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Q&A: Deborah Meier

Educator and author
ASBJ Editors

For our September 2007 "What is Ready?" cover package, the editors of ASBJ interviewed educators, scholars, and researchers about the topic of student readiness for the 21st century.

Deborah Meier is considered the founder of the modern small schools movement. A lifelong educator, she is a MacArthur Fellowship winner and author of numerous articles and books, including *The Power of Their Ideas*, based on her experience as the founding principal of Central Park East School in New York City. When Meier received our query, she said she had to "apologize ahead of time for trying to twist these questions into a discussion of the broader question of readiness for adulthood."

Editor: What is "ready"? What specific skills should students have when they leave high school to enter higher education or the workforce?

Meier: I think the second half asks the wrong question. It presumes that (1) we have agreed about the purposes of 13 years of publicly-funded schooling and (2) that there could conceivably be specific skills for all the work of being an adult in our society, or even just an employee. With my parent hat on I hope schools encourage a love of work, and the skill to do the work one loves well. Can we turn that into a list? If one adds that any 18 year old needs to demonstrate his/her skill at exercising adult judgment—the kind we expect of a voter or a jury member or just a responsible adult, we might come close to something worthy of so many years of effort. Something we hope for whether one is a barber or a doctor. But I wouldn't dare turn it into a list of specifics.

Editor: How well are schools preparing today's students for tomorrow's workplace challenges?

Meier: Might one such challenge be the willingness to work for Third World wages! Or figuring out how to responsibly tackle a world economy that doesn't undermine the hard won victories of American working people? Or creating a fairer wage structure? In short, the challenges may be basic intellectual habits of mind that enable us to rethink the world and our place in it.

Editor: Is 13 years of public school, using the current 180-day, 6½ hour instructional formula, a realistic time limit to ensure readiness? If not, what can schools do differently?

Meier: Preparation for the tasks of the next three-fourths of our lives is based on first one-fourth. All 24 hours of all 365 days of our youth, not just the school day. It follows that we need to consider the conditions of life that support our long-term goals for all our children—what's available for them the other 18 hours of the day, weekends, summer, not to mention their health, neighborhood, family income. It cannot all be viewed as the responsibility of "the school".

Editor: What can and should be done to ensure that programs teaching "readiness" skills are replicable across districts, states, and the nation?

Meier: Let's start with restoring our schools to our publics, and above all our parents. Let's allow them a voice in deciding what they want their children to be "ready" for even if they don't all want to replicate the same thing. Let's provide the young with a voice too, so that they can be investors in their own future. The purpose of human life is not just "making a living," but also living. The traditional "academic" education was invented by the leisure classes to prepare them to rule the world and enjoy their leisure. Maybe it's time we invented a K-12 education to prepare all young people to rule, which includes re-imagining the world so we all have some leisure.