

**Deborah Meier:**

**The Importance of Democracy in Public Schools Today**

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**Introduction**

As part of its occasional paper series, The Patton College of Education’s Institute for Democracy in Education (IDE) is pleased to present these reflections on the work of educational reformer Deborah Meier. A teacher, principal, award-winning writer, and education advocate, Meier is one of the foremost leaders in the U.S. school reform movement. To recognize Meier’s outstanding leadership in education, The Patton College named her its 2012 Hicks Executive in Residence.

Over the course of her 45-year career, Meier has worked in K–12 public schools in Boston, Chicago, New York City, and Philadelphia, including four highly successful small, democratically run urban schools: Central Park East I, Central Park East II, and Central Park East Secondary School in New York’s East Harlem and Mission Hill in Boston. She has used her firsthand experience as a foundation for her advocacy of education reform through reduced school size, transparent and democratic school governance, and the abolition of high-stakes testing. Her books include *The Power of Their Ideas* (1995), *In Schools We Trust* (2002), and *Playing for Keeps* (2010), as well as *Many Children Left Behind* (2004), which she coedited with Dr. George Wood, the high school principal and superintendent of Federal Hocking School District in rural southeastern Ohio. She writes a blog, “Bridging Differences,” for *Education Week*. The first educator to be named a MacArthur Fellow (the “genius grant”), Meier is a senior scholar at New York University’s Steinhardt School and an active co-chair emeritus of the Coalition of Essential Schools.

This paper explores four areas of Meier’s work and interests, using her comments during an interview conducted by Patton College graduate student Jennifer Petrie and excerpts from her writings and interviews.

### **Democratic Education**

Meier’s work is synonymous with the concept of democratic education as both a means—preparing students for life as citizens—and an end in itself, modeling openness and reasoned discourse. In Meier’s view, the public debate on school reform and testing is misplaced because it ignores a central question: “[W]hat is it that’s so important to know that we must require every single American to spend 13 years at the task” (Meier, 1996b, p. 275)?

While much of the current rhetoric on education reform construes P–12 schooling as the training ground for college admissions and the workforce, a school’s true purpose, according to Meier, should be to prepare children and young adults for participation in the American democracy. With this view of educational purpose in mind, Meier argues that a well-educated person is not the one who can best recall facts on a test, but the one who can best analyze information, place it in context, draw conclusions from it, defend these conclusions, and even change his or her mind on occasion. The true measure of a school’s success, given this view, is not how many of its graduates go to college, but how many of them play active roles in their communities and otherwise take part in civic life.

In Meier’s judgment, the focus on schooling as economic development—as well as the associated drive for standardized testing—is misplaced and perpetuates gaps between rich and poor and minority and majority: “[A] single-minded focus on raising test scores ... will not close or even narrow the gaps between rich and poor or black and white” (Meier, 2003c, p. 16). It is,

she argues, “at best a distraction at a time when we can’t afford distractions” (D. Meier, January 30, 2013, personal communication).

Regardless of race or socioeconomic status, she claims, all children share an innate thirst for knowledge and a curiosity about the world that can and should be leveraged to teach the “habits of mind” necessary to be both a powerful and well-informed citizen. These habits of mind are associated, for example, with the ability to weigh evidence, to consider alternative viewpoints, to identify cause and effect, to formulate counterfactual suppositions, and to judge the relevance of information (Meier, 2009, p. 47).

To teach democracy, she writes, schools must model it in their mission, governance, classrooms, and school-community interactions: “Such habits cannot, on the whole, be taught didactically; but the way we organize schooling will contribute to or negate the development of such inclinations” (Meier, 2003c, p. 19). Thus, a democratic school is not one in which everyone necessarily has a vote, but it is one in which everyone has a voice and in which all voices are respected.

Meier admits that the habits of mind consistent with a democratic education may not yield the highest test scores. But she believes that they *will* create young adults who have the intellectual skills to handle both the rigors of college or vocational training and the challenges of citizenship. Whether a child grows up to become a cosmologist or a cosmetician, “both need to know how to think about complex matters, both need to care about others, and both need to know how to learn new things to keep up vocationally” (Meier, 1996b, p. 276).

## **Small Schools**

Meier often points out that when she was born, there were 200,000 school districts in North America; today, there are fewer than 15,000. Other researchers have argued that the drive to consolidate schools to achieve economies of scale may save tax dollars; Meier disputes that claim on a per-graduate basis, but finds the greater cost to be the loss of robust community involvement and support for schools (Meier, 2006).

Meier's ideal school has no more than 400 students, forming a relatively small community that facilitates vital interactions and decision making between teachers and students, teachers and their colleagues, principals and their faculty, families and the school, and school boards and the public. In this model, familiarity fosters respect and safety and discourages the formation of bureaucracies that resist the bottom-up principles of democratic schools: small schools, therefore, can focus on "genuine outcomes" based on children's "real capacity to show us what they know and can do" (Meier, 2006, p. 659).

Meier stresses, however, that smallness is not a goal unto itself. It is a tactic to achieve the true goals of inclusion, interaction, and interconnection: "A smaller school makes the relationships ... feasible, but only if the will to focus on those relationships exists" (Meier, 2003c, p. 19).

