

CONNECTIONS

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Countering Democracy's Challenges

By David Mathews p. 2

Recasting the Narratives That Shape Our Public Life

By Paula Ellis p. 23

Being a Civically Engaged College

By Adam Weinberg p. 36



Experiments in
**DEMOCRATIC
CITIZENSHIP**

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How I Learned What Not to Do as a School Superintendent

By Charles Irish



Early in my career as a superintendent of schools, I tried to follow in the footsteps of my mentors. They taught me that success in the community would mostly be about selling your solutions to a “yet-to-be-informed” public. More than once I was told:

People don't know what they want or need. You have to patiently educate them. Sometimes you do that by bringing them together and pointing them toward the right answers, helping them to uncover for themselves what is the right thing to do. That's what leadership is all about.

In time, after frustrating experiences and a lot of soul searching, I concluded that my mentors' model of leadership was insincere and unsustainable. I worked hard at try-

ing to forge a better way, but long-established customs, even community expectations, encouraged the kind of relationship my mentors had established. The following story is about the journey that brought about a new way of thinking.

PUBLIC INTRODUCTION

In the middle of my first year as superintendent, the district was ready to implement some significant curriculum changes. A large group of parents, unhappy with the changes, asked for a meeting. When they arrived and settled in, I began to make a presentation about the need for the changes. I had been talking for less than a minute when a man stood and said: “You've got the wrong idea. This is our meeting. Now, sit down.” I was angered and quickly tried to figure out how to react in a

way that said, “I’m in charge here.” Over many years, it had been embedded in me that his kind of boldness on the part of citizens was wrong and needed to be nipped in the bud. I could hear all my mentors say: “Don’t let him get away with that. You’re the boss.”

My mentors had all been seasoned community leaders—college professors, experienced school administrators, church ministers, and even a former state superintendent. The message was always the same: Be the person in charge. Their advice was rooted in the notion of control, always, at all costs. The goal is to get people to do what you want them to do. Some even made it seem to be a holy calling. “It’s what they (the public) want you to do,” I was told.

Here I was, faced with my first moment of truth.

I don’t know whether it was instinctual or simply a rookie lacking confidence, but I betrayed my mentors and said: “You know what? You’re right. The meeting is yours.” We fumbled through the meeting and developed a resolution satisfactory to all. It was one of those blips in history that is quickly forgotten by everyone—except me.

In one simple statement, I had rejected my mentors. Why did I do that? Had I thrown away my career? Was I really rejecting all of my teachings, or had I simply been cowed

by a group that took charge? Better yet, I asked: “What do I do now?” It didn’t take long for that next challenge to present itself.

A CONTROVERSY

Soon after the curriculum resolution, I was informed that a community member had demanded that the district remove a portrait of Jesus that was displayed in an elementary school. The portrait had been placed in 1946 in honor of a beloved superintendent. In short order, we had drawn coast-to-coast attention and had become the battle ground for civil rights and religious groups. Individual letters and newspaper editorials poured in from all corners of the nation, demanding this and threatening that. Even our Board of Education was split.

I thought I would resolve the issue quickly by convening a large group of the local clergy. I had assumed that there really wasn’t a choice about the final outcome. The portrait had to be removed. Our role would be to come together and figure out how to make that happen as painlessly and as respectfully as possible.

I was wrong.

This group was divided. Their body language, facial expressions, and even their choice of which side of the room to sit let me know that this wasn’t going to be easy. Before



the meeting began, some of them let it be known to all that there would be a severe price to pay if the picture was removed. It was obvious that they were not interested in a dialogue. Still, we tried to talk.

During what appeared to be an unfruitful exchange between some of the participants, a Methodist minister, who had remained silent to this point, spoke forcefully, pleading for a civil and thoughtful conversation. I could see that his appeal brought about little change in the positions staked out, but I did notice he engendered respect from several of the participants. He was a person I wanted to watch.

The clock was ticking on the timeline established by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) before it would bring suit against the

school district. Therefore, at our next public meeting, I found it necessary to make a statement about the school district's next steps. The audience was large and diverse. Several major TV and newspaper reporters were in attendance. Many local citizens were there to express their desire to resolve the issue without being drawn into a highly publicized suit in which the schools would end up as the unwitting pawn between forces that had no interest in our community. On the other hand, there were some individuals clearly seeking a fight.

The time came for me to make my statement. It was short. I simply said: "We're not going to do anything until we've had time to talk about this as a community. It's our community and it's our decision. We'll let you know what we decide when we decide." That didn't make many people happy, especially those who wanted the picture removed immediately. My comments probably sounded bold at the time, but they were nothing more than an attempt to get off the stage and to buy time. I wasn't nearly as concerned about the initial response to my comments as I was trying to figure out how we were going to have a productive community conversation in the midst of so much anger.

THE NATURE OF PUBLIC FORUMS

To begin that conversation, I set out to create forums in all the usual

“ This group was divided. Their body language, facial expressions, and even their choice of which side of the room to sit let me know that this wasn't going to be easy.

places: school buildings, churches, civic halls, even in some individuals' homes. We defined our role simply as listeners. But those meetings turned out to be anything but dialogue. People were divided into two very polarized camps around the choices I had framed for them: fight the ACLU or remove the picture. The participants were not shy about expressing their perspective of the stance taken by "the other side." After a couple of weeks, I had heard nothing but vitriol.

