

ALFIE KOWN, THE SCHOOLS
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STARTING FROM SCRATCH

What's the Point?

MOST OF US send our kids off to school each weekday morning without giving much thought to the reasons we do so. If asked, we might say that going to school is just what kids do, much as adults go to work. Besides, the law requires it. But why do we as a society want our kids to be educated? What's the point of having them learn? These questions are not merely academic, nor are the answers self-evident. Indeed, the rationale for educating children has a direct bearing on what they'll actually do in the classroom—and on the practical question of what we can do to help them become enthusiastic and excellent learners.

Immediately, the matter of overall purpose splinters into smaller questions. For example, should schools be devoted chiefly to academics? To judge by the tests given to students, that seems to be the only function we think schools should perform. But some people emphatically disagree. For example, Nel Noddings, professor emeritus at Stanford University, urges us to reject “the deadly notion that the schools’ first priority should be intellectual development.” She argues that “the main aim of education should be to produce competent, caring, loving, and lovable people.”¹

Other educators are content to restrict schools to the intellectual realm but insist that the focus should be not merely on what students learn, but on how strong their desire is to keep learning. It isn't just about how many skills they acquire but about whether they want to acquire still more. Perhaps, as Seymour Sarason says, “the overarching purpose of schooling is to stimulate, capitalize on, and sustain the kind of motivation, intellectual curiosity, awe, and wonder that a child possesses when he or she begins schooling.”²

Even someone who feels safer just asking schools to promote students' intellectual capabilities will have to decide which capabilities are relevant. Is the point to transmit knowledge to students or to help them become reflective people? Do we define an educated person as someone

who knows a lot of stuff or someone who's a good thinker? Most of us would answer "Both" to each question, but we don't all strike the same balance between the two ends of the continuum. Clearly, our children's days are going to be spent differently if we're primarily concerned that they've memorized a list of what everyone their age is supposed to know, as opposed to if we believe that "the purpose of education is not primarily to help children know more; rather, it is to help children become better able to think, care, imagine, understand, and adapt—to become autonomous learners."³

Those of us who are attracted to the latter formulation should be aware that when schools were invented, they weren't set up for anything so ambitious. They were designed to teach children routine skills and to "facilitate the memorization of important texts, principally religious ones," with which everyone was already acquainted. Schools weren't meant to help students "interpret unfamiliar texts, create material others would want and need to read, construct convincing arguments, develop original solutions to technical or social problems."⁴ Thus, when people today say that education should not just prepare students "to do things [but to] decide what is worth doing,"⁵ or when they ask our schools to "help children make fuller, deeper, and more accurate sense of their experiences,"⁶ the implication is that we'll have to commit ourselves to re-making education. As it stands, traditional practices, such as direct instruction, fact-based tests, and a quest for the right answer are more consistent with the original conception of schools, whose catechisms "sought to produce believers rather than thinkers."⁷

That last distinction raises the question of whether we see schools as places where cultural knowledge is transmitted to a new generation in order to preserve important institutions, or as places where a new generation learns the skills and dispositions necessary to *evaluate* those institutions. Again, it's more a continuum than an either-or, but the point on that continuum we identify as ideal makes all the difference. Are we more inclined to want schools to turn out kids who accept or who question, who conserve traditions or who create new ones? We can side with Émile Durkheim, who said schools should "exert pressure upon [the student] in order that he may learn proper consideration for others, respect for customs and conventions, the need for work, etc."⁸—or we can cast our lot with Jean Piaget, who believed that "the principal goal of education is to create men and women who are capable of doing new things, not simply of repeating what other generations have done—men and women who are creative, inventive and discoverers, [who] have minds which can be critical, can verify [rather than] accept everything they are offered."⁹

One way of splitting the difference on this dispute is to pursue the latter goal with a select group of students (who are deemed capable of being creative) while doing something less challenging with everyone else. Woodrow Wilson, during his tenure as president of Princeton University, stood before a roomful of high school teachers and announced, "We want one class of persons to have a liberal education, and we want another class of persons, a very much larger class of necessity in every society, to forgo the privilege of a liberal education and fit themselves to perform specific difficult manual tasks."¹⁰ This, of course, raises yet another basic question: Do we want schools to be about "sorting people out, the presumed abler from the less able" or "educating *all* children, generously and without qualification"?¹¹

Our country has been of two minds about this matter almost since its founding. Today, the only thing more common than rhetoric about how "everyone can learn" and the importance of "high expectations for all students" is a set of practices that belie those sentiments—practices such as tracking children into very different kinds of classrooms. Few people today are as crude (or candid) as Wilson was, but his notion of the purpose of schools is alive and well and on display whenever some children are pointed toward algebra and others toward "consumer math."

