

**INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATIONAL INQUIRY**

**AGENDA FOR EDUCATION IN A DEMOCRACY SCHOLARS**

**Finding a Common Purpose for Schooling in the United States: Why Do We Educate in a  
Democracy?**

Work in Progress by

Dennis Potthoff, Corrine Mantle-Bromley,

Richard Clark, Audrey Kleinsasser,

Bernard Badiali, and Steven Baugh

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## Abstract

Centuries ago, Aristotle recognized the problems associated with deciding what the youth of a culture should learn. Early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and more than two centuries into the history of the United States, the circumstances are astonishingly similar. The struggle to identify a common purpose for schooling continues. A premise of the Agenda for Education in a Democracy (AED) Scholars is that “the absence of common purpose of education and individual schools among the major players: policymakers, business leaders, academics, schooling personnel, and the communities that make up the moral ecology that holds this nation together” is one key reason why most attempts to renew and reform schools have failed, stalled, or faded. This paper begins with a historical overview of the struggles to achieve a common purpose for schooling. The next section provides a rationale for why seeking a common purpose for schooling is more important than in the past. Finally, a set of engagement tools designed to foster more thoughtful and effective conversations regarding the common purposes for schooling are recommended. This paper provides a foundation for the ongoing work of a team of five AED Scholars whose goal is to provide a tool kit for policymakers, educators, and community members as they engage in conversations about the public, democratic purposes for schools. These tools may be found at <http://purposesforschools.blogspot.com/> .

## **The Common Purpose for Schooling in the United States: Why Do We Educate in a Democracy?**

Success is not a rarity in schools or classrooms; without a doubt, youngsters and the educators most responsible for their schooling routinely accomplish amazing feats. The goals for schooling, however, are lofty; maximizing learning for all youngsters is a monumental and elusive vision. To move closer to the ideal, schools and programs must commit to ongoing, constant renewal—getting better and better. One identified key to this renewal is clarifying the common purpose for schooling. Ravitch (2009) describes the lack of agreement on why we educate as the single biggest problem in American education. A similar conclusion was made by a team of Agenda for Education in a Democracy (AED) Scholars:

**“One need only cite a few of the realities, differing in character and impact, that frustrate processes of continuously renewing our schools to begin to understand why reform has failed and compelling innovation has stalled and then faded. Perhaps the most important of these is the absence of common purpose of education and individual schools among the major players: policymakers, business leaders, academics, schooling personnel, and the communities that make up the moral ecology that holds this nation together. Our failure to reach agreement on the question, “Why do we educate in a Democracy?” also explains why educational research is often found to be lacking. How can we effectively assess any societal institution if we don’t know the sought after outcome?”** (Goodlad, et. al., 2009)

This manuscript examines why we have such difficulty achieving national common purposes for schooling. The paper begins with a historical overview of the struggles to achieve a common purpose(s) for schooling. Section two shares a rationale for why achieving a common purpose is critically important in an increasingly diverse and technological 21<sup>st</sup> century United States society. In section three, tools of engagement designed to foster thoughtful conversations regarding the common purposes for schooling, are recommended.

### **Section One: The Struggle to Define a Common Purpose for Schooling**

At some level it is comforting to know that the current struggle to define a common purpose for schooling is not a new condition. Centuries ago, Aristotle (Aristotle, trans. 1984) noted there was no consensus regarding what should be learned by the young; he mentioned the possible purposes of study being usefulness in life, seeking goodness, or advancing the bounds of knowledge! In the much briefer context of United States history, the story is remarkably similar. Ravitch (2009) declares that the lack of agreement on why we educate is the single biggest problem in American education. The need has been noted for centuries. In a world characterized by astonishing progress in so many domains, why has the question of common purpose for schooling proven so difficult to achieve?

