

Public Schools for the Public Good: Building an LAUSD Grounded in the Principles of Deeper Learning, Student Centeredness, Equity, Inclusivity, Democracy and Collective Responsibility

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Los Angeles is at a critical turning point in its long journey to develop a school system that realizes the incredible potential of this City and its diverse residents. In Los Angeles, and across the country, public schools have long been an essential force in preparing the next generation to live well, contribute to community life and build the country's social and economic vibrancy. Over the years, graduates of Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) have used the opportunities provided by a strong public education system to become well-educated, innovative problem-solvers who have helped guide the city and the nation through unpredictable times.

However, not everyone attending LAUSD schools has been so fortunate. The system has been one with winners and losers, providing an outstanding education to only a fraction of students. Although such a system never realized the promise of educating all children well, it might have sufficed in a labor-intense, manufacturing society. Today, however, as knowledge explodes, the pace of change accelerates, and the City and the world become more complex and unpredictable, our well-being depends more than ever on public schools. But today, we need a system to develop *all* people, not just some, into highly competent and caring community members who are willing and able to solve pressing social, political, economic and environmental problems. Such an education system is a collective necessity.

Much Must Change

- The values that underlie schooling undermine our collective need to educate all students well—individualism, competition and merit support the view that a good education is a private good, available only to a deserving few.
- The way we continue to operate schools like industrial factories is completely out of sync with what we know about teaching and learning. The current model harkens back to assembly-line and batch-processing manufacturing, with teachers as line workers, and management that has become increasingly bureaucratic.
- Even the way we've done school reform has failed. We've borrowed from business and

industry—using performance metrics to rate and rank schools by narrowly defined short-term “results” and providing “consumers” with information to help them choose among factories that are competing for their “business.”

This approach has failed to redress systemic inequities, promote a culture of higher expectations for all, or yield higher levels of readiness among graduates. Moreover, reforms based on choice move schools even further away from being democratic, social institutions firmly embedded in the public sphere. Clearly, making education reflective of the strong and vibrant relationship between democracy and schools will require dramatic shifts in education policy and practice. It’s not a question about whether we have “charters” or “regular” public schools. Neither overly bureaucratic public systems, nor a privatized choice system will bring the dramatic changes we need. This seems to me like the fundamental challenge facing Los Angeles.

Vision and Values

That’s why Los Angeles leaders might find useful and inspiring the approach being developed by the Partnership for the Future of Learning—a group of national and regional funders and a diverse group of leaders they have allied with. The Partnership has set out to refocus reform efforts on five key principles – each widely accepted, and none particularly controversial or innovative on its own. However, in combination, these principles can move the nation away from both the educational status quo and the dominant reform frame of having schools compete and having families choose.



Let me describe each of them a bit more, expanding on what they imply for schooling.

Deeper Learning

First is providing deeper learning that cultivates academic competence, higher order thinking skills and commitment to learning, and that readies young people personally and socially for responsible adulthood. This means that all young people have the opportunity, resources and relationships to develop a rich, interwoven braid of knowledge, intellectual and social skills, emotional capabilities and mindsets they need to craft their own lives and contribute to the collective good. To weave such ropes, students must have an active role, working together with teachers to engage with and apply rigorous knowledge, develop key skills and make learning connections with their own communities and culture.

Student-Centeredness

To support deeper learning, we also have to change teaching, so that it is in line with the science of learning and research on how young people develop and build skills. Learning opportunities must be more active than passive and more social than individual. Assessment must look far more like doing “real work” than like typical tests. Student interests, knowledge and culture must be valued. Learning settings must look more like apprenticeships than classroom instruction. That means that the roles of both teachers and students change. Teachers guide students in an ongoing process of creative production, helping them learn to select information, judge its quality and use it in varying combinations for real purposes. Students get their hands on knowledge. Think about the differences between spoon-feeding learners versus teaching them to “cook.”

Equity and Inclusion

Equity requires us to confront the reality that some communities are filled with opportunities to learn in and out of school – time, experiences, relationships with knowledgeable and caring adults – while in others, these opportunities are few and far between either in school or out. The first requirement of equitable education is to connect all communities to strong, reliable schools, with sufficient resources and opportunities, augmented with the supports that students need to access them fully. But a robust commitment to equity also demands inclusiveness (e.g., deliberate steps to connect curriculum and instruction to diverse students' histories, cultures and communities); and agency (empowering under-served students, families and communities to become equal partners in education).

