

### *Note to the Reader*

Several years ago I was struck by the realization that public education was first established in America with a clearly understood *purpose*. However, I was hard pressed to define exactly what the well understood purpose was today. I began to ask friends, relatives, colleagues and even educators what they thought. But a coherent definition did not quickly roll from their tongues. In the end, after compiling hundreds of responses from people of all walks of life and from different regions of the country, there did seem to be a common denominator. Synthesized, the consensus was that “it is to create well-rounded individuals who will be able to make a contribution to society, be active in civic and community affairs and go on to lead healthy, happy lives.” It sounded pretty good.

The problem was that, upon reflection, much of it did not quite seem to square with reality. For example, few schools today even offer a course in civics (and when they become eligible, our youth do not vote); “well-rounded” had very different and subjective meanings for everyone; “healthy” appeared to be a disconnect based upon studies that indicate over 20% of our children start the school day hungry; and more broadly, since compulsory physical education has been dropped from the curricula in more than 50% of the public schools, our nation’s children are ranked among the most sedentary and least fit of any in the industrial countries.

When pressed for clarification, a second and very different “consensus” began to emerge. Again, synthesized, it seems what parents really wanted for *their* children, was a school that would prepare them to test out well so that they could get into the best college possible in order to get a really great job that would earn them enough money so that they could begin consuming the planet faster than their parents and their future neighbors. To my ear, this fit much better with reality than the first consensus. Not so incidentally, the adult perception of “happy” appeared to be their own view of what would constitute happiness for their offspring. For example, I found that almost nobody wanted their kid to go on to major in philosophy, history or English literature—even if the son or daughter felt that this would be his or her personal road toward happiness.

As a result of this informal survey, I began to understand the reason why the general public never initiates conversations addressing what the purpose of education is, or should be, in America. (Also, why parents don’t want their offspring to major in English literature.) This is simply because everyone already “knows” what the purpose is. Across the land, there is a pervasive kind of background noise as ubiquitous as it is virtually inaudible. The second consensus model just identified never actually needs to be articulated because the background noise keeps saying to us that education is essentially about money. In fact, in our society education has just about become a synonym for a ticket to money. This national belief, because it borders on absolute certainty, requires no discussion, no examination and, of course, no debate. But, in fact, what we most desperately need is a national debate right now before we suddenly discover that it is too late; too late for the nation, too late for humanity. It should be kept in mind that if we could somehow magically reform the educational system tomorrow, we would not begin to reap much of the beneficial results for at least a generation. We must raise our national level of awareness to finally admit that what actually drives our

educational system today is the prospect of money and the concomitant power to consume. This must be challenged and it must be changed.

A preliminary but critical step may be for us to recognize that we actually do not have a nationally understood and nationally embraced purpose for public education that makes any sense at all if we expect the country and the planet to survive. The next step might then be to initiate a debate different from any that has gone on before. For without defining a new objective, understandable and accepted by all (and, most importantly, understood and accepted by our children), there is little real hope to develop a viable, long-term solution to our most daunting crisis.

However, by examining the historical record we can uncover the original objective for public education and follow how and why that objective (or purpose) has changed over the centuries. Tracking the evolution of public education could allow us to see the problem in a new and different context. Then, with the issue redefined, new strategies and tactics might begin to emerge and other practices that have been time-tested could be retooled and integrated into a truly new paradigm for this high-tech 21<sup>st</sup> century—not only for America but also for the world.