Interestingly, many latter-day Wilsonians share with their critics a focus on what will happen after students graduate. The "sorters" are thinking about preparing children for very different kinds of futures, but the more egalitarian may also be concerned about what comes later. Rather provocatively, Dewey insisted that education should be seen as "a process of living and not a preparation for future living."¹² To take children seriously is to value them for who they are right now rather than seeing them as just adults-in-the-making. However, Dewey's colleague William Kilpatrick believed that it is legitimate to attend to both. Ideally, he said, education "prepares best for life [when] at the same time it constitutes the present worthy life itself."¹³

The words "best" and "worthy" in Kilpatrick's comment signal that there may be better and worse ways of conceiving of schooling in either the present *or* the future tense. The same is true of another fundamental distinction: Do we send our kids to school for the benefits they will derive personally or for the benefits their education will ultimately bring about for our society? Most people will be tempted to say, "Both," but again, we shouldn't be content to let it go at that. What matters is the nature of the benefits we're talking about for either the individual student or for the society.

Let's assume that we think schools should be seen as providing some

public benefit. One of the great fault lines running through discussions about education creates two camps that might be labeled “education for democracy” and “education for profits.” The former says that schools should be equipping students with the skills they’ll need to sustain (or, possibly, to create) a democratic society. The latter, in its purest form, says that schools should be preparing students to be productive workers in order to sustain a booming economy.

In practice, however, the economic justification for schooling often goes hand in hand with the Wilsonian vision of separating the privileged from the peons, creating a pool of adequately skilled laborers who will do their part to increase the profitability of corporations. Here, the emphasis is on transmitting basic skills as well as good “work habits” — that is, training students to show up on time, do what they’re told, and get used to being measured and goaded by rewards and punishments. In the early 1900s, there was much talk about the need to set up schools to resemble factories, partly because that was thought to be the most efficient way of organizing any enterprise and partly because that would prepare students to take their place in real factories.¹⁴

“In the twentieth century’s ongoing debate about the purposes of education, business interests have prevailed,” one writer concludes. The triumph of this agenda effectively “whittles the purpose of schooling down to an almost sinister notion of making good little workers for future employment.”¹⁵ This rationale is consistent with all the talk we hear today about Tougher Standards and accountability, the huge role played by standardized testing, the references to education as an “investment,” and the prevalent idea that our students must be Number One, outscoring their counterparts in other countries today so that “our” corporations can triumph over their overseas rivals tomorrow. Marveling that “Democrats and Republicans are saying rather similar things about education,” a front-page story in the *New York Times* in the fall of 1998 explained, “One reason there seems to be such a consensus on education is that the economic rationale for schooling has triumphed.”¹⁶

The idea that we send our children to school to raise the gross national product (much less the value of General Motors stock) strikes some people as disturbing, if not outrageous. They argue that students’ own interests should take precedence when we think about the point of education and when we plan the details of what and how they are taught. But even here we find a lack of agreement about which of “the students’ own interests” matter most. On the one hand, there are humanistic goals: helping children become contented and fulfilled, helping them grow into adults with a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around

them. On the other hand, there are more utilitarian goals, such as helping children grow into adults with a lot of money.

In the late 1950s, Erich Fromm wrote a striking sentence: “Few parents,” he declared, “have the courage and independence to care more for their children’s happiness than for their ‘success.’”¹⁷ Forty years later, an educational historian named David Labaree argued that the financial success of each child vis-à-vis his fellows has become the driving force of American education—eclipsing not only happiness and other humanistic goals but also the *public* rationales for schooling. Those who are busy arguing whether we should think about education in terms of “what it can do for democracy [as opposed to] the economy” may be missing the more fundamental shift, which is toward asking “what it can do for me.” This transformation, Labaree contends, has turned our school systems into “a vast public subsidy for private ambition,” “an arena for zero-sum competition filled with self-interested actors seeking opportunities for gaining educational distinctions at the expense of each other.” In the process, the substance of education takes a backseat to the credentials it provides.¹⁸

