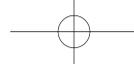


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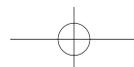
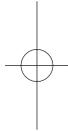
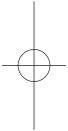
If parents “do not understand,” is it not, in part at least, because educators have been woefully negligent about seriously “educating” parents about classrooms, schools, roles, pressures, constraints?

—Seymour B. Sarason

As a parent, in addition to giving my unconditional love and support to my children, three major responsibilities are mine to bear. Those obligations are to keep my children healthy, keep them safe, and provide them with the best education possible. As a parent seeking quality in education, I have failed.

Making sure our children were rested, well fed, and respectful of others was not enough. Reading to them almost every night starting when they were very young, being involved in the classroom, participating in our parent teacher organization, keeping myself informed as much as possible about educational issues, and even going to school board meetings was not enough. I did everything I could to try to ensure the best opportunity for a good education for our children. I trusted the education professionals to do the rest. I trusted the schools.

My trust turned out to be misplaced. That trust is forever gone and in its place has grown a healthy skepticism. It is three years after the publication of this book’s first edition. So much has “changed” but so little real progress has been made. Yet I remain optimistic that true, lasting improvement can occur in the public education system of the United States, and it must. When the National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* in 1983, it was supposed to be a defining moment when the lights would go on in the minds of all Americans and the importance of the need to improve education in every classroom in the United States would be illuminated.





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I now understand that the public remains ignorant of the findings and recommendations of that national commission. Yet, *A Nation at Risk* continues to be seen as marking the beginning of our modern day “education reform wars.” And we don’t understand what it was all about. We have always had “turf” wars and politically motivated power struggles, but this is different.

This war appears to have started over the question, is there a crisis in education? This war rages on while one fact remains certain; during the last three decades of attempted education “reform,” children have fallen through the cracks while adults fight about who is right. For the approximately 30 percent of children that this nation fails to provide with the best education possible, it is a crisis. End this war!

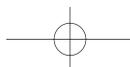
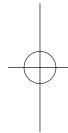
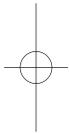
We fight against a corporate reform model, against a business reform model, against outcome-based education, against standards, against standardized tests, against privatization, against public schools and their teachers. We argue about how our downfall began and who is to blame for our faltering schools. The fight becomes more about the side we are on, or the label we carry, and less about what we should be doing for children. Have we forgotten what we once *fought for*?

Did political and business leaders take over education policy and now dictate classroom practices because they found “the establishment” educators inept and unwilling to listen? Or did they take over as part of a plot to undermine our republic through standardization and privatization of our schools? I don’t know—and frankly—I don’t give a damn. I just want to see us stop the in-fighting long enough to do what is right for our kids, our communities, and our country.

If the public only knew what all was going on behind the scenes, they would be up in arms. And that would be a good thing, at least temporarily.

The truth is, too few people grasp the current situation and understand the deadweight of a poor education system; it can take us under. People aren’t realizing education’s influence on their top concerns: the economy, health care, and the environment. Others say, “If it’s not broken, don’t fix it.” But at what point do we admit the education system is broken? Is it when workers can’t fill out an application or make correct change or when the quality and essential quantity of our teachers and higher education personnel declines to an irreversible level?

Historically, there would have been no need for true equal educational opportunity in the United States if we were going to maintain a slave class. If our educational goal in the United States now is to maintain a subservient lower class, then don’t change our system. If you feel satisfied with the idea that educational opportunity is for the “haves” and mediocrity in education is fine for the “have-nots,” then let us do nothing but stage reforms that benefit a few and give some well-meaning people a warm fuzzy feeling while too



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many of our children, and our country, gets left behind in this now-global economy that we have created. Every day we are losing American talent that we don't even know exists; it is talent that is unrecognizable in the disinterested students being viewed as hopeless.

Why should you listen to me? Here is one really good reason; I put my own children through the very "type" of school that all the "experts" and "do-gooders" say they want to "reform." There is a difference between "do-gooders" looking for areas where they can "do" what *they* think is best versus "doers" that pitch in and do what is needed for children in need. In my schools, the poverty rate classifies them as "Title I," and their indicators of educational quality have been alarmingly dismal. I learned the hard way the lessons I now want to share.