Meanwhile, I noticed a remarkable difference in some get-togethers that were arranged by the Methodist minister who I had earlier heard calling for people to be civil with one another. While the meetings brought together individuals with differing perspectives, I found them to be different from the meetings I had led. While attendees passionately expressed their convictions, the conversations were far more respectful than the meetings organized by the schools. I didn't perceive that anyone had a change of heart, but I sensed that they did listen to one another.

It soon became apparent to us that the most polarized and unproductive meetings were those convened and led by people from the school district. Organized groups attended those forums and freely expressed anger, and those of us representing the schools were the recipients of that anger.

At that point, I was coming to believe that lining up groups to make presentations to the Board of Education was worse than a hollow exercise. It isn't genuine conversation and most people exploit it for what it is—theater.

LISTENING FOR PUBLIC VOICES

Still, we had to resolve the matter. One morning I walked into a local coffee shop where a group of regulars were talking about the issue. Barely acknowledged by them, I sat down and listened. It was a totally different conversation from the ones I had been experiencing. People were disagreeing with one another, but their demeanor was respectful. Even though they came from differing perspectives about the needed resolution, they were all troubled with the situation.

Then, just as I was about to leave, a woman named Julie spoke: "I know it's not right for the picture to be hanging in a public school, and it has to be removed. But with all the garbage allowed on TV and the uncontrollable violence all around us, I feel like we're losing as a society. It just makes me sad." Then there was silence with everyone slowly nodding their heads in agreement. Just like that, in less than 10 seconds, she had put a name on the issue that clearly resonated with everyone there.



I talked with her later and asked her what she meant by her statement. She said she had been talking with others over the previous few weeks and, just like them, she was working through her thoughts and reactions. She spoke about what had stuck in her mind from the many informally networked conversations that had been taking place throughout the community.

She said she initially came to the issue believing that the picture should remain in its present location. However, in the interim she had several conversations with friends and fellow church members. Their conversations took many turns, but in time she concluded that the picture had to be removed. Still, it left her with a deep sadness: “I just feel like we’re losing.”

The next evening, I used her words to express what I had learned from the community as I announced that the portrait would be moved to the Methodist church across the street where the honored superintendent had been a member. In the elementary school, a placard describing the events would replace the portrait. Few minds had changed from their original opinion, but the eventual “community-led ceremony” around the transfer of the portrait seemed to end the storm, and the community returned to business as usual.

REFLECTIONS

Averting that crisis left those of us in the schools feeling satisfied with the way we handled things. We had taken on an issue that had the potential to turn the community upside down, and we believed that we had put the problem to rest with little lasting damage having been done. Among the school leadership the general response was to wipe one’s brow and proclaim, “Whew, we sure missed a bullet this time.”

Inside my mind, however, a persistent voice remained: “There remains a group of folks who feel that they lost, and we have completely overlooked them and that point.” In the midst of our desire to keep the relationship between the schools and community on an amicable footing, we had focused exclusively on getting the matter behind all of us. With the picture in its new home and newspaper editorials patting everyone on the back, we moved on. The conflict was over, so there was no longer a need to talk. Most everyone believed that an absence of conflict equated to a good relationship.

There are so many tangents we could have taken, but didn’t. We should have recognized that there were many citizens who felt disenfranchised from society. It wasn’t just about a picture of Jesus. It was a feeling that was expressed so well by the woman who caught my attention:

“I just feel like we’re losing.” The power of the statement had struck me immediately. Even so, its full meaning would take more than a decade to sink in. While a community cannot control social change, we could have talked about it in schools, churches, and other gathering places. Our experience with the picture could have been the impetus for that, but no one took advantage of the opportunity. Gradually but surely, that window closed. We had missed a giant opportunity to learn as a community. That’s the saddest part of the story.

Several years later, I can look back on that experience with more clarity. I can see now that the schools had not exerted as much control over the community conversations as we believed at the time. We thought that we were in charge of the conversations and that they were happening because we asked the community to talk about the matter.

In a sense, we had approached the subject as if it wouldn’t be discussed at all if we didn’t organize the dialogue. Yet our attempts to bring folks into our spaces were generally met with unfortunate responses. The meetings we organized on our turf seemed to draw in those who occupied the extreme positions. While our gatherings usually ended in a heated exchange, there were other places in town where people were



Our most profound act was actually to not act, and to simply say that “we need to talk.”

having constructive, civil conversations. The real dialogue had taken place far more on the community’s terms than ours. It wasn’t until I had encountered the woman who expressed her feelings about “losing” that I began to see that learning was taking place without the school’s direction.

We in the schools may have acted as a catalyst, but the people in the community would decide how they wanted to respond. Our most profound act was actually to not act, and to simply say that “we need to talk.” It would be wrong to say that we weren’t learning; we just didn’t know what it was. What I knew for sure was that I was left with a nagging feeling that dealing with a problem and winning a majority are not the same thing. That sense of unease would frame our approach to challenges in the future. ■

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