One compelling argument is that Americans have not devoted sufficient time or energy to the task. Almost 35 years ago, Cremin (1975) chided Americans for not talking enough about education; Cremin called for a “great public dialogue about education” that raised “the most important questions that can be raised in a society. What knowledge should ‘we the people’ hold in common? What values? What skills? What sensibilities? When we ask such questions, we are getting at the heart of the kind of society we want to live in and the kind of society we want our children to live in” (p. 11). During the same decade, Goodlad (1979) asserted that impatience was preventing parents, citizens, policy makers and educators from engaging in the important conversations relative to education and schooling that should be taking place. More recently, Fineman (2008) contended that Americans are not arguing enough about

fundamental issues (such as schooling) and suggested that the tradition of arguing encourages freedom, creativity, and strength and is also what makes Americans unique.

Confusion in the meaning for two key terms, “education” and “schooling” is a second explanation for the lack of a shared common purpose. Roland-Martin (2008) argues that the public mind views education and schooling as nearly synonymous but schooling, in truth, is “but one element of a vast educational system” (p. 48) that can be detected in virtually all aspects of our lives including homes, neighborhoods, places for worship, clubs, museums, libraries, and recreation facilities. Other differences between education and schooling are also noted. For example, whereas there tends to be a clear ending to most individual’s formal schooling, education never ends; rather, education is an endless process of growth (Dewey, 1916) or of becoming (Goodlad, 2006). Establishing a clear focus on the more definitive and narrower common purposes for schooling is a needed step.

A third mitigating factor is the issue of who decides the common purpose(s) for schooling. Over the past 50-60 years, an increasing percentage of schooling decisions have been made at the state and/or national levels. This contrasts with the historical dominance of local control that arguably was established by the 10<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the United States *Constitution*. The 1954 Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education court case, which mandated the desegregation of schools, was one very significant example of the increased involvement of the national government in educational policy decisions. The No Child Left Behind act adopted during the George W. Bush administration is, perhaps, the most recent example. In any event, the reduction in local control remains controversial. Goodlad (1994), for example, places greater trust in local control: “The purpose of the local school is to provide all the young with the education not provided elsewhere in the cultural context. The purpose of schooling is to support all the local schools in this endeavor. When the schooling machine takes over the purpose of the local school-as increasingly it has done in recent years-this democracy and its citizens are headed toward deep trouble” (p. 272). Kohn (2004), another outspoken critic of diminished local control, observes that the shift to more distant control of education reduces the likelihood that a common purpose for schooling can be achieved.

A fourth factor that slows progress toward achieving a common purpose for schooling is the changing nature of the larger society. Schools do not operate in a vacuum. As the nature and needs of society change, the expectations for schools also change. In the early years of United States society, an arguably much simpler time, the common purpose for schools may have seemed clear, if narrow: mastering basic reading and arithmetic skills to read the Bible and *cipher*. In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with American society apparently experiencing exponential change demographically, technologically, economically, and socially, reaching agreement on a common purpose for schools becomes more and more difficult.

The confounding factors noted above, while vexing in and of themselves, are not the whole story. The inability to forge a common purpose for schooling while reflective of philosophical differences also reveal conversations in which people struggle to reach agreement regarding two key purpose-related issues. One conversation pits purposes for schooling focused on economic issues (i.e., preparing youngsters for the world of work) in competition with purposes designed to prepare youngsters for citizenship in a democratic society. Support for both views is long-standing.

In 1885, Education Commissioner William Torrey Harris (1885) admonished citizens that children must attend common schools or face being unable to compete with other nations. A few decades later, Bobbitt (cited in Callahan, 1962) argued the business community should set the standards for schools. In 1957, when the USSR beat the United States into space with the launch of Sputnik, the argument that schooling was for economic and military ends was fueled further. In the 1980s the *A Nation*

*at Risk Report* (1983), furthering the argument, declared, “Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world” (p. 1) and the National Governor’s Association (1986) declared “better schools mean better jobs” (p. 8). Postman’s (1995) cleverly conceived discussion of the God of Economic Utility and Cochran-Smith’s (2006) argument that the primary purpose of public education is becoming increasingly workforce-related demonstrate that creating workers continues to be viewed by many as the primary purpose of schooling.