Democracy

Near the founding of our republic, public schools were established as an essential bedrock of democracy. Today, democracy isn't a focus of either the content or the process of schooling. We need schools that place a priority on preparing young people to address increasingly complex social, economic and political issues that democracies around the world face. Making students the drivers of learning is not only integral to learning itself, but also the best preparation for being active and engaged in civic life. Communities must also reclaim public schools as key democratic institutions – a role that has been put at risk by both the status quo and by recent reforms. Schools must be shaped by communities, in partnership with professional educators. Of course, one of the toughest problems that schools solve is the isolation of young people by both economic status and race. This limits the extent to which they can prepare to participate in and wisely guide a diverse democracy.

Respect and Collective Responsibility

Finally, it is impossible to build learning environments characterized by deeper learning, student-centeredness, equity and democracy unless the education system builds and insists on relationships of respect and trust and recognizes that all of us—policymakers, educators,

communities and families—share the responsibility for educating all young people well. Policymakers can't be primarily enforcers; they must also be enablers who craft policies, structures and resources that provide educators and communities the support and space to work effectively and harmoniously together. Teachers can't be conceptualized as workers along an education assembly line. Instead, we must begin to think of them as skilled masters of a craft. Parents can't be reduced to "customers" whose main role is to choose the "best" school for their own children. Rather, they share responsibility for helping to create and support great schooling for all of the community's children. Cities and communities, including grassroots groups, must be full partners in this work.

A Transformed System

An LAUSD based on these pillars would develop policies to support capacity-building, continuous improvement and meaningful connections between schools and communities, rather than focusing primarily on compliance and sanctions. Such policies would focus on four key elements, each of which is essential to a transformed educational system:

- 1) a focus on *meaningful learning*—that is, learning that is exciting, engaging and prepares students effectively for the world they are entering. For example, policies could generate robust, locally-designed assessments, such as curriculum-embedded performance tasks, which allow students to inquire, investigate, collaborate, present and defend their ideas, as well as to think critically and be creative – and that provide more information about their learning progress and needs;
- 2) *professional capacity*—that is, a system built to ensure knowledgeable and skillful professionals committed to all students and their learning, who work in contexts that support meaningful, equitable learning and individual children's needs. For example, create time for teacher collaboration and opportunities for teacher learning through individual and school-wide lesson study, action research, peer observation, professional learning communities and other learning opportunities.
- 3) *sufficient resources, wisely used*—that is, an adequate and equitable funding system that allows communities to allocate resources so that they effectively promote learning for all students while meeting the needs of each local school. For example, construct local indicators of school quality, resource equity and learning opportunities that provide regular information on what students are receiving as well how well they are doing, and use the data to drive greater equity.
- 4) *connected communities*—that is, shared responsibility based on relationships between educators and communities that enable the use of local knowledge in the educational process and that foster democratic, public participation in schools as democratic institutions. For example, establish community schools (and other high-quality school and community partnerships) to create adult education opportunities, wraparound services, expanded and enriched community-based learning opportunities beyond the regular school day and in summer.

Los Angeles is poised to put such principles and policies into practice. You have all of the ingredients—a committed superintendent, union leadership focused on educational justice, a chamber of commerce dedicated to education for the public good, supportive and engaged

universities and incredibly strong and smart community activists. And, you have an impressive history of accomplishing things together.

Readings

Partnership for the Future of Learning (2016). *Updating American Public Education: Keeping the Foundation-While Preparing for the Future.*

Online at <https://d3ciwvs59ifrt8.cloudfront.net/f41b5a61-3f18-4177-a7b1-cfe886a430b1/2a3ea4f8-e1c8-4382-85fe-bfd6a0a6cbd2.pdf>

Partnership for the Future of Learning (2016). *A Policy Framework for Tomorrow's Learning.*

Online at <https://d3ciwvs59ifrt8.cloudfront.net/3a40ddc2-b686-4d79-be80-fd1785727c4f/1749d332-0d55-4cb4-ae4a-95aa0939dfd6.pdf>