

March, 2008

## **The Promise of Living**

*Schools are not about trivial, pragmatic outcomes: they are about profound and noble goals*

By George A. Goens

Schools are about the promise of living. They are not about organizational structures, power, or management. They are about living, fully and completely, with the heart as well as the head, physically as well as intellectually, and intuitively as well as well as logically. Schools are about the relationships that form the nucleus around which learning and growth occurs. Children do not become educated without the energy created from a deep relationship with teachers, peers and others.

Yet the literature about schools gives you a different message. We have turned our schools into factories and complex organizations. We talk of power, data, authority and participation, from top-down to bottom-up to both-ends-toward-the-middle. We agonize over the distribution of power and control. We are stuck in standards and regulations and trapped in redesigning structures and policy. Schools have become enamored with systems, focused on measurement, accountability, and management, and have become bloated with jargon. They have become cold, impersonal and competitive places concerned with metrics and test scores at a time when children need warm, caring and nurturing environments. We are reengineering, restructuring or reprogramming schools as if children are not a part of them. In the process, we have forgotten the nature of childhood and the process of growing up complete with its joys and travails.

Instead, we should be giving thanks for our children. They all come to school with hope and love. They are full of anticipation and joy about learning and growing into adults. The curiosity and magic of a kindergarten classroom is testament to the natural excitement and energy children bring to school and learning. It's natural, it's innocent and it's genuine. Fostering and building on those qualities make schools special places that celebrate the unique destiny each child brings to this world.

Schools should be places where people have their heads in the clouds, not buried in the systems or policy manuals. Ideals drive schools, not procedures or regulations. Ideals are challenging to implement and reach because they float high in the sky beyond our fingertips, but always offering the allure of greatness. Our whole nation is predicated on ideals. The pragmatists, on the other hand, wring the idealism and the serendipity out of schools. They want everything spelled out, all contingencies covered, coupled with standardized, quantifiable results.

Schools are not about trivial, pragmatic outcomes: they are about profound and noble goals. They are serious places of learning with excitement and creativity, as well as the successes and failures that come with striving. Great teachers fuse poetry with purpose and imagination with reality. To get inventive schools, we need to change how we perceive them.

### **School as sanctuary**

The best metaphor for school is the concept of a sanctuary. The term sanctuary has a spiritual derivation. In ancient times, sanctuaries were the most sacred part of temples that offered inviolable asylum, shelter and refuge. Children need schools that offer them the sanctity to be themselves, to learn and grow, and to take risks so they can garner the experience of life without

paying devastating prices. In these “sanctuaries” human genius in all its forms is honored, and the efforts of children who persevere with intensity, drive, and integrity of purpose are honored. Children learn about the great philosophical ideas.

As sanctuaries, schools are not impersonal tomb-like places. They have a deep sense of soul, a passionate spirit, strong emotional bonds, and intellectual challenge. These educational sanctuaries are:

**Wonder-ful** -- The inexplicable wonder of learning is in the air because the imagination and creativity of children are not lost. Curiosity is more than a spelling word. Children are spontaneous, explore and ask questions that spur more thought and reflection. Children and adults delight in creative perception and the unique synthesis of ideas. The expressiveness of childhood is not lost as children share their views of the world and learn new things. Innocence, with its reluctance to accept the conventional, is the catalyst that produces the magic of curiosity and learning in its purist form.

**Reverent** -- Wisdom is revered. Children master information and knowledge and see how both the head and heart are important in life. Regardless of their ability or station in life, children learn their responsibilities and obligations through guidance and affectionate prodding of teachers or mentors. Education is valued because it liberates the mind and the spirit and helps students break self-imposed limitations and boundaries. It cultivates the boundless potential of their lives.

Children's learning is important work and is cherished for it comes from the minds of children and is evidence of their developing minds and destiny. Too frequently we value children's work less than that of adults. In some schools, children's work is interrupted, ignored or trivialized, when in fact, it is as important to children as what their parents produce on their jobs. Work is revered because it is the expression of the human spirit.