The alternative view identifies the preparation of youngsters for citizenship in a democratic society as the common purpose for schooling. In 1813, Thomas Jefferson (1813/1975) was among the first to emphasize citizenship preparation when he proposed a public system of schooling. Two hundred years later, the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER) describes an agenda for schools and schooling focused primarily on preparing youngsters for life in a social and political democracy (Darling-Hammond, 1997). This perspective recognizes the crucial relationship between democracy and education. Goodlad (2008) describes public schooling as “the essential starting point for addressing the well-being of democracy” (p. 19) while Benjamin Barber (1997) describes public schools as the “forges of our citizenship and the bedrock of our democracy” (p. 22). The mission statement of the NNER provides an incentive for critically reflecting about Westbrook’s (1996) observation that “American public schools have become a vast variegated system that funnels human capital into the hierarchies of the undemocratic world of modern work” (p.135). Admittedly and predictably, establishing a common understanding of the qualities of a good citizen is challenging work. The nature of the definition can profoundly impact the strategies implemented in schools. For example, those who see citizenship as loyal behavior stress group rituals and learning of content that casts their nation in a positive light because they believe such activity will build patriotic behavior. On the other hand, those who see democratic character as civic engagement are more apt to emphasize critical thinking, development of debate and discussion skills, and participation in service learning activities.

In addition to the dichotomy represented by the advocates of schooling for economic reasons versus schooling to prepare for citizenship, a second conversation posits there are two common purposes for schooling that may be complementary at times or conflicting in other instances. One view is that the common purpose should be maximizing development of the individual. Individualism has been a cornerstone for much of United States history. European-based writers from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, including Rousseau (1762/1974), declared that education should encourage the full development of the human being in ways that permit self-expression while avoiding repression and conformity. The Bill of Rights to the U. S. Constitution, written in the first years of United States history, reveals the importance of preserving and protecting individual freedom. Even John Dewey (1916), a staunch advocate of educating for the good of all, favored education for self-realization; Dewey rejected the notion that education is only about responsibility to God, country, home, and job.

The second of the views in this conversation proposes that the common purpose for schooling is to prepare youngsters for contributing to the common good of all (Goodlad, 1996). Dewey (1916) and Apple and Beane (1995) are among the many who stress the importance of democratic ideals which promote the common good. The remarkable diversity of United States society is one reason for promoting the common good of everyone. In the first years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Noah Webster (1781/2009) stressed the role of education in developing a common national identity. Two centuries later, Benjamin Barber (1997) argued that schools “must turn a host of ‘everyones’ into something like a single national One” (p. 26). The risks associated with extreme individualism are a second reason why protecting everyone is a legitimate purpose for schooling. Theobald and Newman (1994) argue that a highly individualized approach to schooling too often results in individual rights becoming superior to what is good. Goodlad offers another intriguing expression of this view, suggesting that “what is truly good in the long run for

each individual citizen comes about when people choose the common weal, the overarching public good, as their first priority in making decisions about schools and other social issues” (Goodlad, 1994, p. 1).

## **Section Two: The Increased Importance of Achieving a Common Purpose for Schooling**

Section one summarized key challenges to agreeing upon a common purpose for schooling in the United States. Section two presents the premise that achieving a common purpose for schooling has never been more important than it is in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Two explanations for this premise are offered. The first explanation hinges on the belief that the complexity of United States society is increasing exponentially. The second explanation hinges on a belief that United States society, at this juncture in history, is unusually contentious.

