



The Purpose of Public Education and the Role of the School Board

By Angie Peifer, National Connection Consultant

What is the purpose of public education? Ask one hundred people and you will likely get 100 answers. In fact, one teacher did just that. Heather Wolpert-Gawron, an award winning teacher, blogger and author, asked 300 people both inside and outside of public education to answer that question in 30 words or less and published her findings in the July 22, Huffington Post. The answers she received fell into nineteen categories ranging from “preparing students for their future participation in our democratic process” to “grant equal opportunity and access to the same high level of learning” to “develop the skills to have options in life.” (http://huffingtonpost.com/heather-wolpertgawron/what-is-the-purpose-of-pu_b_774497.html)

How would you answer that question?

One of the questions in the 2010 report *School Boards Circa 2010: Governance in the Accountability Era* (a joint effort of the National School Boards Association, the Iowa School Boards Association, and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute) asked board members to rank the importance of six goals for education.

Here is how the 875 respondents ranked the six in order of first in importance:

Help students fulfill their potential – 42.6 percent
Prepare students for satisfying and productive life – 31.7 percent
Prepare students for the workforce – 8.1 percent
Prepare students for college – 8.1 percent
Help students become well rounded – 6.5 percent
Prepare students for civic life – 3.0 percent

In its forward to the report, the Fordham Foundation made this observation about these results:

Three-fourths of board members say that “help[ing] students fulfill their potential” or “prepar[ing] students for a satisfying and productive life” is number one. Just 16 percent chose preparing students for the workforce or for college. One wonders, in our globally competitive world, how their sense of what’s important got so skewed. Do they really not put much stock in the most tangible outcomes of schooling? Are they possibly hiding from results-based accountability by selecting goals that cannot readily be measured?

In contrast, the NSBA forward pointed out the following:

School boards realize that test scores aren’t all that matter. Nearly 87 percent of boards think it is shortsighted to define success on the basis of student achievement alone. Success goes beyond preparing students for college and the workforce; there is a much larger purpose to educating our next generation to make a living, a life, and a difference.

So, who has it right? What is, or should be, the purpose of public education in America?

Current Thinking and Divergent Points of View

In the current age of accountability and reform, the trend does seem to have coalesced around the need for a singular focus on college and career readiness—at least from the perspective of the current leaders in education reform along with federal and state government. One of the leaders of this movement has been Achieve Inc., which grew out of the 1996 National Education Summit of a bipartisan group of governors and corporate leaders. According to Achieve’s website, these leaders formed Achieve as “an independent,

bipartisan, nonprofit education reform organization” whose agenda is “strongly committed to ensuring all students graduate from high school ‘college and career ready’ or, in other words, fully prepared academically for any and all opportunities they choose to pursue.”

The federal government made college and career readiness a key principle in its 2011 waiver process from the requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. State governments have similarly adopted this position. Certainly the Fordham Foundation is among the champions of the college and career-readiness focus. In a recent Fordham report, *Does School Board Leadership Matter?*, authors Shober and Hartney, citing the results of the *School Boards Circa 2010* data and board members’ prioritization of the goals of education, stated, “Nothing is wrong with those other priorities—but they ought not displace the primary goal of presidents, governors, employers, myriad education reformers, and a great many parents in twenty-first-century America: boosting children’s learning.”

On the other hand, there are those who argue strongly for a broader purpose. The Center for Education Policy published a document in 2007 that updated a previous 1996 publication titled, *Why We Still Need Public Schools: Public Education for the Common Good*. Their report makes the case that “American public schools have been expected to fulfill certain public missions that go beyond the purely academic purposes of all schools, public and private.” They have characterized these public missions as follows:

1. To provide universal access to free education.
2. To guarantee equal opportunities for all children.
3. To unify a diverse population.
4. To prepare people for citizenship in a democratic society.
5. To prepare people to become economically self-sufficient.
6. To improve social conditions.

Their report emphasizes the need to remember the public purposes for public education—a role that they believe distinguishes public schools from private education. They also cite polling information that indicates that many Americans agree with these multiple missions:

“When asked to choose which reason for public schools seemed most important to them, 25 percent of Americans participating in a 2006 national poll cited as their top reason ‘to give all children a chance to get ahead and level the playing field;’ 22 percent said ‘to keep American strong and competitive in the global economy;’ 19 percent said ‘to help strengthen our democracy so children will have the skills to participate as adults;’ and 16 percent said ‘because today’s children are tomorrow’s workforce.’”

A December 1996 ASCD (American Society for Curriculum Development) InfoBrief titled, “Finding Common Ground in an Era of Fragile Support” (<http://www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/policy-priorities/dec96/num07/toc.aspx>), suggests that these divergent points of view reflect an inherent tension between two core American principles: “the pursuit of happiness” and “the common good.” It goes on to say, “The charge of enabling each student to achieve individual promise, including economic potential, often stands at odds with the broader need to prepare all learners to be good citizens.... Although career preparation is a valid function of education, democracy demands much more. Democratic life requires critical inquiry, collective decision making, civic participation, and a commitment to the common good.”

The Board’s Role

What does this mean for boards of education? It is likely that within every community there are differences of opinion on the question of the purpose of the community’s public schools.

Again referencing the ASCD InfoBrief: “Although controversy is an inherent part of democratic schools, shared ideals transcend individual differences. Democratic schools demand the thoughtful efforts of all stakeholders, including students, teachers, families, and community members.”

Boards of education are uniquely positioned to provide leadership for exploring those differences, working with the community to find its shared ideals, and crafting a shared mission and vision for its schools that reflects their community.

Questions to Guide Board Reflection:

1. What do we (the board) believe to be the purpose of public education in our community? Do we know if our beliefs fully reflect those of our community?
2. If we don't know our community's answer to that question, how might we find out? If there are conflicting viewpoints, how can we move toward meaningful deliberations toward shared ideals?
3. If we have identified a clear and shared purpose for public education, does it create an appropriate balance between "the pursuit of happiness," individual good, and "the common good?"
4. How does the current national focus on college and career readiness fit with our community's purpose for public education?
5. How will clarifying the purpose of public education in our community assist us in aligning resources and making decisions at the board table?

There is no single *right* answer to any of these questions. The answers lie in the work and commitment of individual boards of education to engage their communities around these critical questions.