

PRESENTATION BY DR. MCGILL AT SCARSDALE FORUM MEETING ON NOVEMBER 21, 2013

Since the very beginnings of public education in the nineteenth century, two different spirits have animated Americans' thinking about their schools.

One is the principle of utility. It tells us that education is important insofar as it's practically useful, and that the value of education is to be determined by cost-benefit. At its extreme, this principle says, "I'll pay no more than I have to in order to buy an acceptable product. A highly pragmatic expression of the principle is the view that the goal of education is to get into college or to get a good job, and schools should cost no more than what's required to achieve those objectives.

The second principle is the principle of liberality. It proposes that education is important because it realizes personal potential, empowers or frees people and strengthens democracy. Its value is determined by the individual and social welfare it fosters. It says that human possibilities and the promise of democracy are boundless, and that learning goes on throughout life. It leads to the view that schools should offer students a wide variety of opportunities and deep, rich learning.

Since the economic downturn of 2009, schools across the nation have been caught in the tension between these two principles. In New York, the governor has come down squarely on one side. Because of a difficult economy and the state cap on taxes, growing numbers of children are receiving an education that's mediocre or worse.

In Scarsdale, residents have certainly been aware of the practical uses of education and have always wanted their money to be used with care. At the same time, and unlike many other places, the community has also embraced the principle of liberality. It's seen education as a source of human fulfillment and social improvement, and it's therefore insisted that its schools and teachers strive for dimensions of excellence that extend well beyond what students might need if the sole goal were college admission.

The District first gained national prominence a hundred years ago as a model of Progressive education. In the 1940s and '50s, Principal Lester Nelson transformed the high school into what the head of New York's association of private schools in more recent years called "one of America's great independent schools." Today, we wrestle with the question of what education will be in the new century and of how we will sustain the quality that's been our District's hallmark for generations.

So that's the context for my report on the state of the schools tonight. Our schools have long sought to be cradles for success and of leadership for the common good. They involve our young people with the humanities, social sciences and arts, and engage them in the "languages" of science and math, so they'll become literate, articulate, clear-thinking adults. To that end, we've preserved broad opportunity over the last two decades and even expanded it in areas from Mandarin to music, science research to elementary grade Spanish.

The heart of the Scarsdale experience is still the essential encounter between student and teacher – the necessity of great teachers' knowing and nourishing young minds, to paraphrase former Superintendent

Archibald Shaw. In support of that work, a long line of Boards – and residents – has recognized the value of paying salaries that attract and hold strong teachers, of favorable class sizes and also of providing ample professional development, so faculty will remain vibrant throughout their careers.

Meanwhile, our Boards and many residents have realized that today's graduates are part of a global community. Our schools cannot abandon their traditional emphasis on basic skills and liberal learning, but neither can we responsibly ignore the import of this growing reality.

Leading schools and universities have recognized that global citizens of the 21st century confront complex cross-disciplinary problems that demand inventive, innovative solutions. The rapid expansion of interdisciplinary learning at the undergraduate level is a bellwether for parallel developments in schools. Scarsdale's elementary grade classes and middle school houses have always been natural seedbeds for subject integration. More recent interest in Reggio Emilia teaching methods, special projects like the fifth grade capstone, and emerging cross-disciplinary collaboration at the high school are early shoots of continued institutional growth.

Our graduates will also live, compete and collaborate with counterparts from around the globe, which means they'll navigate in unfamiliar waters. We cannot prepare them for every specific challenge they'll meet. We can involve them with other histories and literatures, and they can become fluent enough in at least one second language, to be sensitive at a deep level to the complexities of human cultures and to how other people think. We can also help them acquire empathy and a desire to make a difference, whether through service projects in Westchester or New Orleans, Ghana or Cambodia. And those involvements will give them growing insight into their own nation and themselves.

Why is any of this any different from before? The American experiment has always been restless, the world ever-changing. Public schools have always had to adapt. And a time when many public schools are being asked to do more with less, why is a progressive spirit important now? I'll offer six reasons.

- Because Scarsdale graduates do compete with others from the strongest independent and public schools in the world. Those schools aren't standing still. Entry to selective colleges becomes more competitive each year, and there's no shortage of applicants with good scores. Admissions offices are looking for candidates who are intellectually and personally distinctive and who promise to distinguish themselves. Efforts like Scarsdale's Advanced Topics plan not only prepare our graduates for the kind of learning they'll do in college. They are the kinds of distinguishing features college admissions officers look for.
- Because the rest of the world now believes that intellectual capital and human capacity are the coin of the realm. Other nations are re-inventing their schools, emphasizing critical thinking, innovation and entrepreneurial enterprise over test results. In this context, the abilities that result from a strong traditional education are necessary but not sufficient. Hence, the importance of efforts like Scarsdale's Global Learning Alliance of schools and universities, whose goal is to understand not only how well the world's high-performers do but how they achieve outstanding results.