Few Americans are likely to challenge the notion that U.S. society is becoming more complex. Chrislip (2002) uses the terms “complex and systemic” to describe the public problems of today. Chrislip also notes that increased difficulty ascertaining the precise nature of problems creates a situation where agreement on solutions is difficult and concerted action is rare; distrust and mistrust are unfortunate and prevalent outcomes. Examples of this phenomenon are plentiful. Mantle-Bromley (2009) offers one instance explored by [http://www.nnerpartnerships.org/cases/why\\_schooling\\_for\\_democracy.html](http://www.nnerpartnerships.org/cases/why_schooling_for_democracy.html)) and addressed in a recent morning radio talk show. The show’s topic was mortgages: Who is targeted for subprime (higher risk and interest) mortgages? Why are some population groups up to six times more likely to have higher interest rate mortgages when their incomes are similar to other population groups who receive more favorable interest rates? Who, historically, has been targeted for “contracts” (with many fewer consumer protections) instead of mortgages? The commentators ended up talking about the complex knowledge and skills necessary for home ownership—understanding one’s rights, for example, or analyzing options and the impact of accepting one source of financing over another.

The recession beginning in 2008-2009 provides a prime example of a multi-faceted problem. Several key factors contributed to the problem, each of which was complicated. Flaws with the process of determining who received home mortgages and under what conditions have been well documented contributors to this major recession. Greedy international corporations added to problems. Flawed economic theories and regulations contributed more difficulties. Correcting this system requires a series of changes on the political front (using democratic processes to change policies, regulations, etc.) while simultaneously making individual and group adjustments on a social level.

Schooling provides a rich example of the consequences of increasing societal complexity. In a high accountability climate, where results are a high profile issue, consider the vast amounts of time, energy, and funds being directed toward the implementation of systems used to assess student learning. In a society that is increasingly hostile, remember the vastly expanded processes designed to protect the safety of the youngsters and adults that inhabit school buildings each day. In a society characterized by an explosion of information, consider the schools’ struggles to embrace technology in useful ways and to somehow help youngsters learn more than was expected in past generations.

How does increased societal complexity impact schools? Short term, the impact can be devastating. Adverse economic circumstances exert considerable pressure on schools. How will neighborhood schools get by with less funding? How will schools meet the needs of students living in families that have no income? How will schools cope with the loss of support traditionally provided by the various human services organizations that have lost/will lose much of their funding? In addition to the immediate impact on current students, there is the question of how best to prepare youngsters for successful adult living in such a complex environment. How does society determine what students should

learn in school? Should they learn about mortgages? Most K-12 students will not be very motivated to learn about mortgages and financing or about how a rezoning proposal might change their lives. Long term, however, these are the sorts of complicated issues that they will someday need to understand. As adults, they will be responsible for figuring out the impact of zoning proposals, and many other issues as they strive to create safe environments for their families. In a complex environment, it seems obvious that mastery of basic academic skills is not enough. Preparing youngsters for a successful future, for example, is likely to include helping students learn how to learn independently without reliance on schools and teachers. How might schools help to create lifelong learners?

The increased contentiousness of United States' society also elevates the importance of achieving a common purpose for schooling and increases the difficulty of doing so. Fineman, cited earlier in this paper, believes that Americans are not arguing enough. Perhaps he is correct. Alternatively, it is plausible that the issue is not how much Americans are arguing. Rather, the problem may be the changed rules of engagement. Arguments may be more hostile. Drucker (1994) described the current situation in the United States as "battlefields between groups, each of them fighting for absolute victory and not content with anything but total surrender of the enemy (p. 80). Chrislip (2002) observes that the current antagonistic approach to public engagement cannot produce sustainable change; he fears that the antagonistic approach is "destroying civility and the fragile bonds of community that bind us together" (p. 9). Examples of this trend are abundant. One need only pay attention to daily news broadcasts. Angry shouting matches in town-hall meetings regarding health care legislation, street demonstrations regarding world trade arrangements or the correct approach to dealing with immigrants, shouting and occasional violence dominate what passes for political suasion. Media – particularly cable television – have resorted to sensationalized and politicized reporting that embarrass and frustrate advocates of objective journalism. From the pulpit come arguments for and against political issues that seem only incidentally related to the religious teachings that believers attempt to attach them to. While the textbooks used in schools may continue to describe an idealized (some would say romantic) vision of a nation that resolves its differences through rational debate and deliberations, the frequency of name calling, sloganeering, and emotional tirades, while not new, cause one to ponder what schools might do to teach youngsters the types of skills that are necessary for creating and maintaining a civil society.

