

# Introduction

I have worked as an educator for more than 40 years. Although much has changed over that time, there have been a few constants. One is that I have found that most of the criticism leveled at schools has been misdirected and off the point. The second constant is that most of the people working in education are not shiftless, lazy unionists with no interest in children. They are dedicated to the task of “touching the future” as Christa McAuliffe put it. The third constant is that education, at its core, is not complicated. It is about the relationships between the people and about the processes that must be undertaken to connect them. It is, in essence, an organic process. It is mostly about uplifting and challenging people in meaningful ways.

I come to this book with strong biases borne out of my experience as a student and as a teacher, principal, superintendent, and national education association executive. I grew up in a place called Davis Creek, West Virginia. My trajectory took me to a number of schools, two major public universities, and ultimately, to the ivy covered rarefied atmosphere of Harvard University. I taught in a blue-collar section of Durham, North Carolina, and the newly integrated Chapel Hill public schools. I was a principal in Chapel Hill and later in the upper-middle-class suburb of Summit, New Jersey. I was an assistant superintendent in Birmingham, Alabama, during a time of great turmoil in the south and superintendent of schools in three very distinctly different school districts. I spent nine years in the Princeton Regional Schools in Princeton, New Jersey, one of the most highly educated communities in the United States, more than five years in the urbanized southwest in Tucson, Arizona, and three years in Riverside, California, an edge city on the edge of the country. I followed this up with more than 14 years as executive director of

the American Association of School Administrators. Each of these experiences colored and expanded my understanding of the good, bad, and ugly of American education.

I came away from all this with a simple philosophy. Schools are about creating and nurturing dreams, and this is best done through meaningful, engaging work. I believe that we have to view education as *fundamental* not merely *instrumental*. In other words, it isn't about preparation for life or work—it is life and work—right here, right now. It isn't something you “invoke” and pour into children. It is something you “evoke” and draw from them. One of the biggest problems we have in education today is that we are trying to force learning into children, and when you force something, you break it. There are basic truths about what motivates and inspires people and these must be embedded in the educational process. The American education system has great diversity and inequities built into it, but at its core, it is simply about acting more as an elevator than a bulldozer. It is about raising people up, not flattening them out.

The current discussions about education are either misdirected or mistaken, and this has been true for at least the last 50 years. The names change, the issues morph, the policies are modified, but basically, education is affected by four *dirty Ds*, as I call them.

The first is *distraction*. We are constantly being distracted from focusing on the real problems of education by issues that are raised by political and corporate leaders who neither understand education nor really seem to care that much about it. Although education is fundamental to a healthy society, it is down on the list of issues that political people consider, and when they bring it up, it is usually to promote an idea or pet project that won't really change things. For business leaders, education is important until it comes time to tax themselves to support it. For example, we have seen a major emphasis on accountability in the last few years, as defined by measuring the outcomes of multiple-choice tests. Success in life isn't about filling in a bubble on an answer sheet, and yet that has become the standard because it has been forced onto education by elected officials. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act that first passed in the 1960s to assist poor students has morphed into the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law that puts a premium on test results for all children. This is distracting educators from acting on the deeper things we should be giving children.

For more than 20 years, many have proposed giving vouchers to parents so they can choose their children's schools. The idea is that competition is good and will force improved education. I must observe this is the model used by Wall Street and the big banks. How has that worked for us? A paucity of evidence shows when family income is held as a constant, choice schools perform better than public schools; yet politicians and neoconservative pundits continue to push vouchers. They are simply promoting distraction. The great irony here is that the schools held up as exemplars of excellence—private schools—are not required to meet the imposed, coercive policies aimed at public schools and are allowed to choose their students, something public schools cannot and should not do. It is easy to win a competition if you get to pick all your players and play by your rules.