Depending on whether we think schools should be promoting individual or social goals, and whether we primarily value humanistic or economic values, we find ourselves with four possible agendas for education (see Table 1). Once again, it’s possible to pursue more than one at a

Table 1: *The Purpose of Schools*

	PRIVATE	PUBLIC
HUMANISTIC	Enhancing personal fulfillment	Building a democratic society
ECONOMIC	Maximizing competitive financial success	Increasing corporate profits

time, but it's not at all clear that we can dedicate our schools to all of these goals.¹⁹ My own vision of schooling, which necessarily informs this entire book, is defined by a concern for both the fulfillment of each child and the creation of a more democratic society. As for the other objectives discussed here, I believe school should be about more than just academics, more about producing thinkers than walking repositories of knowledge, more about creating an ethic of questioning than of preserving the status quo, more about teaching and learning than sorting and selecting, and more about honoring the needs and interests of the child in the present but without overlooking legitimate, humanistic concerns about the future.

Your goals and mine may not be exactly the same. But to the extent they do overlap, the relevant question for us is this: How well do concrete school practices—all the things that take place in classrooms throughout the country on a given Thursday morning—reflect the commitments we share? Traditional teaching, the kind familiar to most of us from our own days in school, is well matched to the goals many of us would identify as the least ambitious, the least appealing, the least worthy of our children. To that extent, the Old School has worn out its welcome.

Goals and Memories

While beliefs about the ultimate purpose of schooling exert an invisible influence on real educational decisions, that influence is usually indirect. Let's make the discussion more personal. Whenever I give a talk to a group of parents or a workshop for teachers, I like to begin by asking these questions: How would you like your children—or, in the case of educators, the students you teach—to turn out? What are your long-term goals for them? What word or phrase best describes what you want them to be like after they're grown up and gone?

The answers that come back are strikingly similar, whether they come from parents or teachers, whether the students in question are toddlers or teenagers, whether the school in question is public or private, and whether the community is urban, suburban, or rural. Wherever I go, people say they want their kids to be happy and fulfilled, successful and productive, ethical and decent, independent and self-reliant, but also caring and compassionate—and (to continue the alliteration) confident, curious, creative, critical thinkers, and good communicators. Also, someone invariably expresses the hope that his or her child will always keep learn-

ing, and wanting to learn, even after leaving school. (If you sneaked into the bedroom of a random elementary school teacher at three in the morning and yelled, "Quick! What's your long-term goal for the students you teach?" a bleary voice would probably reply, "Uh, lifelong learners." This phrase has become something of a cliché in educational circles, but it is a goal commonly shared by parents and teachers whether they use those words or not.)

Several things about the list as a whole strike me as interesting. First, it's very rare for people in any neighborhood to say that a top goal is to have their children make lots of money. Second, most of the items (proposed by teachers as well as parents) reach beyond intellectual characteristics and deal with the kind of human beings kids will become—their character and psychological state. Third, even when intellectual features are mentioned, they tend to be broad dispositions such as "curious" and "creative" and "critical." No one has ever said, "What's most important to me is that my kid will be able to convert a fraction into a decimal" or "will know the difference between a simile and a metaphor." In my experience, when people are asked to reflect on their long-term goals for children, no one thinks in terms of possessing a storehouse of facts.

This last observation raises a troubling question: Are school practices in sync with the long-term goals shared by most parents and teachers? Logically speaking, there are only three possibilities: either schools are (a) helping children to turn out the way we hope, (b) doing things that are mostly irrelevant to our objectives, or (c) making it less likely that they'll acquire the characteristics we regard as most important. I believe the effects of traditional schooling typically include some of (b) and a lot of (c). There's a disconnect between our goals and our practices, a clash between what we ultimately desire for our kids and the kind of education they actually receive. We say we want one thing, but we're really doing another—or at least allowing another to be done.

[Sometimes the clash isn't just between long-term goals and everyday practices but between long-term and short-term goals. We want kids to be independent thinkers eventually, but for now we ignore that because we want them to know long division by the end of the year. We want them to love learning, but we set that aside because right now it's more important to us that they bring up their grade-point averages.]

