1

Please briefly describe your secondary school experience:

*** Where did you go to high school?**

Most of the interviewees (10) went to high school in MN. Two interviewees went to high school in each of the following states: IL, DC, IN, NY. There was one student from each of the following: GA, Columbia/ Singapore, Greece/ MN, KS, MA/MH, MD, ND, NE, OK, Poland, SD, TN, and WI. For the complete cite/state/country list please see figure 1.

*** Would you describe the school as urban/ rural/ suburban?**

There were 16 interviewees described their school as urban, 2 for rural, and 17 for suburban.

*** Public/ private?**

28 of them came from public high schools and 7 came from private high schools.

| | | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|-----------|
| Atlanta | GA | Helsinki | MN |
| Columbia/ Singapore | Columbia/ Singapore | Richfield | MN |
| Washington | DC | Twin Cities | MN |
| Washington | DC | Minneapolis | MN |
| Athens/ St. Paul | Greece/ MN | Saint Paul | MN |
| St. Charles | IL | Pipestone | MN |
| Peoria | IL | Minneapolis | MN |

| | | | |
|------------------------------|---------------|--------------------|---------------|
| South Bend | IN | Bismarck | ND |
| Indianapolis | IN | Columbus | NE |
| Atchison | KS | Westchester | NY |
| Boston/ New Hampshire | MA/ MH | Waterloo | NY |
| Sandy Spring | MD | Tulsa | OK |
| Saint Paul | MN | Warsaw | Poland |
| Saint Paul | MN | Sioux Falls | SD |
| Arden Hills | MN | Memphis | TN |
| | | Wisconsin | WI |

What two or three terms best describe your secondary school experience?

| Cultural | Social | Curriculum-related |
|--|---|--|
| International | Friends as a priority | Challenging, maybe not too challenging |
| Language divide | More social than academic | Academically challenging (IB program) |
| 3Diverse | Family Involvement | Rigorous |
| Diverse but self-segregated | Social | Tracks |
| Not very diverse | Strong community | 3Competitive |
| Racial tension | Close-knit | Non-competitive |
| Racially integrated Hybrid of Columbian culture and British education system | Unsupportive | Hyper-competitive class rankings |
| 4 Homogenous | Social-networking | Lost in the shuffle (in regular track) |
| | Uncomfortable | Focused on individual success |
| | “I felt a mismatch with my environment” | |
| | Left out | |

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| | Sheltered Insulated | College preparation No athletics Arts the only positive |
| Political and Economical | Experiential | Excelled in arts Unimpressive education in retrospect |
| Wealthy Wealthy (but the district more so than the students from special property tax) Catholic Catholic background White Hierarchical Small Politically conscious Conservative Social politics and cliques very typical suburban | Enriching Briefly enlightening Opportunity-filled Interesting Fun Exciting Busy Satisfying Well-rounded Comprehensive Eye-opening High quality Quality “good enough” 2 Adequate Convenient Accommodating 2 Positive Teachers had an impact | Un-stimulating Unstructured Straight and narrow square Narrow focus, low expectations Disorganized Unserious 3 Unchallenging/ Stepping stone 2 Boring “slacker” student average student Limited academically anxious Frustrating Disappointing Egocentric Self-focused |

Question 2

What do you think are the most important issues facing public education today?

Representational patterns:

- inadequate or unequally distributed funding
- low quality teachers and inability to attract better ones
- inflexibility of No Child Left Behind and testing
- educational disparities between socioeconomic classes

Distinctive insights:

- immigration and influx of English learners
- education not preparing people adequately to participate in political process
- mismatch between students' home culture and expectations at school
- loss of political faith in public schools as an institution

Commentary:

There were striking patterns of consensus among the interview respondents on question 2. Most agreed that funding was a major issue both in terms of lack of funding and an unequal distribution. They felt that there were not enough high quality teachers, possibly as a result of the low pay many teachers receive. There was also a general feeling that No Child Left Behind was stifling educational creativity and not allowing for flexibility in terms of responding to particular students' needs. Some people still felt that accountability was important, but every person that mentioned this felt like it should take a different form than NCLB. It is important to note that it was extremely easy to identify the themes we have described above. Despite the diversity of respondents, there were very few responses that did not at least peripherally address any of the above points. This is useful for the design project because there seems to be some level of agreement on what is not going well in the American educational system. Nevertheless, there seems to be a feeling that the role of education is to develop students intellectually and give them the skills necessary to get a job, not necessarily to prepare them to participate as citizens in a democracy. In terms of the design project, this suggests that trying to appeal to people based on the ability of our programs to create better citizens might not be an effective strategy. It does not mean we cannot still strive to educate students to participate in a democracy, but that should not be the focus of any rhetoric to pitch reform.