The second dirty D is *distortion*. If you can't distract the public and educators from working on the right issues, then distort the reality of the current situation. This is most clearly seen in media stories about education where the most extreme issues and situations are reported without context or comment. When I was superintendent in Tucson, we had an outbreak of hepatitis, and all headlines and evening news shows screamed about "Hepatitis in the Tucson Unified Schools." Well, there were several cases in one school, but it was found that the children had contracted the disease in their neighborhood from tainted water. It had nothing to do with the school. Despite being notified of this, the media continued to use the schools headline for days. I have always found some gallows humor in the headlines around murders. If a body was found anywhere, it was usually described as "near, such and such school," as if the school had something to do with the death. The next time a serial killer is caught, check and see if there isn't something mentioned about which schools they attended—never mind the churches or boy scout troop they may have belonged to. In many cases, the distortion comes merely by placing the wrong focus on the story. In others, it is from misunderstanding the issue. Newspapers love to rank schools by their test scores. If they ranked the communities by family income, it would have an eerie overlap with the school list. Might one affect the other? We'll never know from the reporting that goes on.

The third D is *disrespect*. This hit home for me after having the opportunity to visit other nations and to look at their schools.

Most were not nearly as good as those found in the United States, yet there was a pride in the schools we rarely see here and a respect for educators that simply does not exist in America. On my visit to Singapore, I found that the government totally underwrites the cost of teacher training, and then it pays the teachers more than doctors, lawyers, and engineers because of the recognition that you wouldn't have these professions without teachers. I visited muddy villages along the Amazon where the school was the nicest hut in the village. Around the world, I found other countries had greater respect for educators and for the educational process than we find here. I saw children walking miles in the remote reaches of the Masai Mora in Kenya, so they could go to school because getting an education was the most important thing they could do. In America, we are fond of reciting, "Those who can do, and those who can't, teach." We see the teachers attacked as moneygrubbing hacks when they simply would like to maintain a modicum of self-respect. Education must be valued by the student and family, but it must also be valued by the society that supports it.

The fourth and perhaps most powerful dirty D is *disadvantage*. This has been written about eloquently by such people as my friend Jonathan Kozol, in such books as *Savage Inequalities* and *Amazing Grace* (1991, 1995). The first time I met Jonathan, I teased him that I had lived his *Savage Inequalities* book, from my upbringing in rural West Virginia, to my stint in affluent Summit and Princeton to my time in Tucson, which was spending a fraction on students compared to what I saw in Princeton. Today, we are seeing a push for national standards so that we can be assured that all our children will be competitive in the growingly complex global economy. That is fine; will we also see a national standard for supporting education? I doubt it. During the years of NCLB, I was in Washington, the epicenter of policymaking. And do you know what? It was considered bad form to mention poverty as an intervening variable for student achievement. Well, talking about student achievement without talking about the effects of poverty is like NASA talking about going to the moon but failing to consider gravity as an intervening variable. Poverty, like gravity, can be overcome. But going to the moon took a big rocket and a lot of fuel. And yet we expect to deliver education on the cheap. We have pundits, including a couple of former secretaries of education,

who opine that money doesn't matter. The only people I have ever heard say that are people who already have money. Go into the South Bronx or the Navajo Reservation or a barrio in East Los Angeles and try that out. Yes, money is not sufficient to delivering good education, but it is necessary, and to ignore that reality is the worst level of distortion, distraction, and disrespect.

But I don't want to let the education community off totally. Educators continue to cling to outmoded ways of teaching and educating. We add to the inequality when we have contracts that put the weakest teachers in the schools where the hardest to educate attend. We settle for mediocrity when we could create excellence, and we give children experiences that are totally disconnected from what interests them, and we keep parents and communities at arm's length when we need to embrace them. We continue to ignore the fact that education is really about people's hearts as much as it is about their minds. It is about their possibilities as much as it is about their performance.

Education has to be oriented toward creating success in students. It has to focus on the assets they bring with them so they can be built on. We can transform our schools in America. But the most important transformation has to come from our internal transformation of understanding what education is really about. It is about giving wings to children's dreams and that is what I have tried to capture in this book.