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COLLABORATION FOR THE COMMON GOOD: AN OVERTURE TO COOPERATION IN K-12 EDUCATION

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In many communities, competition between public and private schools is the norm. Educators typically compete for students, government services, tax dollars, qualified teachers, athletes, corporate support, community visibility, good press—all of which are arguably limited resources. This essay calls for more cooperation between K-12 public and private education and offers some practical ideas about how such a goal can be accomplished. More than an educational “can’t we all get along?” this article points out some difficult political work that all educators can support.

In his screenplay for *Amadeus*, author Peter Shaffer calls Mozart the “voice of God.” Extending that metaphor, Mozart’s Symphony no. 41, the *Jupiter* symphony, surely intones some of God’s most celestial sounds. Given its privileged place among musical compositions, the *Jupiter* might only reluctantly be used for a purpose the composer never intended—as a starting point in a case for increased collaboration within the American K-12 educational community. But one of the marks of great works of art is their susceptibility to multiple interpretations.

Specifically it is the soul-stirring coda, the concluding portion, of the symphony’s fourth movement that will be used for this unconventional point of departure. The coda, like the movement it concludes, is structured on five simple yet grand musical themes. Each theme is compelling in its own right and carries its own integrity and beauty. At times one theme dominates the movement, but then yields to another. A theme may start gently and slowly, but then build to a resounding and majestic statement, and occasionally a theme is restated in a different key, by a different instrument, at a different tempo.

But while each of the five musical themes can stand alone, only in combination do they realize their potential. Mozart's genius is his ability to take five strong, solid, independent subjects and interweave them into a majestic, harmonious polyphony. He does that in the coda, where he reintroduces each theme one by one and then spins them into a richly textured tapestry.

So what does all this have to do with collaboration within the K-12 educational community? As the *Jupiter* is marked by a rich variety of musical themes, America is blessed by a rich diversity of schools. Some, like Catholic schools, are rooted in a particular religious tradition; some provide intensive academic experiences; some are specialized for particular populations. Each type of school has its own integrity and purpose; each is distinguishable. But if they were ever to work in full collaboration on behalf of the common goal they share—the education of our country's children—their whole would be far more stirring than the sum of their parts. Indeed, by joining forces they could make significant strides toward the realization of that harmonious polyphony we call the good society.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Comprehensive collaboration, like any other undertaking, requires a starting point, and the obvious one for the private school community is to expand collaboration within itself. In many ways the times are well suited for such collaboration. Public interest in and receptivity to private schools appear high. It is hard to turn on the news or pick up a paper without seeing a story about the success and growth of private schools whose remarkable record of providing a solid education to youngsters from a variety of backgrounds is now routinely recognized. It seems the media and the public have come to discover what those of us in private education have known all along: that the disciplined environment, core curriculum, caring communities, and high expectations private schools provide make them some of the most effective schools in the country. Given the enormous level of public focus on private schools, any message that the private school community might speak with one voice would likely receive considerable national attention. The potential of a high-profile position for garnering public support would be enormous.

There are multiple common objectives worthy of cooperative efforts, including promoting the rights of parents to educate their children in the school of their choice and advocating for the equitable opportunity of private school students to participate in appropriate state and federal education programs. But a particularly pressing objective around which all segments of the private school community could cooperate is the need to proclaim the vital role of private schools in American education and their significant contributions to educating the public and advancing the common good.

GOOD FOR AMERICA

One of the unfortunate consequences of the increase in public interest in private schools and the related gain in support for various school choice initiatives is that opponents of such developments have gone on the offensive. We hear, sometimes from surprisingly high places, the suggestion that private schools are somehow not good for America, that they are not supportive of democratic principles, or that they do not do as fine a job in fostering good citizens as public schools. As the argument goes, public schools are the common schools, unique in their ability to educate everyone alike, to nurture tolerance for others, to promote good citizenship, and to instill democratic ideals. In sum, public schools are the true-blue American schools. And private schools? The implications are plain.

The private school community must be vigorous in addressing the charge that private schools are not fully American. The reality is that as America's first schools, private schools established our country's foundation for education. Today, private schools help fulfill the American ideal of educational pluralism. In a country where there are lots of answers to the question "What is the good life?" there is no one right school system. Besides, research shows private schools are "doing a better job than public schools of integrating students of different races, teaching them tolerance, and imparting a sense of public spiritedness." In short, they are "at least as capable as public schools of producing good citizens" (Greene, 1998, p. 84).

Just like public schools, private schools strive to instill in students a love of democracy and to prepare them for productive citizenship. The fact is that students who attend private schools are no less tolerant of diversity, no less supportive of democratic principles, no less embracing of American ideals than students who attend government schools. To suggest otherwise is to offend millions of loyal Americans who have relied on private schools for all or part of their own education. The charge that private schools are somehow not good for America is preposterous, and the private school community must say so with one voice.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Another issue around which the private school community can and should speak as one is accountability. In this era of performance standards, national tests, and school report cards, a charge we often hear is that private schools are not accountable. Not accountable to whom? All private schools are schools of choice—chosen by parents, the child's primary educators, and presumably chosen because they provide an education consistent with the parents' expectations of what a school should be. There are free-market forces at play in our schools that ensure a level of quality control which is immedi-

ate, effective, and decisive. If our schools don't deliver what parents want, they take their business someplace else and the school closes. That is accountability far beyond what we see in publicly funded education.