I was fortunate to have been raised in a family led by a World War II veteran who got ahead in life by using his GI Bill combined with income from our local iron factory, which no longer exists. My dad taught mathematics for thirty years and built his own little empire of small businesses in our town. He lives the American Dream. Education provided him that opportunity.

I am a common, middle-class American who worked hard to invest in my own education. The belief was that education would serve as a safety net for remaining in the middle class; it would keep me out of poverty. It was an investment that has served me well, to date.

My own path in education led to the much respected profession of veterinary medicine. Having practiced for over twenty-five years and having been actively involved in education reform for twenty years, I found my profession and the teaching profession remarkable similar. I hope the reader does not take offense at the comparison of teaching children to training and working with animals, for none is intended.

Within the traditional public school system, I am just a parent. I have no credentials in the field of education. But please consider that much of my time in veterinary medicine was spent on farms or in exam rooms using my knowledge and skills to draw conclusions and communicate to everyday people my findings concerning the problem identified, potential solutions, and future prevention of problems. Those processes in veterinary medicine I understand well. Those are the same processes that should be applied to the problems of our education system. Gaining insight into these issues through the education system's "school of hard knocks" gives a person a unique perspective of the solutions.

Please don't close your ears and minds to me because I lack educational credentials. Find the patience and respect to listen and consider my views because I am one parent who has behaved like the scientist within me. I have observed children learning, teachers teaching, administrators managing, and the actions of our school board along with some interaction with state and



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federal educational bureaucracies. I noted my observations, unconsciously at first and mainly mentally but sometimes in notes to myself or editorials in the newspaper. I reviewed, researched, and evaluated my beliefs against many others in the education field, both current and historical. I listened to others and reflected.

In the end, it seems we need to base development of a teaching philosophy on our beliefs and principles, observed correlations, knowledge of the developing brain, and common sense about how to best help children learn. We must become and remain vigilant to the constantly changing needs of our communities and the educational structures that are of integral importance to building and maintaining successful communities. Our goals must be based on the desires and needs of our people.

That is the combination of thoughts that led to the one idea presented within this book that I considered “mine” when I wrote the first edition. Since then I have discovered others who came before me with similar ideas. They serve to reaffirm my beliefs and justify the time spent in writing this second edition. Their ideas deserve to be heard.

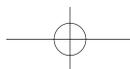
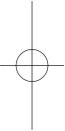
My belief remains firm that the largest single problem with the so-called education system of the United States is its failure to listen to the people it was supposed to serve.

The ideas, suggestions, and solutions in this book are mainly taken from others. There are many in the past and the present with solutions for improving the K–12 American education system. Many speak the same phrases that we too often discount as clichés. So, I ask the reader not to think of the well-known phrases as clichés but rather to think of them as wise thoughts from the past that have been repeated so often they have become clichés. I ask the reader to hear those words anew as voices from the past trying to echo words of wisdom to us.

The major resolving principles and beliefs contained in this book correlate not only with the historical beliefs of many but also with modern research. This is not to insinuate that this book is research-based in the strict sense of the words. Rather, it should more appropriately be considered experience-based and research-backed, since much of what I found in my research over the years goes unnoted because I was reading for interest and not with the intent of writing a book.

Remember, my beliefs, from the perspective of a parent, were based first on observation and common sense about how children learn. But, when common sense and research do align, shouldn't we give those concepts our focused attention?

Writing the first edition, I convinced myself to be calm and analytical, as if the issue of educational improvement was no longer personal. You know what, it is personal; more so now than ever before because once you under-



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stand what is happening, you can see where “change” is leading us and even though my children didn’t receive the best education, I still want a public system left standing in their future. Our republic is at risk.

“Statistics and their interpretation by experts show only the surface dimension of the difficulties we face. Beneath them lies a tension between hope and frustration that characterizes current attitudes about education at every level. . . . What lies behind this emerging national sense of frustration can be described as both a dimming of personal expectations and the fear of losing a shared vision for America” (on, 1983, 11–12). These are words from *A Nation at Risk*.