## **Trusting and Trustworthy Adults**

Meier is a firm believer that school success requires trust—both within schools themselves and between schools and the community. "[T]hat ... means we need schools whose work we can easily see, whose governors are folks we know well, and whose graduates' lives we can track without complex databases or academic studies" (Meier, 2003b, p. 20).

In her experience, students and parents often affirm their trust in teachers and administrators, but legislatures continue to treat educators as though they lack expertise and behave in untrustworthy ways, requiring decisions about school governance, student achievement, and other issues to be made and implemented without teacher input.

One example of this philosophy in action is high-stakes standardized testing. Meier notes that a student's proficiency in a given subject is no longer determined by a teacher's firsthand experience in the classroom; it is determined by standardized tests with proficiency levels "based strictly on judgment calls" rather than historical norms (Meier, 2002, p. 196). As a result, teachers have been stripped of authority in perhaps the most important aspect of education: deciding whether a child has a sufficient grasp of the subject matter. And that fact is not lost on students, Meier asserts: "For the young, to be adrift in a world in which those who know them best are told that they do not know them at all undermines what growing up most requires: faith in adults and respect for their expertise" (p.198).

In Meier's experience teachers who speak out against standardized testing face opposition from their own school districts, departments of education, and the media (2004b). She finds that such institutions are particularly critical of teachers' unions, which they often paint as enemies of reform. The discounting of teachers' perspectives on testing not only undermines trust in teachers' expertise, Meier says, but also blocks much-needed debate from a source with firsthand knowledge of the situation:

Reforms are not always good, and change is not always in the interest of better learning. Healthy resistance is sometimes what we most need, side by side with thoughtful proposals for change—and this is what we will sorely miss if teachers' unions are defeated by the relentless hostility of their many opponents. (Meier, 2004b, p. 55)

## Charter Schools

Although Meier's stance on democratic education has not wavered over time, her views on the kinds of schools that can achieve such reform definitely have. "I started out pro-charter because I thought they'd be little mom and pop shops with new ideas," Meier says. "I thought at first they'd be kind of like the schools that I started in the public system" (interview with Jennifer Petrie, 2012).

In *The Power of Their Ideas*, Meier dedicated an entire chapter to the notion that "Choice Can Save Public Education." At the time—and to some extent, still today—Meier believed that an arrangement in which parents can choose their children's schools, rather than one in which bureaucracies assign children to particular schools on the basis of place of residence would save public education by potentially stopping the flow of middle-class students out of public schools and by increasing the odds for greater racial and social class integration. More than that, though, she argues, "choice may offer the only way to create schools that can experiment with radically new pedagogical practices" (Meier, 1995, p. 100).

Even in her early support for charter schools Meier warned of the risk that charters might merely become a means of transferring public dollars to private schools. But she encouraged progressives to embrace the concept of choice, as she did when she founded the Central Park East elementary and secondary schools in New York: "The schools I founded ... are small, largely self-governing, and pedagogically innovative schools of choice" (Meier, 1995, p. 93).

Meier now believes that what she most feared has come to pass: "[C]harters are now an organized 'movement' on behalf of ending public education .... They are also strong supporters, as a movement, for testing, high stakes, merit pay, and ending unions" (Meier, 2012, n.p.). Rather than a series of "mom and pop shops" operating within the public education system,

charters have become quasi-public enterprises run by for-profit entities such as KIPP Academy. Furthermore, she points out that charter schools are even more segregated than public schools (D. Meier, personal communication, January 30, 2013). As Meier explained in a video interview with Juan Gonzalez and Amy Goodman of *Democracy Now*:

[A]n enormous number of pilot schools ... are really replicas of the worst parts of the public system, where decisions are made farther and farther away from children, and they're made on the basis of people who don't know the kids or that school well. ... 90 percent of what the charter schools have become is not small schools, but just alternate private systems within the public sector" (Goodman & Gonzalez, 2009, n.p.).

### **Conclusion**

This paper has brought together many of the major themes that run through Meier's extensive body of work, perhaps most importantly the need for educators to reflect on the power of community, public institutions, and activism and for citizens to take action to safeguard democracy in public schools.

In *Keeping School*, Meier wrote:

Schooling is all about influencing others in ways that increase their independence and autonomy. Whether it's conducting a course on arithmetic or writing, all we have going for us is our capacity to enlighten others in ways that change their own perceptions of numbers and words and ideas—and the way in which knowledge becomes a source of power. Kids are properly attracted to power, and they seek influence. Our modeling of adulthood need[s] to show them how this might look. Students need to witness powerful adults unafraid to discuss power! (p. 63)

From Meier's vantage democracy, in schools or in society at large, does not happen unless concerned and engaged citizens make it happen. If students, parents, and teachers are to take back the power to choose how their schools are run, they must examine not only the current condition of those institutions but also the principles on which they are organized.

The Institute for Democracy in Education thanks Deborah Meier for sharing her thoughts about the need to keep schools public and strengthen democracy.

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