

Visioning Public Education in America

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According to several observers (e.g., Clark, 1997; Fullan, 1993; Postman, 1996), America lacks compelling visions of what public education should be like. Yet experience has shown that a common vision is among the most important factors for bringing about positive change in any organization (see, e.g., Barker, 1990; Drucker, 1989; Senge, 1990). Furthermore, as Edward Clark (1997) put it:

Since people only pursue long-term visions *because they want to*—I suggest that the first step in educational reform should be to invite teachers to “think big” and *create a vision of the future they desire*. (p. 48)

The purpose of this article is to help to develop such visions for our educational systems.

In four years of working with schools in Indiana, we at Indiana University’s Restructuring Support Service have found that, for a vision to be powerful enough to truly influence educational practice and not engender a lot of resistance and divisiveness, it must be a common vision, one owned by community members who have a stake in the school: students, parents, teachers, administrators, policy-makers, employers, senior citizens, and other community members. Such ownership requires that those stakeholders be integrally involved in developing the vision. Therefore, the purpose of this article is not to provide a vision, but to help *educators and community members develop their own visions*.

To be powerful, a vision must also be unconstrained by the way the community’s educational system happens to be at present. If the Wright brothers’ vision of transportation had been constrained by prevailing conceptions, they would not have laid the foundations

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for the highly effective airline industry we have today. Such freedom of conception requires that the people who develop the vision engage in a process that helps them to “jump out” of their current mindsets about education (Banathy, 1991; Frantz, 1993; Senge, 1990). It requires a process that helps those stakeholders to evolve their thinking about education by “thinking in the ideal.” After the ideal vision is developed, they can give consideration to ways that the ideal must be compromised, given practical constraints. Thus, the purpose of this article is, more specifically, to help stakeholders engage in a process to develop *ideal* visions of their communities’ educational systems.

Visions are based on values or beliefs. If people’s beliefs about education differ, their visions of education will inevitably differ, and meetings intended to develop a shared vision will often result instead in increased divisiveness. Therefore, the process of developing a shared vision of education must begin by working toward some consensus on stakeholders’ beliefs about education. This is in essence a process of reculturing, which, as Michael Fullan (1996) says, is a “process of developing new values, beliefs, and norms” (p. 422). It is a process that brings diverse stakeholders together in conversation to share their beliefs about education with each other and try to understand why the others believe what they do. The purpose of these conversations is not to convince others to adopt your beliefs, nor to figure out whose beliefs are “best.” Rather it is to help everyone to advance their own beliefs about education and in the process to come closer together in their beliefs as well as in their understanding of each other.

This article offers some ideas for a **process** in which stakeholders in a community can engage to advance their thinking about, and reach some consensus on, beliefs about education and subsequently one or more ideal visions of education. It also presents some **beliefs** about education that the stakeholders could discuss in that process. This list of beliefs is offered for several reasons: (1) to provide an example of what beliefs are and (2) to provide a stimulus to encourage stakeholders to expand and evolve their own beliefs about education. Of course, the process should result in different teams evolving quite different sets of beliefs about education, and differences in beliefs will necessitate differences in visions. Also, different visions could well be developed for the same set of beliefs.

One Possible Process

The following are some suggestions for engaging in a process to develop ideal visions of education in your community. You should revise the stages in this process to best suit your particular situation.

1. Form teams. It is very important that the stakeholders work in teams, for two reasons. First, just

as sometimes two heads are better than one, so also many heads can be better than two. With many perspectives, experiences, and understandings to draw on, you have access to better ideas for the vision. Second, different visions are based on different mindsets (values, beliefs, and understandings) about education. The greater the differences in mindsets that stakeholders have, the greater will be the resistance to any vision. To some extent, differences in mindsets arise from lack of exposure to alternative mindsets and a lack of in-depth understanding of education as a complex system. Therefore, each team should have a broad diversity of stakeholders to help members understand others' thinking and deepen their own thinking, and thereby evolve their own mindsets about education.