Question 3

What do you think are the most important issues facing democratic governance in the US?

Representational patterns:

- apathy about the political process
- lack of adequate knowledge and avenues to participate
- government is unresponsive or unrepresentative
- socioeconomic and racial inequalities

Distinctive insights:

- tension between individual and collective good
- too great of a focus on individual needs
- plurality good, but very difficult to have policy address all groups
- loss of sight of individual rights
- poor public education impacting democracy
- symbolic dualism (i.e. us vs. them)

Commentary:

There was moderate level of consensus on question 3. The points that the most people agreed on were that citizens do not participate enough because they are apathetic or uninformed and that government is either unresponsive or unrepresentative of the will of the people. To a lesser extent, respondents felt that socioeconomic and racial inequalities were a problem facing democratic governance, though one person mentioned that it is not the role of the government to address these problems. Beyond these points though, there was very little agreement. Most notably, there was a tension in the responses between a favoring of the individual and collective good. Some people felt there was too great of a focus on self-interest in American society, but others felt like society did not adequately respect individual rights. Despite the preceding question asking about education, there was a conspicuous lack of responses mentioning any relationship between education and issues facing democratic governance. Only three people mentioned it. This reinforces our observations from the previous question that people do not necessarily see a strong relationship between education and democracy.

Question 4

What, in your opinion, are the primary responsibilities of public education in a democracy?

Representational Patterns:

- Instilling civic duty
- Ensuring a basic standard in math and science
- Preparation for the working world
- Promoting cooperation and community

Distinctive Insights:

- Instilling a sense of agency with regard to political system
- Developing full individual potential
- Technological savvy
- Teaching Morality

Commentary:

In these responses, we find an expectation that students leave school with a general knowledge base, with basic math and reading skills, but also aware of the importance of their civic responsibility. Interestingly, notions about students' awareness of political activity available to them (access to congress people, etc.) was less well-represented in the surveys compared to a basic standard of morals and values related to cooperation in public life. People seem to expect schools to expose their students to diversity, inspiring a sort of cosmopolitan social awareness, and helping students place themselves in the wider world. Several interviewees mentioned a need to create leaders; we saw this echoed in one respondent's insistence that students leave with a sense of agency and a willingness to push for change. At the same time, many respondents mentioned the struggle for equality as a principle battleground for schools, believing that schools should work to level the playing field. A few lone voices advocated for morality education, fully developing each individual's potential, and making sure students did not leave school dispirited, so they would continue to support public schooling in the future. All in all, the respondents showed a divergence of opinion regarding the way schools and students share responsibility for the future.

Questions 5

Reflecting on your understanding of the current situation and prospects for public education in the United States over the next decade, what is the worst-case scenario you can imagine?

Representational Patterns:

Financial:

- can't provide services such as special education
- disparities (e.g. geographic)
- underpaid teachers
- government doesn't address poverty as a national crisis

Testing:

- standardization leads to loss of... innovative teaching, hands-on learning, life skills, community learning, 'unmeasurable' skills, real accountability
- move toward mediocrity
- continuance of NCLB as it is now

Missing from our schools:

- math and science
- critical thinking, students taught to regurgitate facts
- life skills
- arts and music
- free time and creativity
- preparation for jobs
- failing to create lifelong learners
- high schools become babysitters/ factories

Community:

- no sense of community
- less interaction and concern for others
- online education
- prioritization of individual goals

Privatization and divergence:

- people with power leave system/ form own system
- government contracts out
- highest achievers leave
- movement towards school specialization

Diversity:

- loss of diversity
- lack of awareness.... Cultural and socioeconomic sensitivity, gender issues
- school culture reflects white middle class values only

Achievement gaps:

- racial
- extreme achievement dichotomy

Distinctive insights:

- lack of critical thinking means that students aren't able to solve societal crises (e.g. global warming)
- schools and teachers become targets of societal animosity
- extended school day
- people can't afford higher education
- automation/ visual media- a television in every classroom
- right wing politics
- schools become microcosm of society in general
- children come to school unprepared
- poor outcomes lead to a lack of support- cyclical

Commentary:

Collectively, the interviewees expressed concerns that the current problems in our education system will persist and worsen. Many of these problems are cyclical- particularly the disparities in financing. In addition, the interviewees fear that schools will become "factories" which will produce people with no critical thinking skills or life skills. A loss of diversity in our schools will lead to a lack of awareness of cultural, socioeconomic and gender issues, which will be problematic in our increasingly diverse communities. Students are losing sight of community, are interacting less within the broader society, and are becoming apathetic citizens.