Schools have not escaped the contentiousness noted above. In 2002, Martin Kozloff, a faculty member at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, declared:

“There is war in public education. The war is over beliefs about how children learn and what they need to learn; about the most effective ways to teach reading, math, science, and other bodies of knowledge; about accountability and moral responsibility for educational outcomes; about what teachers need to know how to do and who should train and certify them. There are two sides to this war. One is the education establishment. The other is the education anti-establishment.”

Local school leaders are familiar with the sound and fury of disputes regarding such matters as changing school attendance boundaries; proposals to close schools (or, ironically, to shift student attendance patterns as new schools are opened); controversial speakers (whether they be broadcasts by the President or appearances by a peace activist); curriculum proposals regarding sex education, mathematics programs, approaches to teaching reading; or changes in school bus routes. Such arguments not only reveal a contentious society, they reflect deep disagreements regarding why we have schools.

Can schools in the United States of the 21<sup>st</sup> century survive a lack of common purpose? Time will tell. The combination of increasing complexity and increasing contentiousness is problematic.

### Section Three: Creating Common Purpose--Engagement Tools

Metaphorically, in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, the practical and philosophical ground that must be traversed in order to achieve a common purpose for schooling is particularly rocky and steep. Still, there is good cause for feeling hopeful. As former President Bill Clinton (1993), observed in his first inaugural address “there is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America.”

Some Americans know that the first key to more earnestly pursuing a common purpose for schooling is predicated on a willingness to engage with others. Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson (1996) offer the following remarks related to this question:

“When democratic citizens morally disagree about public policy, what should they do? They should deliberate with one another, seeking moral agreement when they can, and maintaining mutual respect when they cannot” (p. 346).

While this is what should be done, Gutman and Thompson also remind us that the deliberative behavior necessary to make progress is rare. The authors continue by observing that:

“Moral argument in politics can be socially divisive, politically extremist, and morally inconclusive, but avoiding it for these reasons would be self-defeating. The divisions, the extremism, and the inconclusiveness would persist, while the prospects of finding better terms of social cooperation would deteriorate” (p. 347).

Many Americans also realize that the quality of the engagement is crucial. Fortunately, engagement tools powerful enough to avoid the aforementioned perils of divisiveness, extremism, and inconclusiveness are being developed.

The individuals and groups of the National Network for Educational Renewal exemplify commitment to developing and utilizing such effective engagement tools. While the NNER is not unique in its pursuit of democratic engagement, it is part of the largest single initiative we know of that works toward this public common purpose for schools. The NNER was formed in 1986 by John Goodlad and his colleagues. Participation in this network requires that public school and university personnel work together to simultaneously improve both schooling and the preparation of new teachers as both groups work toward excellent schools that promote the public purpose of schooling for democracy. While the multiple members of the NNER agree to a common agenda for their work, they take very different routes to moving this agenda forward. Various members and supporters of the NNER advance a four-part mission that we summarize below:

1. Enculturating the young into a social and political democracy. This public purpose of schooling suggests that increasingly complex skills and knowledge are taught, modeled, and expected as students complete their K-12 education. High school graduates need to know their rights and processes for making change; they need to know how to learn about issues, how to critique and analyze them for impact, and how to talk to others about their understandings. They also need to know how to be fair and reasonable neighbors, how to take into account the common good, and how to balance their private interests with the public good.
2. Providing access to knowledge for all children and youths. In order for the first part of the mission to be realized, all children must have access to multiple forms of knowledge, regardless of primary language spoken, race, ethnicity, gender, or ability. Urban children need access to art

and music; rural children need access to high levels of math and science. There is no excuse for limiting the disciplinary knowledge children engage in because of their parents' incomes, their geographic location, or their perceived future goals. Well-informed students will result in well-informed citizens and neighbors.