Also, each team should have no more than about 10 members, because group dynamics change for the worse with larger groups. You may find it helpful to have several teams for each school, so that large numbers of teachers, parents, and other stakeholders can be involved in the effort. There are several advantages of this multiple-team approach:

- A design team is more effective if it is fairly small.
- The more people who have been involved and whose mindsets have therefore evolved, the more support there will likely be for the new visions. It is particularly important for board members and central administrators to be included on various teams (in which their status is equal with everyone else), so their thinking can evolve along with that of the other stakeholders. Otherwise, implementation of the new visions will be unlikely.
- The more teams there are, the more likely at least one team is to come up with a truly powerful vision.
- Since there is likely no one best way to educate all children, many teams generating many visions may help the stakeholders to recognize some value in designing a system that implements more than one vision.

As with most things in life, there are some potential problems with the multiple-team approach that your process should address. They include a risk of: some fragmentation of the community or school personnel, some negative effects of competition among teams (such as jealousy and lack of willingness to share what they are learning), lack of coherence among the evolving mindsets and diverse visions being generated, rigid advocacy for their own vision, and closed-minded rejection of ideas in others' visions. However, these potential problems can all be minimized by designing your process in a way that addresses each of them. Alternatively, this process could be adapted for use with a single design team if you feel that is best for your community.

2. Reach consensus on beliefs. In accordance with Neil Postman's (1996) recommendations, each team should first reach consensus on beliefs about the ends of education, and then consider the means for accomplishing those ends. However, it is also important that each team maintains the flexibility to continually modify and evolve those ends as society, their community, and their own thinking evolve. Postman provides some thought-provoking narratives that help to develop ideas on the ends. There are numerous other writings that provide ideas on both ends and means for attaining various ends (Clark, 1997; Finn, 1987; Glickman, 1993; Lewis, Schaps, & Watson, 1995; Raywid, 1995; Reigeluth, 1999).

Each team should extensively discuss each of the beliefs presented below to determine which ones its members truly hold, and to modify and expand them into a consistent set of beliefs that can guide the development of their ideal vision of education. Beliefs exist on a continuum from very general, vague ones, such as "education should serve the needs of the community," to very detailed, specific ones (sometimes called "instrumental beliefs"), such as "education should foster the empathy and self-control skills of children who have a tendency to behave violently." The further you break beliefs down into detailed ones, the harder it is to reach consensus, but the easier it is to figure out what changes should be made to your educational system.

In the list below, most beliefs have been broken down one level into subbeliefs to illustrate this relationship. Teams may wish to break some beliefs down further, or not so far, depending on how like-minded their members become in their thinking. Each team should be as detailed as it can, because discussion of disagreements can contribute most to advancing people's thinking, as long as it is done in a nonadversarial way, with the focus on each person trying to understand *why* the others believe or value what they do.

Before meeting, it may be helpful for the team members to read and study the list of beliefs below, as well as some of the readings cited two paragraphs earlier. At the first meeting each team should establish ground rules for its discussions that include respecting other people and their beliefs regardless of how much they may disagree, and focusing on trying to understand why each of the others believe what they do. Meetings should probably be at least one and a half hours long but no longer than about two or two and a half hours, especially if it's at the end of the day. An all-day retreat setting would be ideal, though with frequent breaks. To really allow people to discuss their differences in beliefs, you should plan on perhaps a total of 8–16 hours of discussions per team.

3. Share your team's beliefs with other teams. Teams should meet with each other to share

their beliefs, understand the other teams' thinking, further advance their own thinking, and decide what beliefs the teams have in common. The common beliefs will be general if the community is heterogeneous, but will be more detailed the more homogeneous it is. The team beliefs and the common beliefs—along with the thinking behind them—should also be shared with the community at large, with opportunity for community input and dialogue. This should result in a set of district-wide (or community-wide) beliefs about education. These activities can help avoid the potential problems with the multiple-team approach mentioned earlier.