You ask: Can't we have it all? I answer: It depends. If we focus on traditional short-term goals (such as knowing this fact by that deadline or getting good grades), it is entirely possible that the long-term goals will not be met. If we teach too many topics over the course of a year, then a deep understanding of meaty ideas may be impossible. If school is based

on the “bunch o’ facts” model for long enough, our children may be less likely to develop the skills and dispositions of critical thinking. If kids are drilled incessantly on separate letters and then separate words, it may be unrealistic to expect them to be avid readers for life. If they get the message that the point of going to school is to snag as many A’s as possible, then, as we’ve seen, the depth of their understanding and their motivation to learn will suffer.²⁰

The good news, on the other hand, is that if we start with the long-term goals and teach in such a way as to promote them, students may end up remembering more facts and acquiring more skills to boot. Thus, even relatively superficial short-term goals may not require us to abandon what we really care about over the long run—and may not require the kind of traditional teaching that ultimately proves so problematic. As the data reviewed in Appendix A suggest, progressive education not only produces major gains on measures of thinking and motivation but may help (or at least probably won’t hurt) the lower-level competencies that are measured by standardized tests.

A former high school English teacher²¹ told me that at the beginning of the year, he would lay out his (short-term) objectives, which were for his students to be able to write clear, well-structured essays, to take pleasure in self-expression, to do sustained, independent research, and to participate constructively in discussions. It’s hard to imagine anyone objecting to these goals, which is why it’s noteworthy that he was best able to meet them by teaching in a nontraditional way: he rarely lectured, had them spend more time with fewer books, created the opportunities for frequent collaboration, and didn’t grade their individual assignments.

The moral is that we need to reflect on, and periodically revisit, our long-term goals—and to evaluate what happens in school in light of those goals. In the meantime, it’s possible that remembering what happened to us when we were in school can put those short-term objectives in perspective. Harvey Daniels and his colleagues, who work with the Chicago public schools, find that many parents initially parrot the “superficial received wisdom” about Tougher Standards and basic skills. These off-the-cuff comments are consistent with national polls showing wide support for a “reactionary, back-to-basics agenda.” But when parents “stop to think seriously about their own student experience, the vast majority want something very different and better for their children.”

In workshops, Daniels asks everyone to think privately about, then scribble down, and finally describe to someone sitting nearby, a couple of key experiences he or she had in school: a memory of learning to read, a time when writing went especially well, a moment that stands out as

particularly awful. The lessons that emerge from these recollections, it turns out, are that “rote grammar instruction does not improve writing, writers should choose their own topics, collaboration improves the quality of texts,” and so on. In other words, once they reflect on their own schooling, most parents realize they “don’t want their children to endure the same deadening seat work, passive memorization, lockstep assignments, demoralizing grading practices, and hurtful discipline” that they themselves did.²²

So: ask parents about the future (their long-term goals for their kids) and remind them about the past (their own experiences as students). Then add to that the best research available in the present, and you find that all three point away from traditional kinds of teaching—and toward something better. Most of us can remember glimpsing that something better, even if only rarely, so the question is whether we want it to be the rule or the exception for our children. Wouldn’t we like them to have better schools than we had?

Beyond Achievement

Virtually any ambitious goal for our children will require us to rethink the set of psychological assumptions—or perhaps I should say the disregard of psychological factors—that characterize the Tougher Standards movement. Recall from chapter 2 that a serious disservice is done to students when they are led to become so preoccupied with how well they’re doing that they end up becoming less engaged with what they’re doing. How do we set about reversing this? To start with, parents will do well to reconsider how they talk with their children about school. As a rule, it’s better to ask, “So what did you figure out in class today?” “What did you learn that was surprising?” “How did you manage to solve that tricky problem?” “How do *you* think the Civil War started?”—as opposed to “How’d you do on that test?” “How come you only got a C in math?” “Are you going to make the honor roll this term?”

Ultimately, though, we may have to concern ourselves with what’s actually happening in school and not merely with how we talk about it. Let’s put the question this way: If chapter 2 explained the effects of getting students to think constantly about how well they’re doing, what are the causes of this phenomenon? Many of us are inclined to think in terms of the personality of the individual students.²³ To be sure, there are differences among kids, but what appears to matter more is their environment, the structure and culture of the school.²⁴ So what specific practices

in schools lead kids to focus on their performance? Make your own list and you'll probably come up with some of the same items I've heard from people all over the country who were asked this question:

- Grades.
- Variations on grades that increase their impact, such as privileges made contingent on a high grade-point average, honor rolls and societies, and weighted grades (where some classes count for more than others).
- Standardized tests, especially when the scores are published.
- Academic contests and other instances of competition.
- Frequent evaluations of student performance, particularly when done publicly.
- Rewards ranging from gold stars to scholarships.
- The segregation of students by performance or alleged ability, including tracking and special enrichments for those labeled "gifted and talented."
- The current criteria for (and sometimes mistaken beliefs about) college admission.
- The kind of teaching that values error-free assignments and right answers more than real thinking.