3. Practicing pedagogical nurturing. Those who teach well know that teaching is not just about knowing one's subject. Children learn when their teachers understand them, care about their success, and hold them to high standards. Good teaching requires content knowledge as well as pedagogy (teaching) that takes individuals and their needs into account. Successful teachers nurture their learners' successes.
4. Ensuring responsible stewardship of schools. Educators of all kinds, including community members and parents, must accept responsibility for the well-being of our schools. It is not enough for any of us to care only about single classrooms, as important as they are. We must also care about—be stewards of—the school and the larger community. This is done to some extent when citizens accept the tax burden of paying for schools, but much more could be done. For example, when volunteers participate as mentors, tutors, and board members they help strengthen our schools and the future contributions the schools' children will make to our society.

The remainder of this section showcases engagement tools utilized in three recent NNER initiatives. All three initiatives created engagement opportunities which were linked in a recognizable fashion with the goal of reaching agreement on a common purpose for schooling.

**Initiative 1: Informing Policymaking.** This initiative affirmed the critical role of policymakers in the schooling process. A small group of 10-12 individuals from schools and universities accepted the challenge of creating tools which would increase the capacity of local settings (universities and P-12 schools) to inform policy makers. An important first step was affirmation that the policy community is a tangled web of interactions and decision-making consisting of governmental and non-governmental entities. Within the formal governmental structure the policy community subdivides into federal, state, and local layers. These layers, then, further subdivide into executive, legislative, and judicial branches. In addition, the policy community includes myriad layers of non-governmental policymaking and policy-influencing bodies including accreditation agencies, professional organizations, and service groups. A second key step was to identify key strengths and limitations of the NNER and the members and organizations that are part of the network. Strengths included a significant role in preparing large numbers of teachers, the clarity of the NNER Agenda, and depth of understanding of the conditions surrounding teaching and teacher preparation. Identified limitations included scarcity of resources, restrictions due to the network's nonprofit status, risk of appearing defensive, inexperience in the policy-making environment, an occasional tendency toward complaining as opposed to acting, and lack of organization in putting forth compelling arguments.

Having set forth these propositions, the group then created a series of problem-based policy case studies as their chosen engagement tool. Case studies have been used successfully in a wide variety of fields for decades. The key to success for the policy-making initiative was the writing of powerful cases which affirmed the complexity of the policy making environment and also engaged participants at a high level. Each case included specific components: (a) a richly described context; (b) a narrative which included a clear statement of the problem; (c) specific learning objectives; (d) required completion of a clearly designed task; and (e) a series of guiding questions. The end result of engaging individuals throughout the NNER in policy case studies was an increased capacity to influence policy-making.

**Initiative #2: Developing Networks of Responsibility (DN).** The focus for the DN initiative was developing and sustaining school-university-community partnerships to improve the schooling of children and youths in academically at-risk situations.

A set of engagement tools was consistently implemented throughout the ten DN sites. The sites included rural, suburban, and urban contexts. An engagement tool which was central to the work of the DN was commitment to increasing the breadth of engagement; the voices of youngsters, parents, and community members not directly affiliated with the school were sought and welcomed. Reports of results were prepared using a story-writing format; the final reports honored the diverse voices that were engaged and also utilized the emotional power of the story as a tool for engagement. A second key engagement tool was providing the members of the leadership teams in each site with an intense training experience designed to hone participants' skill in facilitating democratic processes. Training in study circles methodology was a key democratic engagement tool (<http://www.everyday-democracy.org/en/Page.WhatWeDo.aspx>). A third engagement tool was training in and use of a scenarios-oriented process to assess community needs. A fourth engagement tool/strategy was the adoption of an action orientation; each site was charged with creating, implementing, and evaluating an action plan that addressed an identified local educational need. "Engaging with the Community: Developing Networks of Responsibility to Educate America's Youths" (published November 2006 and available through the Institute for Educational Inquiry in Seattle) features reflections by people engaged in the DN initiative and includes a preface by John Goodlad, a description of the initiative, five stories told by DN participants, an evaluative report by Ann Foster, and comments regarding sustaining collaborative engagement.

