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# The Power of Trust: A Review of *In Schools We Trust* by Deborah Meier

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It is eight years since Deborah Meier shared the story of the Central Park East Schools in *The Power of Their Ideas*. The stunning vision of the future of public education she painted in that book seems further and further on the horizon in today's atmosphere of testing, standardization, and accountability. In response, Meier continues her plea for educational reform with her most recent book, *In Schools We Trust*. In this compelling text, she acknowledges the need for accountability and responsibility in schools. She knows that public education has failed to meet the needs of a substantial number of families and that school systems must respond. However, she argues against putting our trust in tests and standardization, proposing that the solution lies in the opposite direction: "The issue of trust needs to be tackled head-on if we are to embrace this expansive vision of education, by enhancing—not diminishing—the authority and judgment of those who know our children best" (p. 3).

The message of the book resounds through every chapter: "What kind of trust can and should we have in our schools?" (p. 3) Meier cautions against blind faith and proceeds to define the trust she advocates: "It is a hard-won, democratic trust in each other, tempered by healthy, active skepticism and a demand that trust be continually earned" (p. 3). Her abiding faith in the ability of parents, students, teachers, and administrators to cultivate this trust and build successful school communities, at a time when the systems being built around standardized testing threaten the very core of trust, inspired me as a reader to examine my own beliefs and confront my growing pessimism that progressive visions for public education are a dead end. Meier's confidence comes from her many years of experience in the public system, and she writes with passion to convince others that small, caring, flexible school environments can and will result in higher standards for students and teachers, developing greater public satisfaction.

The book is divided into three sections. Part one defines trust and how it relates to the culture of schools. Schools have replaced the natural learning communities of preindustrial society and have tended to grow into larger and more depersonalized environments. Meier sees this as counterproductive to the kind of relationships children should be developing with adults. To encourage expertise-apprentice relationships, the best way for children to learn the complex skills of adulthood, schools need to be set up to foster connections between adults and

children. The commonalities that she sees as necessary for developing this connectedness remind me of the words of Francis W. Parker: "A school should be a model home, a complete community, an embryonic democracy" (*Talks on Pedagogy*, p. 340). Meier defines these commonalities as safety, low expert-novice ratios, sharing, a variety of learning modalities, flexibility (particularly as related to timetables of learning), student engagement, and connectedness to life outside of the classroom. These attributes, along with "the love which doesn't allow us to give up" (p. 23), should be the organizing forces for schools instead of the current ideas based on opposite premises. This kind of restructuring, or reinvention, to use her word, may seem daunting, yet she has seen it work.

In the second chapter of part one, Meier tells the story of her Boston project, which began shortly after her retirement from the New York public school system in 1994. While working with Ted Sizer at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, she became involved in the development of a pilot school in 1997, Mission Hill. This small school was dedicated to the goal of developing an adult community of learners whose intensity would serve as a model for students, inspiring them to join the learning community. Meier credits small size, organization of teams of teachers, status as a pilot school (enabling them to make many of their own decisions), diversity among the staff, dedication to staff development, and the collection of data for purposes of reflection and examination as some of the major reasons for the school's success. It is a community where adults and students have opportunities to develop relationships that are more comprehensive than solely academic interchanges within the classroom. Creating these types of environments is not easy. Mistakes are made and the experience at each school will be unique. This is not a drawback, but an exciting part of the journey.

The culture of places such as the Mission Hill School or the Central Park East Schools causes issues of trust to be examined in different ways. These environments are powered by trust, and that same trust produces the potential for mistakes. These trust issues—between parents and schools, between children and adults, between teachers—are part of the exciting process Meier outlines to create mutually respectful learning communities.

Part one concludes with three chapters, each focusing on a specific trust issue: parents to schools, teachers to teachers, and the dynamics of difference. Parents have a right to expect schools to be accountable. However, the relationship between parents and schools is much more complex. Meier states that "listening to families is more than a favor to parents; it is essential to children thriving as learners" (p. 44). Through communication with parents, teachers can develop a full picture of children and how school does or does not fit in with their lives outside of school. One of the difficulties of parent-teacher relationships is that both are extremely personal roles, and parents and teachers always face situations that

cause them to pass judgments about each other. While institutional distance may seem like a tempting solution, Meier calls for clear and honest communication. Schools need to make their agendas known; outline the policies of decision-making; provide various opportunities for parents to know the school culture, the teachers, and the curriculum; and be prepared to handle situations if the process breaks down. Parents are part of the adult community that surrounds and protects children. Schools and parents working together to build trust is an essential component of effective schooling. "Getting the relationship with families right allows schools to provide the kind of education that can be transformative, that can truly make that other slogan, the one about how all children can learn, realistic without watering down our learning goals to trivial matters" (p. 57).