It comes down to this: all of us who are bothered by the effects of overemphasizing achievement—namely, the prospect of kids trying to take the easy way out, thinking superficially, and losing interest in learning—will view this as a "hit list." Collectively, these items describe an antilearning environment—reason enough for us to work to eliminate (and, in the meantime, deemphasize) as many of these practices as possible. The consequences of a preoccupation with performance are quite clear; the question is whether we're willing to follow that analysis where it leads.

One place it leads is to the recognition that the problem with tests is not limited to their content. Rather, the harm comes from paying too much attention to the results. Even the most unbiased, carefully constructed, "authentic" measure of what students know is likely to be worrisome, psychologically speaking, if too big a deal is made about how they performed, thus leading them (and their teachers) to think less about learning and more about test outcomes. This point is overlooked even by some of the most incisive critics of standardized testing and traditional instruction.²⁵

Another disconcerting implication of this whole analysis is that we're

obliged to rethink the very idea of motivation. Getting students to become preoccupied with how well they're doing is typically achieved by techniques intended to "motivate" them. These include giving students rewards for good performance—or, in what seems almost a parody of Skinnerian psychology, giving them one reward (like money) for having received another reward (a good grade)! This practice is so patently destructive that you can almost watch kids' interest in learning fade before your eyes. Yet some of the parents who do this are obviously bright, thoughtful, and well intentioned. How is this possible?

Two simple and almost universally shared beliefs about motivation may account for the use of such gimmicks. Belief number one, which is so elementary that no one even thinks about it, is that it's possible to motivate someone else, such as your child. The truth is that doing so is impossible, unnecessary, and undesirable. Let's take these in order. First, while you can often make someone else do something—in effect buying a behavior with a bribe or a threat—you can never make him or her *want* to do something, which is what "motivation" means. The best you can do is create the kind of setting and offer the kind of tasks that will tap and nourish people's own motivation.

Second, such motivation is natural. I don't think I've ever met a child who wasn't motivated to figure things out, to find the answers to personally relevant questions. However, I've met (and taught) plenty of kids who aren't motivated to sit quietly and listen to someone else talk or to memorize the definitions of a list of words. That lack of interest doesn't suggest an absence of motivation (to be remedied with carrots and sticks) but a problem with the model of instruction or with the curriculum. Anyone who has been around young children knows that it's hard to stop them from learning, almost impossible to curb their natural motivation. They persist in asking questions about things we take for granted. They want to apply their new reading skills to every sign in sight, from highway billboards to restaurant menus.

"A passion for learning . . . isn't something you have to inspire [kids] with; it's something you have to keep from extinguishing," as Deborah Meier has remarked.²⁶ Unhappily, it often does get extinguished. At least in the United States, research has repeatedly found that this enthusiasm for learning declines sharply by the time kids are well along in elementary school.²⁷ Even so, it's not helpful to see our task as "motivating" such kids. Rather, our short-term obligation is to help revive or resuscitate what used to come naturally, and our long-term obligation is to figure out (and change) what's going on in schools that's contributing to this decline.

Finally, even if it were possible to provide motivation from outside, it's not a good idea. Think for a moment about the arrogance of setting out to motivate a child. It should be clear that this is an exercise in control and therefore likely to boomerang, if only because humans hate to be controlled. Once the issue is framed as "how to motivate" someone, it is quite likely that the usual techniques of control—namely, rewards and punishments—will be used.

One popular myth about motivation, then, is that it can be done to others. The other, even more basic misconception is one we encountered while looking at high-stakes testing—the idea that there's a thing called motivation, a single substance that people possess to a certain degree. The reality, remember, is that there are qualitatively different types of motivation. What determines how effectively students will learn isn't how motivated they are. It's how they are motivated. The type of motivation referred to as "extrinsic"—which we find, for example, when kids are led to read books so they can get some goodie—turns out to be not merely ineffective but counterproductive. It tends to reduce "intrinsic" motivation—that is, an interest in reading itself.²⁸ Thus, when things go badly for kids at school, it "is just as likely the result of [their] being *overmotivated*, but for the wrong reasons, as it is of not being motivated at all," in the words of Martin Covington.²⁹

This basic point—that all motivation isn't created equal—goes a long way toward explaining those data demonstrating that giving (and emphasizing) grades is such a mistake. Recall the three key consequences of grading: less interest in learning, less proficiency at learning, and less desire to challenge oneself (pp. 41–43). None of these findings seems so counterintuitive once you stop thinking of motivation as something that comes in only one flavor.