**Passionate** -- Schools are not places of ambivalence and neutrality. They abound with passion. Educating children invokes strong, deep feelings of excitement and efficacy where passion is transformed into commitment. This passion drives teachers and others to create places of joy and learning for children in an optimistic and positive environment. Passion is the ground in which commitment and energy is anchored, and when coupled with perseverance it gives birth to the music of our imagination.

**Connected** -- Children belong and are connected to the people within the school as well as those in the outside world. Connections are important. These schools are clear on their values and ideals, and they build strong bonds with children and their families.

Children are not "customers" who have a fleeting interaction and based on mercenary motives like profit or ego. They are more like family members who need long-term attention and care through unbreakable emotional bonds. These bonds allow children to feel safe to explore the outside world and see where and how they fit into it.

In addition, children see the connection of knowledge and concepts between the disciplines, and understand the integrated nature of knowledge and thought. Children connect thinking and feeling and become fully aware of all of their faculties and senses. They understand that the heart and the intellect are equally important, and they begin to see themselves as competent, complete people. Integrity academically and personally is honored.

**Focused on Purpose** -- In these schools everyone is a learner -- children and adults. They share the excitement of learning something new and of struggling with mastering new things. The curriculum reflects strong academic understandings in all the disciplines -- being well-educated, not well-schooled, is the focus.

Children understand the difficult problems with which human beings wrestle and realize that in order to create solutions to them it takes a heart with its entire range of emotions and feelings in addition to brainpower. Too frequently children get the idea that heads are more important than hearts because schools are so driven by cognitive goals. Schools as sanctuaries cherish the intellect *and* celebrate matters of the heart and spirit. They nurture character and wisdom, as well as knowledge, concepts, and skills.

**Idealistic** -- Strong ideals exemplify schools that are sanctuaries. Through lofty and noble ideals, children grow simply by striving to reach them. Excellence arises from stretching to reach the unattainable and to question what is. There is no settling for pedestrian goals of basic literacy or application skills. Sanctuaries pursue virtue, justice, beauty, equality, goodness, liberty, and truth. These schools discuss these issues so children can gain the wisdom and skills to act on them.

**Safe** -- Children have a right to be safe physically, emotionally and intellectually. Safety of the mind and spirit, as well as body, needs to be a part of every school. Safety is more than security from physical violence. Children need protection from verbal assaults, emotional muggings, and intellectual elitism. They need the warmth of compassion to express feelings and emotions, the security to express ideas no matter how divergent or imaginative, and the assurance that they are physically safe. Adults are careful with children, respecting them as people, and providing care and support. There are no haves and have-nots, chosen ones and outcasts in these schools. There is no mold all children must fit. All children are safe to be who they are; as products of their heritage, parents, potential and experience.

Our children need to consider the great philosophical questions of justice, liberty, equity, beauty, virtue, truth and goodness. Aren't they the issues around which we build our lives? Aren't our personal relationships and interests wrapped in these issues? Don't the academics, fine arts, relationships, economics and politics revolve around them?

Sanctuaries nurture imagination. Children's imagination is the window to their genius and humanness. Seeing opportunities in dark times is a factor of imagination. Having the ability to confront and deal with problems resourcefully is a part of imagination. Cooperating or competing requires inspiration and creativity. Imagination creates vision that is fresh, and inspired vision and moves beyond the expected and conventional into a whole new way of perceiving and understanding.

Imaginative schools require the courage to push against the grain, stand up for principles, question conventional wisdom, and challenge "the way we always do things". There are many smart people with comprehensive knowledge and skill who do nothing in the face of adversity. They may be afraid of consequences or lack confidence and zeal.

To fulfill children's promise of living, schools must have a spirit of loyalty and courage. We must be loyal to the wonderment of childhood in all its stages. We must examine it and nourish it and value it as deeply as we cherish adulthood. We must look through the eyes of a child and focus the lens of reform so that change will improve the quality of life for all children. Children need caring, not curing.

To do so takes courage because open discussion of schools as sanctuaries and matters of the heart brings scoffing and charges of naiveté from those whose perception is stuck in the quicksand of engineering and standardization. To be an idealist takes courage, and to champion the cause of educating children in matters of the intellect and the heart takes true heroism. Only then can we help children reach the promise of their lives.

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