Nothing will change what has already occurred, so now becomes the time to learn from our past and from each other. I understand people’s frustration and resultant unwillingness to put forth the time to listen. That’s why parents like Bonnie C. ask me, “how *long* is your book?” Keeping regular people in mind, my first edition was short but left too many important concepts up to the reader to clarify. This time I’ve done my best to make the solutions simple, easy to understand, and useful. Really, this book is short, considering the gravity and complexity of the problems this country faces. My major point is that there are no excuses for shrugging and walking away thinking what is proposed can’t be done. It can. It is being done in schools and communities across our country and around the world.

Individual chapters can be *used* by different people to suit their needs. For example, Chapter 8, “What’s Next: Starting in the Trenches,” can serve to give the reader some verbal ammunition to explain what school improvement looks like. It can be used as a discussion piece in your own community. Chapters 4 and 8 along with Addendum 1 should be a must read for those looking to change the No Child Left Behind law. You can write your own “briefs” of them for your congressman; it’s called “citizen lobbying.” Personally, I think everyone involved in the education system directly should read Chapters 6 and 7; my advice is to take small bites and digest well. And Chapter 10, “Democracy and Education: The Powerful Will Drive Progress,” is written for all citizens. Read and share. I hope you decide to read the book cover to cover for the fullest understanding. The objective is that you do what you can.

To thoughtfully consider the current needs of our education system; we have to begin with understanding. I use brief stories in Chapters 1–4 and occasionally throughout to set the stage for understanding for those of you who have not experienced any difficulties. After all, successful school districts are the rule in this country. They have similar characteristics, which include personalized learning with effective teachers and an appropriate curriculum with instruction taking place in an inviting, caring environment.



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These schools don't just happen. They are guided by leaders with the knowledge, skills, experience, desire, and motivation to overcome personal barriers to cooperation.

Most kids that make it through the public schools do so without any apparent problems. Many parents are aware of problems with public education but not in their school or with their child. Others are unaware of problems or don't associate their children's failures or societal problems with education. But is not the true test of education measured by *life indicators* of happiness?

Many will be able to use their own stories to illustrate my points. These are people that weren't so lucky in the great gamble for the best education for their children. These are people that experienced dysfunctional school districts where the governing structure and leadership are not asked by the community to provide transparency and accountability for the underperformance of their schools.

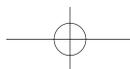
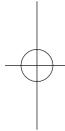
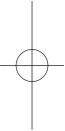
I many times heard myself asking, "Why me?" as I once again phoned or visited our school district's office. One has to consider walking away from the whole mess. Time and again you hear "you can't change the system"; "forgive and forget."

I wanted to forgive and forget the injustices I've seen and experienced in this "failing" school system. But the injustices are spreading and growing as the level of disrespect, incivility, and distrust is rising. There are things that should not be forgotten, and this is not the time for any Americans to look the other way. It is time for Americans to *make the choice* to improve our existing public schools.

Parents, educators, and students should not forget what they experienced and leave the next generation to experience the same problems. We know what mistakes have been made. Will we speak? Will others hear our crucial voices?

The demographics of Title I (low-income) schools like mine do present some unique troubles to solve, but the major problems are the same as for any other schools (urban, suburban, or rural), where maintaining a disciplined yet stimulating learning environment, quality educators and administration, and financial and community support in order to provide quality learning opportunities for all is the universal dilemma.

In reading the works of others, I was led to believe that the roots of these problems are also universal. One wrote about school boards and I wondered how I missed seeing him at mine; it sounded like our local board. Another wrote about her children in a public elementary school; it sounded like she was in our classrooms, but I never saw her either. Our stories are the same with different details and varying degrees of severity.



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The problems are manifested in classrooms all over, not just in “failed” schools. But the encouraging thing is that we do have the answers to our problems, with each school and each classroom having its own unique solutions. The bigger problem is the systemic lack of support and guidance for local improvements. It is *a systemic problem, a national issue*. Just as a few disruptive, out-of-control kids can rot the learning environment of a classroom; areas of educational neglect can rot the whole of our society.

So at this time, it is very important that people understand their role in school improvement and the need for complete and thorough change of “the system.”