After sharing team beliefs and developing some common beliefs for your community, it might be productive to encourage teams to reconfigure (change membership), with stakeholders joining others who hold similar detailed beliefs, for the next stage of developing their ideal visions of education. This will encourage several different visions to be developed and may result in finding that the students and community will be better served by having several different kinds of schools within the boundaries of the common beliefs. Each continuing team (prior team if it is remaining together, or new team if it is reconfigured) should revise its belief statements to reflect any changes in members' thinking, based on input from other teams and community members.

4. Develop an ideal vision of education based on those beliefs. Again, as Postman has indicated, each team should first develop its vision regarding the ends of education, and then consider the means for accomplishing those ends. But what should the vision be like, and how detailed should it be? System specifications and narratives are two of the forms the vision can take, and eventually it will need to be very detailed. But a vision is made up of many parts, all of which need to work together in harmony.

To develop system specifications, I recommend a process that begins by creating a "fuzzy image" and proceeds in design cycles to provide ever greater clarity and detail to the vision (Banathy, 1991). The fuzzy image can take the form of descriptions of *goals* (ends) to be attained by the educational system, given the team's beliefs. The next cycle can identify *functions* that must be performed to attain each goal. And the next cycle can design specific components or features of the system and the activities they engage in to perform each of those functions (Banathy, 1991). By using this cyclical process, it is easier to maintain a holistic view of the interrelationships and interdependencies among all the different aspects or parts of the vision. Throughout these design cycles, it is helpful to keep in mind that your major goal is "process reengineering" (Hammer & Champy, 1993), that is, changing the processes by which the goals are attained and the functions are carried out.

To develop narratives, I recommend a process that begins by describing a "day in the life" of a student and then proceeds to elaborate that narrative in cycles, perhaps by adding to that story or by adding stories of other students, of teachers, and/or of families. Those stories should give some sense of the goals, functions, and components/activities mentioned in the previous paragraph, though it is sometimes helpful to start with powerful narratives and proceed to system specifications. One technique is to use the nonfictional narrative story method, whereby participants think of and describe the best learning situations they have experienced. But it is important to not be constrained to actual experiences. The fictional narrative story method frees the participants to think in the ideal. This could include the use of technologies that haven't even been invented yet.

Each team should decide how it can best portray its vision. Often, a combination of methods (e.g., system specifications and narratives) is most powerful. But whatever method(s) you use, it is wise to be on guard against either ideological or simplistic solutions. As Susan Ohanian (1996) put it:

For me, drawing up the plans for an ideal school isn't a matter of basics versus electives, phonics versus whole language, new math versus old, tracking versus heterogeneous grouping....No matter what side one takes, it always has to be amended with a "Yes, but." (p. 283).

Also, as mentioned earlier, the more different teams you can have engaged in this stage, the more likely you are to develop at least a few truly powerful visions that can dramatically improve your ability to meet your learners' and community's needs.

5. Share your team's vision with other teams. This is another occasion upon which your process should address potential problems with the multiple-team approach. Teams should meet with each other to share their visions, understand other teams' thinking, further evolve their own thinking, and make improvements in their respective visions. Each team should revise its vision to reflect any changes in members' thinking. These visions should also be shared with the community at large. There will always be some differences in parents' beliefs about education and learners' educational needs. Thus, you may decide that you want several visions of education for your community, and that some degree of public school choice is beneficial, particularly if parents have choice within their neighborhood school in the form of small "schools within a school" (Meier, 1996). For example, Boston, New York, and Philadelphia have adopted new district policies and flexible funding strategies that encourage groups to start small semi-autonomous schools within existing public school buildings (Wagner, 1996).

6. Develop an ideal vision for the district-wide administrative and governance systems. By this time you should have decided whether to go with a single best vision for all schools in the district, or to go with several different visions. If you chose multiple visions, you should explore ways of subsuming those visions within a vision of larger district-wide administrative and governance systems. I recommend that a representative from each team serves on a community-wide (or district-wide) council to create that larger vision. But either way, it is important to create an ideal vision of the administrative and governance systems that will best support the full range of school visions (or the one vision) you have designed. The administrative and governance systems deal with such concerns as scheduling, budgeting, hiring and firing, managing, record-keeping, professional development, policy making, and funding. The ways in which these things are currently done in your school system may not provide the necessary support for the ideal vision(s) you have developed. Be sure to include influential community members on this council.