DEBUNKING THE SIPHONING MYTH

Another common-ground issue ripe for cooperative efforts within the private school community is the need to debunk the myth that every nickel of government assistance to children in private schools is a nickel less for children in public schools. That charge has become a core assertion among opponents of school choice, but it is empty of content. It rests on the presumption that all potential help for private school students must necessarily be drawn from a revenue pool expressly earmarked for public schools—a position that only serves to drive a wedge between two segments of American education and to foster rivalry and division where there should be solidarity. The private school community should seize the opportunity to promote a more inclusive stance: America is sufficiently good, generous, and socially just to support the education of all its children, not just those in one type of school. While public education is a bedrock institution in America deserving of substantial tax support, the country can also reach out to help educate the children of citizens in other schools as well. Moreover, this can be done in a way that does not siphon aid from one segment of education to another.

PARENTAL CHOICE

The issue of parental choice in education and the provision of tax incentives to help parents exercise that choice afford plenty of fertile ground for cooperation within the private school community. Unfortunately, too many policymakers in our country maintain divergent perspectives on helping parents meet the costs of educating their children. They regard tax assistance to parents of students attending grades 13 through 16 in public, private, or religious schools as much-needed support for families struggling to meet tuition payments. But they see similar assistance to parents of students in grades K-12 as pretty much the first step toward the demise of democracy. Apparently they believe some radical transformation takes place between high school and college that makes aid to the parents of a 12th grader taboo and aid to the same parents a year later laudable. The private school community collectively needs to champion a unified theory of K-16 parent aid.

One place to start is with education savings accounts, an issue that enjoys broad support throughout all segments of private education. In the 105th Session, Congress passed legislation (H.R. 2646) allowing parents to establish tax-free savings accounts for their children's college education and then followed up by passing similar legislation to help parents save for the costs

of elementary and secondary education. Withdrawals from these savings accounts, including the interest they would earn each year, would not be taxed if used for qualified educational expenses. Unfortunately, though President Clinton signed the college savings accounts into law, he vetoed the K-12 measure, claiming it would siphon federal funds from public schools. Keep in mind that both the college-level accounts and the K-12 accounts were designed to increase the monies available to parents and decrease the funds available to the U.S. Treasury by eliminating the tax on earned interest; yet the former was hailed as part of a much-needed package of tax relief to help middle-class families send their children to college while the latter was stigmatized as a drain on public school resources.

Last year a broad cross section of the private school community issued a statement in support of K-12 education savings accounts (Council for American Private Education, 1998). Those groups recognized the accounts as a modest measure of relief for parents who bear a special burden in educating their own children at considerable benefit to society. Their collaboration was a fine example of the kind of united effort that is needed to promote justice for parents of children in private schools.

SOUND AS ONE

Given the diversity of the private school community in the United States, the notion of providing a unified voice to American private education is somewhat oxymoronic. Despite private school plurality, the community has common needs, core values, and unifying issues, such as those described above. And while each segment can stand alone, there is real value in working together on issues around which there is agreement. Like the diverse themes in the *Jupiter* symphony, were these strong independent groups to sound as one, they would convey an authority and power that none could muster alone.

Just think of the sheer size of private education in America. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 1998), private schools now educate nearly six million children—11% of the nation's students. They have an expansive institutional structure with 27,000 schools, 25% of the nation's schools. And the NCES (1998) says the numbers are on the rise. By the year 2006, NCES expects a 5% increase in overall private school enrollment in America. How ironic that a community of this magnitude, with its vast numbers of students and institutions, doesn't seem to have influence commensurate with its size. Organizations that represent far fewer constituents wield much more political clout.

A key reason for its relative lack of influence is that the private school community generally does not speak, organize, or act collaboratively—even when its various components are saying the same thing. Consequently, it lacks the power of organizations which represent far fewer people but which

have been uniquely successful in mobilizing their members behind a well-focused agenda. How do private school leaders secure justice and equity for students? The answer is simple: They walk as one. They combine forces into a melodious, powerful, energizing force, much like the coda in the fourth movement of the *Jupiter*.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE UNITED

As private schools work as one within the private school sphere, they also need to build bridges with colleagues in public education. Imagine the entire education community in the United States—public and private alike—sounding as one moving masterpiece of music in support of the resources necessary to educate all of America's children.

Examples of such bridge building already exist. The Education and Libraries Network Coalition (EdLiNC) has brought together public and private education associations in support of E-rate discounts for telecommunications services in all schools. The Center on Education Policy has been trying to foster public/private cooperation on issues relating to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. So the possibility of collaboration is by no means pie in the sky.

Those in public and private education share a noble goal and they hold a common trust: the education of America's youth. In pursuit of that goal, each community has strengths, insights, and wisdom to share with one another, and much to learn from one another. In working together toward their common goal, no segment of American education would have to give up identity or integrity. Just as in the themes in the coda of Mozart's *Jupiter*, each melody would be heard and would remain distinguishable. But if the collection of melodies could be combined for a powerful, harmonious blend in support of key issues in education, think of what a formidable, soul-stirring force for good that would be. How magnificent and breathtaking would be the result of the combined efforts on behalf of American education.

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