Everywhere I go, I find the common people instinctively drawn toward the idea of “change,” but specific changes in education that represent *real progress* have not been part of the talk. Now is the time. We must come together and admit that we, U.S. citizens, can do a better job educating all our citizenry than we are currently doing. As the National Commission on Excellence in Education stated, “This unity, however, can be achieved only if we avoid the unproductive tendency of some to search for scapegoats among the victims, such as the beleaguered teachers” (1983, 12). It’s time to listen.

As a country, we all have a stake in education. If you can’t or won’t consider the country as a whole, think about your own schools. A government report in 1939 called *The Evaluation of Secondary Schools* summed up the situation well by stating, “In a democracy, a school should not be satisfied with being good; it should strive constantly to become better” (Cooperative Study of Secondary School Standards, 61). For our children’s sake, we need to do better.

The reality is that we have ignored the views of parents, teachers, and students for far too long. And we do it to each other. We continue to battle over the “how” to reform while ignoring those that have already experienced “failed” reforms. We are talking at each other, not conversing or debating. Very few people are listening long enough to come to an understanding of where we have been with education reform, what the current truths are, and collectively and collaboratively decide where we need to go.

To collaborate means to work together, to cooperate with the enemy. There is a lot of talk about “democratic” schools and the importance of “teaching” about democracy, but shouldn’t we first practice what we preach? Teach by example. Will we ever get the result we seek when we don’t use the process we wish to promote?

The “education reform wars” have got to stop. They are a tug-of-war over opposing political agendas with teachers, students, and their families as the collateral damage. The fight will only be *about* the children if we make it so.



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In a country founded on democratic ideals, we must constantly work at not making judgments without a fair hearing from the people. To keep our heads above water, to strive to stay one stroke ahead, we must act now to correct the mistakes of the past and prevent those in the future as best we can.

Our K–12 education system in the United States of America does not take the honor of being best in the world; it’s not even second best. It is well below that using any measure. And being part of the public schools, at this moment in time, has left me feeling like I’ve fallen into a swiftly moving current, grasping at times for a handhold, but each time finding it out of reach.

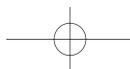
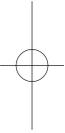
What is there to grab hold of? In Idaho, there is *outcry* over a proposed law to put hunting tags up for sale to the *highest bidder* because the people here understand what “equal opportunity” means when it applies to their individual rights. They see the injustice of allowing the “haves” to have special privileges. But they fail, as most of the nation does, to see how dangerous it is to deny “educational opportunity” to any child.

Living in the beautiful state of Idaho with its narrow mountainous roads winding above treacherous white-water rivers along with dangerous irrigation ditches running through backyards, I warned my children repeatedly as they were growing up that if they fell into rapidly moving water: “Don’t fight the current. Don’t look back. Go with the flow and look for your chance to grab onto something to help you get out.”

In some ways, life is like that swiftly moving stream. But it isn’t identical. In life, we should look both forward and back. We must look back to learn from the mistakes and successes of the past yet always keep looking to the future with the hope of reaching our goals, fulfilling a vision. And there are times we must fight against the current.

Observation, research, and much trial and failure did produce in me a vision for the education system of the United States. That became agonizing, for sending your own children to school daily while recognizing and realizing what serious mistakes are being made is pure hell. On a regular basis, I wished I didn’t know what I know; I wished I didn’t care about the children, parents, and teachers suffering within this system. Facing the facts is hard to do.

Dare You Face Facts? by Muriel Lester served as my final inspiration to write about education. Through her book, she was appealing to the United States to lead Europe to peace, a peace based on *mutual understanding* with the help and unity of the spiritual and governmental leaders of America, a country in which she believed that “No other people has such initiative, such resourcefulness” (1940, 121). She felt that knowing firsthand “about the happenings” in Europe, in China, and in Africa in the 1930s and 1940s left her “shouldering the burden of caring.” She was reaching out with the *hope*





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of finding others who would care and *hoped to move them to act*. Like her, I feel that knowing what I know, and caring, in my case about the public education system of the United States, has been my burden.

Thinking about the times she must have gone through, my anguish and frustration can't compare. That thought gives me the energy to once more relive my journey down the public education stream as just a parent who cares.