This stage concludes the process for developing a complete vision, or set of visions, for education, which is the focus of this article. Of course, much remains to be done to plan ways to evolve the current system toward the visions with necessary levels of support and tolerable levels of disruption and self-sacrifice for all involved. But it is important to keep in mind that visioning is not an activity that should be done once each generation. Rather, it should be an ongoing process, for as we evolve our systems closer to our ideal, we find that our ideal will change—because our thinking will continue to evolve and conditions will continue to change during that time. Therefore, this should be viewed as the first cycle of an ongoing visioning process.

One Possible Set of Beliefs

The following are some suggestions for possible beliefs to discuss in the second stage of the process just described. Each belief is presented without rationale, because the purpose of this list is to stimulate discussion on a broad range of beliefs, not to advocate for their adoption. The beliefs are interrelated in complex ways that make it difficult to group them by common issues without requiring many overlapping groupings. Therefore, they are presented in an order that might be good for discussing them, and relationships with other beliefs are noted in parentheses.

The More Basic Issues

A. Education should help every student to reach her or his potential.

A1. Given that students learn at different rates, every

student should be allowed to progress at her or his own maximum rate.

A2. Given that students have different interests, different needs, and different talents to be developed, every student should be helped to learn what is most appropriate for her or him at any given time.

A3. To be most effective, instructional processes should be based on the best available knowledge about the human brain, human learning, and human development.

A4. To help every student reach his or her potential, the assessment system should be more like an inventory of attainments that are checked off as they are reached, rather than a norm-based comparison of students that labels them as winners and losers.

A5. Given that success in both one's personal life and one's work depend more on one's "emotional intelligence" than on one's cognitive intelligence (Goleman, 1995), emotional development should be a high priority.

B. Education should also serve the needs of the community.

B1. Every community should decide what its children should learn for the community's sake, regardless of any benefit to the individual student (as well as helping every student to reach her or his potential—see A above).

B2. This decision should be made directly by all stakeholders in the entire community, perhaps with a 60% or two-thirds majority.

B3. Given that most violence both inside and outside of schools is attributable to deficiencies in emotional and social development (Goleman, 1995), high priority should be given to them by schools in collaboration with parents (see F1).

C. Education should help every student become a life-long learner.

C1. One of the most important aims of education should be to help every student develop a love of learning.

C2. Another should be to help every student develop powerful learning strategies.

C3. Another should be to help every student become a self-directed learner.

D. Learning should come before "moving on."

D1. A student should be allowed—even required—to master the topic under study before being required—or allowed—to move on to a new topic in an area of study. (This supports A–C.)

E. Every child should have a teacher who knows him or her well, cares for him or her, and is accountable for a stage of his or her education.

E1. Every child should have a mentor teacher, who

is chosen by the parents and is responsible, in partnership with the parents, for the child's education for a developmental stage of the child's life—about 3–4 years (see H).

E2. The mentor teacher should be concerned with all aspects of the child's development, including intellectual, social, emotional, aesthetic, moral/ethical, physical, and spiritual (but not religious), subject to the parents' approval (see M).

F. Those closest to the learner should be involved in making all instructional decisions.

F1. The child, the parents, and the teacher should all be actively involved in deciding what the child should learn and how she or he should learn it, subject to community and state oversight (see R and S).

F2. The child, the parents, and the teacher should each assume mutually-agreed-upon roles in helping the child to learn (see L).

G. The educational system should be a collective of community learning centers that have many elements of a "learning cooperative."

G1. The learning centers should serve all community members.

G2. Children 18 and under should have free use of most services.

G3. People over 18 should pay in some form (money and/or volunteer services) for use of most services.