Even apart from how more of one kind of motivation can mean less of another, the simple fact that there are different kinds can change the way you look at kids in school. Say you walk into a classroom and find everyone in the middle of doing an assignment. All the kids are busy and "on task," as some educators like to say. But don't leave without asking a few kids what they're doing³⁰—and *why*. If the most common answer is "Because Mr. Riley told us to" or "Because it's going to be on the test," then something here may be terribly wrong just below the surface. The kind of answers we hope to hear sound more like this: "Because I just don't get why the character in this story told her friend to go away!" or "Because we're trying to figure out a better lunch schedule for all the classes. You want to see what we've come up with?" Both sets of answers may indicate that students are motivated. But the kinds of motivation are altogether different—and so are the long-term effects.

The Secret of Success

Understanding how certain features of schooling are likely to do more harm than good may be a prerequisite for constructive change. If extrinsic motivators—and, more broadly, an excessive concern with bottom-line results—are apt to blow up in our faces, that can help us focus our efforts as parents or teachers. But what, other than removing barriers, can help to foster a learning orientation? How do we get kids to act on their desire to figure things out? How do we help them to become more interested in what they're doing?

Part of the answer concerns what (and how) they're being taught, which is the subject of the following chapter. If we want kids to learn for the right reasons, then the content and method of the instruction become directly relevant. In fact, there's some preliminary evidence that an instructional program explicitly geared to helping students develop a "learning orientation" can make a difference with those who are falling behind³¹—a particularly welcome finding, given that most interventions for "at-risk" populations are geared to bringing up test scores or otherwise increasing the pressure to achieve at higher levels.

But let's take a step back. Chapter 2 amounted to an invitation to reconsider the whole idea of achievement, to reflect on how we want our kids to think about school. It didn't argue that success doesn't matter but rather that success can't be sought directly. In effect, it pointed to the conclusion that *high achievement is a by-product*. Now we're ready to ask: A by-product of what? And the answer is: Of interest.³²

This will not come as a surprise to—nor require much change from—those of us who believe schools should be promoting students' desire to continue learning, or those of us who number lifelong curiosity among our long-term goals for our children, or those of us who understand that the most profound sort of motivation is intrinsic. But what about people who don't see interest in learning as an end in itself and care only about achievement? In its main policy statement, for example, the 1996 National Education Summit of the nation's governors asserted that "the only reason to undertake change is to improve students' academic performance."³³ This is a value judgment and, as such, can be challenged but not proved wrong. What does lend itself to empirical evidence is the question of how you get higher performance. Until now, I've tried to show that, paradoxically, getting everyone focused directly on this goal tends to backfire. It's better to encourage kids to focus on the task itself. Now I want to add that students attend to the task best when the task matters to them. Thus, even parents and teachers and policymakers

for whom achievement is the primary objective must be concerned with interest.

Here's another way of putting it: *where interest appears, achievement usually follows.*³⁴ Show me a student who wants to understand what the Vietnam War was really about, and I'll show you a student who (with the right support and resources) can be helped to acquire the necessary skills to do it. Show me the kind of class where kids groan when the dismissal bell rings, and I'll show you a place where kids are doing marvelously sophisticated thinking. As one science educator observes, "There are many techniques that must be learned and practiced, of course, but the heart of science is the drive to discover, not the mastery of laboratory procedures and report formalities or the ability to recite facts from textbooks."³⁵ Indeed, it is interest—the drive to keep reading, to invent, to explain, to express oneself, to make meaning—that is the heart of any field of study. Some four centuries ago, Montaigne wrote that if students lack the "appetite and affection" for learning, they become little more than "asses loaded with books."³⁶

There is good research to support this general point. Some of it has shown that the extent to which students are interested in the subject matter is a good way of predicting how well they'll learn it.³⁷ Other studies have demonstrated more specifically that, regardless of age, race, or reading skills, students are more likely to remember and really understand what they've read if they find it intriguing. Indeed, the interest level of the text has been found to be a much better predictor of what students will get out of it than how difficult it is.³⁸