Question 6

Please describe your best-case scenario:

Representational Patterns:

- a. Funding
 1. Equitable funding among schools and students within schools, to the degree of absolute equity of resources
 2. Adequate funding/more funding overall (prioritize education in government budgets and society)
 3. Eliminate local property tax/local wealth's role in school funding
 4. Target extra funding towards high-poverty schools
 5. Continue funding for the fine arts
- b. Access to quality education to create equal opportunity
 1. Meet the interests and needs of individual students
 2. High-quality teachers
 3. Encourage professional development and more training in pedagogical skills
 4. Hold teachers to higher standards
 5. Need more enthusiastic teachers and administration
 6. Better compensation (pay) to show respect and value for teachers
- c. Curriculum
 1. Create interest and enthusiasm for math and science
 2. Technology literate students

3. Critical thinking skills
4. Creative thinking skills
5. Knowledge about economic system and civic education
6. Civic engagement and service learning
7. Reduce class size
- d. Cultural Curriculum
 1. Promote desegregation and integration
 2. Connect schools to communities where students live
 3. Implement multi-cultural education to promote the development of democratic citizens
- e. NCLB/Assessment/Testing
 1. Reduce use of high-stakes testing
 2. Be more flexible for schools and districts to set own standards
 3. Tests should measure improvement on individual student levels
- f. Community/Society
 1. Need better supporting systems to handle community & societal problems
 2. Teach democratic values and practices
 3. Students need to graduate with the ability to function in society

Distinctive Insights:

- a. School year round
- b. Health care and parenting classes for poor families
- c. Interest tracking (instead of ability tracking)
- d. More vocational-technical opportunities and less stigma around them
- e. More vouchers and charter schools
- f. More engaged public
- g. Teachers who engage as “guides” and “facilitators”
- h. Decline of influence of corporate funding

Commentary:

The best-case scenario for public education in the United States would encompass a revision of policy surrounding interconnected aspects, such as funding, quality education, cultural diversity, and assessment. It would create equal opportunity through equitable funding and more integrated & diverse systems and schools. Levels of quality curriculum, quality teachers, and student learning would be tested through more authentic assessments that focus on individual student gains and more critical-thinking skills. High-quality and enthusiastic teachers would inspire students and teach a high-quality curriculum that involves creative and critical thinking skills, as well as civic engagement and service learning. In order to reform the current system to obtain the best public school system, reform needs to occur at all levels (federal, state, district, and school) and in all aspects of education to adequately address the many variable involved. A best-case scenario will only be obtained when society values education more and has a more engaged public.

Question 7

Reflecting on your responses to the prior questions, what would be the most productive approach (directions, strategies) to move toward your positive vision?

Representational Patterns:

- Finance reform (more funds, more efficiency)
- Standards and assessment (anti-standardized testing)
- Community engagement/involvement/valuing schools
- Address integration both racially, socio-economically, etc.
- Improve teacher quality/compensation

Distinctive Insights:

- Open houses that involve people without school-age children
- Systemic alignment of curriculum/expectations
- Year-round schooling
- Global history class about US relations with other countries
- Community gardens in schools

Commentary:

We think that community involvement is one of the most important strategies to consider particularly because it is currently one of the most neglected. Community involvement would be really effective because it would lead to greater understanding and new ideas/perspectives due to broader discourse. The fact that the interviewees seem concerned about integration is encouraging but it's a politically dead issue. It is also encouraging that so many people are examining standards and recognizing a need for alternative assessments/reform of NCLB. Another commonly cited issue was teacher quality and compensation to address the need to improve both and introduce accountability (merit pay). We think merit pay has potential but is very difficult to implement fairly and effectively. We thought the idea of systemic alignment of curriculum expectations and could be very effective in improving the efficiency and coherency of public schools. This could be done on a district level but oriented towards state standards (to avoid political feasibility issues surrounding state control of schools).

We think it's encouraging that some sort of consensus seemed to emerge from these interviews on at least some issues (keeping in mind that we have a biased sample). That seems to imply that the next step should be open discussion within a community to identify other areas of consensus and to establish school reform as a community priority.