G4. Community members should earn the right to receive services of various kinds and degrees in exchange for offering services of various kinds and degrees (see K3).

G5. Many community service agencies should integrate their services with the educational system.

The More Focused Issues

H. All children should have equal access to any teacher.

H1. Parents should be able to choose the mentor teacher they want for each child (see E1).

H2. If more parents subscribe to a mentor teacher than she or he can handle, the selection of students should be done by lottery, with some provision made for racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity.

H3. Parents should have access to unbiased information about each teacher's track record and qualities (e.g., educational philosophy, teaching style, pedagogical approaches).

I. Because of the importance of both teamwork and technology in today's world, both should be used extensively in education.

J. Students should have equitable access to resources.

J1. All students of the same age should have equal access to educational resources, with the exception that schools should receive certain degrees of extra funds for students with commensurate degrees of disadvantages and/or disabilities.

J2. All per-student funds should go directly to the school, not the district central office (see K).

K. A mentor teacher should be able to procure needed instructional resources.

K1. A mentor teacher should have a certain amount of money per student to procure the instructional resources and/or services the student needs (see J).

K2. A mentor teacher should be allowed to procure those resources and/or services from private as well as public providers.

K3. In many cases those providers should be people in the community who are interested in helping children learn, who are approved by the school district (see G, P, and Q), and who may offer their services to all "schools" in the district (see M).

L. Teacher pay should be commensurate with parent/student satisfaction rather than with either seniority or an administrator's evaluation.

L1. Teacher pay should depend to some extent on the number of parents/students who request that teacher. Perhaps there should be a fixed base pay and a variable supplemental pay. (See F.)

M. Each school should be a caring learning environment.

M1. All "schools" should be relatively small. If the notion of "schools within a school" is used (see N1), this can be done and still have some economical sharing of resources, such as cafeteria, library, gymnasium, auditorium, playground, playing fields, and so forth. (See E.)

N. Parents should have some degree of choice within their neighborhood.

N1. Multiple schools within the same building should be common. This can be done by keeping the schools relatively small (see M1). But parents should choose a school *de facto* by choosing a teacher within the school (see H.)

O. Each school should be self-managed and should be accountable to the parents it serves.

O1. Each school should have control over its own budget, hiring, firing, and so forth (see J2).

O2. Each school should have a board of directors consisting of parents, teachers, students, and "at large" community members, elected by their respective constituencies.

P. The school district administration should serve a facilitating rather than controlling role.

P1. Each school should elect a representative to serve on a district board that hires a district superintendent and has legal responsibility for the operation of the school district.

Q. Schools should have freedom to contract the best providers.

Q1. Schools, either individually or collectively, should be able to contract the best available providers of goods and/or services they need, regardless of whether or not they are in the public sector (see K3).

R. The community should serve an oversight role in ensuring that the child's and the community's best interests are served by the decisions the child, parents, and teacher make (in F).

R1. Community members should be elected to serve on a community-based oversight council that acts as a critical friend with emphasis on engaging the teacher and parents in inquiry and reflection which guide alignment of their decisions with the best interests of the child and the community of stakeholders.

S. The state should serve an oversight role in ensuring that the community performs its oversight role adequately (in R).

S1. The state oversight council should contain members from across key agencies and entities that reflect the interests of education and children.

S2. Like the community oversight council, the state oversight council should assume a critical-friend role and relationship to the school system and community, fostering inquiry and reflection related to its policies and operations and whose interests it is serving.

Conclusion

Both the process and the beliefs just described are offered not as formulas for you to follow, but as "food for thought" to help you develop a process and set of beliefs that is best for your community. It is my hope that these ideas will contribute in some small way to helping Americans develop visions of education, for without a vision of where we want education to be, it is likely to end up somewhere else. Perhaps there should not—and will not—be a single vision of education for America. Perhaps different communities will benefit from having different visions. And perhaps learners within a community will benefit from different visions.

Given that learners are so different from each other, perhaps the greatest inequity would be to treat them all the same.

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