On one level, all of this is just common sense. Who could disagree with the proposition that what students don't care about they're unlikely to learn very effectively?³⁹ (As some kids I know would say, "Well, duh!") On another level, to take this observation seriously is to call into question the current direction of school reform and the way a lot of parents talk. It suggests that "the most immediate and persisting issue for students and teachers is not low achievement, but student disengagement."⁴⁰ It suggests that if we're going to hold schools "accountable," it should be for something that standardized tests do not and cannot measure: the creation of an environment that supports and enhances students' interest in learning. It suggests that people who really care about educational excellence will make this their top priority: school boards or legislatures will center their reform efforts on making schools more engaging and relevant to students.

Right now, of course, the mission of most school boards and legislatures has nothing to do with interest. Or perhaps it would be more accu-

rate to say that their policies, including efforts to raise test scores, are not explicitly addressed to the question of interest. In reality, they do have a major effect—in *undermining* student (and teacher) motivation and therefore making excellence less likely. To skip the question of interest and proceed directly to trying to boost achievement (or “raise the bar”) is to kill the goose that laid the golden egg.

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In response to any talk about the importance of interest, some heated objections can be anticipated. “Surely,” some will insist, “you’re not saying that the entire curriculum has to consist of things that kids would choose to do or would regard as fun. Surely you’re not proposing that we erase the distinction between school and recess.” Well, no. The point isn’t to turn learning into a game. There’s an important difference, as Dewey emphasized, between natural interest, which grows organically “out of some question with which the student is concerned,” and artificial interest, where a topic has to be made appealing by sugarcoating it.⁴¹ Dewey’s point was not only that the latter fails to work in the long run, but that the perceived need to do this indicates a problem with the original assignment.

Still, is it realistic to expect all kids to have a natural interest in everything they’re doing? To answer that question, we have to distinguish between short-term interest in a particular activity and more lasting interest in a larger topic. As you may expect, researchers have found that the latter is “apt to have more consistent and positive effects on academic performance.”⁴² While few students are likely to be excited about every single idea or every page of every book, that may not be as important as the attitude they take toward the broader projects of which these specific activities are a part. When teachers work with students to help them see the connection between a given task and the wider interests and questions that they brought into the classroom, the whole enterprise is more likely to be experienced as engaging (and therefore is more likely to be successful).

For students to become engaged, then, they have to experience the broad contours of the lessons as relevant. But that doesn’t mean the lessons have to be limited to what they already know.⁴³ We might say that relevance, like knowledge itself, is constructed. However, it’s constructed on the basis of how natural curiosity meets up with rich and important themes. The teacher doesn’t tell students to do whatever they feel like or let them just stick to what they already know. He starts with where they are and invites them to move further. He presents new ideas,

surprising facts, unfamiliar voices, in such a way that their interest swells beyond where it used to be and they want to know more. That takes real skill, but, as we'll see, it's not an unrealistic goal.

Finally, we have to understand the difference between interest and fun. When people frown and declare that education isn't always fun, that it takes work, they may be guilty of a kind of black-and-white oversimplification. They have accepted a dichotomy where the only possibilities are work and play: if you agree that kids shouldn't spend their days in school playing, well, that leaves work as the only option. In fact, though, there's a third alternative: learning. Here, the primary purpose isn't playlike enjoyment, although the process can be deeply satisfying, nor is it the worklike completion of error-free products, although the process can involve intense effort and concentration.

If you'll notice, never in this book do I refer to what students do in school as "work"; I talk about their "activities" or their "projects" or their "learning" but not about how their "work" can be improved or assessed. I resist this metaphor because it suggests that what children do in classrooms to figure things out is tantamount to what adults do in offices and factories to make money. But, again, this doesn't mean that children shouldn't be challenged and shouldn't try hard. It means that work isn't the only activity that can be pursued rigorously—and play, for that matter, isn't the only activity that can be experienced as pleasurable.⁴⁴

The goal isn't to make work playful. The goal isn't even to make school fun. The goal is to create a learning experience that arouses and sustains children's curiosity, enriching their capacities and responding to their questions in ways that are deeply engaging. Even if such a classroom doesn't manage to get every student hooked on every activity, at least we have a better shot at a high-quality education when we think in these terms—that is, when we're attentive to how excellence follows from interest. The educators and parents who understand these things are likely to work to create (or support) schools that are profoundly non-traditional—and astonishingly effective.