- Because, rising demands often drain time and other resources from the schools' primary mission of educating young people. America and New York seem caught in a weird time warp, driven by invasive new education regulations that are supposed to be about the future but that are really preparing our youth for the 1950s. That's why our faculty, Board and Parent Teacher Council have all been critical of shortsighted state policies. Meanwhile, there's never enough time for personal attention to students; families seem even more concerned than ever about getting adequate information and being involved – if that's possible; while residents want still more transparency in school affairs.
- Because, for the first time in a century and a half, nobody can be sure what "school" should look like. The precepts of liberal education endure, but technology is changing the way people learn, and its impact is only going to accelerate. Schools must adapt if they're to take advantage of its promise. Or, some say, they must adapt simply to remain relevant. Initiatives like Scarsdale's Center for Innovation are exploring the potential inherent in the future and developing strategies, like the new "maker space" at Fox Meadow, to shape it.
- Because Scarsdale is in transition. The District once hired teachers for their individual talent and passion, then let them go exercise entrepreneurial independence in the classroom. Today, we're striving to preserve the virtues of individuality and creativity and at the same time to work more collaboratively and systematically, with more synergy. This is a cultural shift; the proper balance between the different approaches is fluid and hard to maintain. Along with all the other challenges, that's why Boards of Education have staffed strong administrative teams, teacher leadership and provided extensive professional development.
- Because whatever the rhetoric about reforming America's "failing schools" or doing more with less, the impulse underlying much of today's educational discourse is the spirit of retrenchment. And ironically, absolutely the easiest course for Scarsdale would be to fall back on what it has been and to slip into sleepy complacency. That is a prescription for decline. A school is a living, breathing organism, and any organism that is not growing is dying.

In fact, one of this district's greatest achievements in recent years is its refusal to be satisfied with the *status quo* or to define success in conventional terms alone. SAT results are in the top one percent of the nation's top one percent. Ninety-nine percent of seniors go to college, ninety-five percent to four-year colleges, and well over sixty percent to the most selective colleges in the country. Graduates report that they are well-prepared; many tell us the first year of college is easier than the senior year of high school.

Nonetheless, our Board of Education, professional staff and many in the community have eagerly accepted the challenge of imagining and forging an even better education for tomorrow. As Gabrielle Bowyer, Scarsdale '07 and The University of Chicago '11, recently reminded us, what matters in school is not how much knowledge students can absorb, but whether they develop qualities that include persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit and self-confidence.

"It has been nearly a decade since I sat in ... ninth-grade English," she said, "but I doubt that I will ever forget (the teacher, who) infuriatingly reminded us that our focus should be not on the grades, but on

the learning.... Years later, I cannot remember a single grade I got in (his) class, but the truth in that annoying adage permeates my adulthood.”

Today, we’re witnessing a struggle for the soul of America’s public schools. Is education a test score or something more profound and transformative? Are we mainly interested in making schools more efficient or in providing an education that’s more effective? Are we buying a commodity or investing in the future: Is the goal to spend just enough to provide a “good enough” education according to conventional standards or to enable our youth to reach out toward their horizons, invigorate our democracy and improve the world?

Scarsdale has always wanted its money spent thoughtfully, but it’s nonetheless held with the more idealistic view. The result is by no means inexpensive. Significant funding goes to support teaching and other direct services for children; although, perhaps surprisingly, money for new programs has been relatively modest over these last years. Still, the investment I’m talking about isn’t primarily a matter of dollars. Future program development need not pose an unreasonable financial burden, and in many cases it will be more about rethinking and re-working what we already do at little or no added cost.

What I’m describing has less to do with economics and more with a way of looking at the world: it’s about a generosity of spirit and a generative view of life. These are difficult economic times, but people survive hard times. What suffocates the soul is selfishness and small-mindedness. Historically, much of the District’s success has been due to this community’s ethic of decency and contribution, one that’s enlivened learning and made it possible to inspire the young. The Scarsdale way has been to build up, support and encourage, to value opportunity and possibility.

Great schools, like great universities and great cities, outlive cycles of fortune and they endure. But in each generation, the challenge is to do more than that. It is to prevail, as William Faulkner said. So what does that mean for Scarsdale? First, every community has an obligation to its own children and to itself. The six issues I’ve described constitute an agenda for a decade. In many ways, the future of Scarsdale and that of its children hinge on how it responds.

More broadly, though, we live at a defining moment for public education in America. Scarsdale may not have asked to be a beacon. Nonetheless, that’s what we’ve been called to be. This community’s choices will define expectations and determine actions elsewhere in our nation and in the world. For those others who seek direction or partnership or reason or hope, we – what we aspire to be and what we do – can make all the difference.

Most who are part of this extraordinary community appreciate how unusual it is and how fortunate they are to be part of it. Privilege entails responsibility, and in the words of the old saying, “To those to whom much is given, from them is much expected.” I trust that as in the past, Scarsdale will live up to its legacy tomorrow.