**Initiative #3: Agenda for Education in a Democracy (AED) Scholars Program.** The AED Scholars Program, implemented in 2007, created an environment from which 30 educators representing P-12 schools and higher education institutions launched an extensive exploration of the following question: Why do we educate in a democracy? One writing team, assigned the task of unpacking and addressing the lack of common purpose for schooling, utilized two engagement tools first unveiled at the 2009 NNER Annual Conference: (a) schooling-based scenarios; and (b) technology-based interaction options—including blogs, video clips, and websites.

Four scenarios are available as of this writing. Each scenario provides an opportunity for critical reflection about a school-based situation that addresses one or more important democratic issues. Each scenario provides rich opportunities for examining the process of democratic decision-making in a P-12 school context. Each scenario also provides an opportunity for unpacking additional key issues. Readers are challenged to (a) critically reflect about the pros and cons of cooperation versus competition in a democratic society (The Spelling Bee); (b) explore the issues of quality and equity in the context of one school's pondering of the value of heterogeneous versus homogenous grouping of students (The Squeaky Wheel); (c) "participate" in a conversation in which two policy-makers debate whether the primary purpose for schooling is to prepare youngsters for careers/the world of work or prepare youngsters for engaged living in a democratic society (Preparing for Jobs of Life); and (d) contemplate current assessment practices (What are American Schools For?). A guide for writing additional scenarios is also provided.

The use of technology as a tool for engagement is a second strategy. One premise is that the innovative utilization of technology significantly expands access to the common purpose for schooling question. Supporting this premise is the work in 2009 of The Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy (<http://www.kflinks.com/knightcomm>) which addressed the access issue in its call for universal broadband access as a strategy that could help prevent the creating of second-class (technology disadvantaged) citizens in a digital age. A second premise is that technology is a

powerful motivational tool; many individuals unwilling or unlikely to pursue the guiding question via traditional means will choose to engage when the question is presented using new technology formats.

Based on such premises Potthoff, Kleinsasser, Badiali, Baugh, and Mantle-Bromley (2009) created the Democratic Purposes for Schools blog (<http://purposesforschools.blogspot.com/>). As the authors note, “the goal for this blog is providing a tool kit for policymakers, schools, educators, and communities as they engage in conversations about the public, democratic purposes for schools.” The blog links to additional websites and videos which present ideas through the use of visually powerful and well-conceived websites, scenarios, video clips, etc. One link is to the National Network for Educational (NNER) website (<http://www.nnerpartnerships.org/index.html>). The home page for the NNER website includes a newly created “engagement tools” button. The previously described scenarios and scenario-writing template are found behind the engagement tools button. In addition, the engagement tools site also features an essay, “Building the Case for Civic Engagement: Why Schooling for Democracy.”

### **Conclusion**

As noted, key reasons exist regarding why achieving a common purpose for schooling in the United States has proven to be extraordinarily difficult. While the importance of this issue has always been acknowledged, there are also sound reasons for concluding that the significance of the common purpose issue is increasing. Why engage? One reason for choosing to invest in this process is choosing to accept that the stakes are high. Ravitch (2009) is one of many that believe that the lack of agreement on why we educate is a very large problem for American education. A second key reason is accepting that engagement, around the kind of questions that matter such as those posed by Cremin (1975), is useful but is also unusually necessary in a democracy. The link between democracy and education, including schooling, is crucial.

While the road that lies ahead is indeed steep and rocky, it is also a road that can be navigated. This paper has sought to communicate a message of hope. Many in this country know what needs to be done. Hope can be found in the set of tools well-suited for fostering a high level of engagement described here. The greater challenge before us is choosing to use these tools.

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