In the chapter on trust between teachers, Meier describes school cultures in which colleagues learn from each other. She clarifies the difference between her view of effective collegial relationships and friendships: "Building a culture in which it's counterproductive to create personal relationships that can't withstand necessary critical feedback is the challenge" (p. 61). Teachers need to build trusting relationships that can withstand mutual criticism and disagreement, as well as believing in the good intentions of all and the capacity to grow. Schools that provide time and encouragement for collaboration, visiting other classrooms, and meeting to discuss curriculum and students are places where teachers can struggle through the difficult process of developing trust and respect, creating an educative community for the adults, as well as the children.

Meier sees difference as a potential asset, but one that can pose significant problems. Heterogeneous school environments are good for everybody and the boundaries of race and class are crossed successfully in schools around the country. However, this takes work. Our culture is filled with racism and the resulting rage and guilt. Racist words or actions, intentional or not, affect individuals and need to be topics of discourse in schools. Schools have an obligation to address these issues. We may not be able to overcome all our biases, but we do need to be willing to examine our attitudes and how they affect our interactions with others.

Part two of the book contains three chapters devoted to debunking current myths around standardized testing. Meier feels that the growing use of testing is redefining public education and threatens the existence of small schools that develop trust and improve achievement for all: "the increasing use of standardized tests both undermines achievement and increases the distrust we have for teachers, students, and our own judgments" (p. 95). Using numerous examples from her experience, and citing specific items from tests, Meier challenges the credibility of the information testing provides and the biases implicit in any testing situation. She compares the recent state-mandated tests to national measures,

presenting compelling arguments against both. Her alternative to standardized testing is genuine standards, determined at the school level, using a variety of appropriate measures: "What we need are assessments—with low or high stakes—that place authority in the hands of people who actually know the kids, and make sure that the community, the family, and the student have ways to challenge such judgments—ask questions, present competing forms of evidence, check them out with a second opinion" (p. 136).

Standardized testing supports the historic achievement gap between members of the culture of power and minority groups. The tests, in effect, enlarge, rather than diminish, class and race distinctions. There are many important life skills that tests cannot evaluate. Meier does not see the answer lying in attempts to improve the scores of minorities by test preparation or other artificial means, but by inventing new kinds of schools and new ways of holding students, teachers, and parents accountable for their part in the learning process.

The final section of the book, subtitled "A Broader Vision," is a passionate cry for school reform. Private schools have an easier time building trusting communities due to their size and empowerment. Using them as a model, how can this advantage be brought into the public sector? Meier calls for "scaling up," demanding that public schools accept higher standards. To do this, public schools need to look at the private-school model and provide schools that are small, self-governing, and places of choice. Many will argue that this vision is simply not practical for large public-school systems. Meier staunchly defends her position, using numerous real-life examples from public education. She outlines important premises for people trying to create schools like this within large systems and emphasizes the importance of accountability. She also addresses the problems that may ensue and the possibility of failure.

The final chapter links Meier's vision of schools to our larger vision of a democratic society: "If democratic habits can't flourish in school, if they are viewed as utopian in the place we should have the most reasons for trusting each other, how much harder to believe in their possibility in society at large?" (p. 181). A system of schools built on trust, bringing students, their families, and teachers together in a united purpose, would develop responsible citizens of the future, students prepared to take a purposeful role in a democratic society. Virginia Richardson wrote, "One of the most powerful ways to prevent our images of teaching and our teaching practices from being captured by the systems where we work is to stand away from our experience and reflect on it" (*Teacher Change*, p. 28). In *Schools We Trust* inspires that kind of reflection. As a person who chose private education, both as a teacher and a parent, I was inspired by the book to reflect on what I value about my school, what is missing in my experience, my pessimistic biases concerning public schools, and my vacillating feelings of guilt and

relief over my choice. Meier offers a hopeful vision and practical guidance for the transformation of public education, one school at a time, creating students who are more than graduates or dropouts, more than test takers, more than individuals taking up spaces in classrooms. Schools of trust create learners, students who are better prepared for responsible adult lives. In the words of Francis W. Parker, "The needs of society should determine the work of the school" (*Talks on Pedagogics*, p. xix). Society needs trusting and trustworthy members. Consequently, we need schools that develop trust. According to Deborah Meier, "it can be done" (p. 24).

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