Care Package: Are We Committed to Public Education?

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In the West, public schools have long had the primary responsibility for education of the citizenry. One of the first projects undertaken in new communities of emigrants was the establishment of schools, and the schools often served as community centers. Everyone pitched in to build and support the school, contributing time, effort, money, firewood, and housing for the schoolteacher to assure that children in the community would receive an education. The Oregon and Washington state constitutions (1859 and 1889) required that the legislature provide general and uniform systems of public schools.

As communities grew, the expectations for schools expanded and the management of schools became the work of professional educators. Local school boards, typically elected by the votes of small numbers of eligible voters, oversaw the development and operation of public schools. Schools now have a major economic impact on the region: more than 6,000 people work in state and local education in the Portland-Vancouver area. In Clark County, school districts rank among the largest employers, with the Vancouver Public Schools number one, Evergreen School District number three, and Battle Ground School District number thirteen.

As we consider the role of public education and public schools in the metropolitan region, it is important to think about public and private purposes of education and schooling. From this country’s earliest days, its leaders saw that an educated populace was critical to the success of this democracy. Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1820, “I know of no safe depositary of the ultimate powers of the society by the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.”

Today the attention to the public purposes of schools focuses more on the demands of a knowledge-based economy. As the region has evolved from a resource-based economy to one that requires a workforce with high levels of knowledge and skills, the demands and expectations on schools have increased rapidly. Pressures from international competition and the uncertainties of a changing economy have driven business and political leaders in Oregon, Washington, and around the country to call for higher standards of learning for students in public schools.

The economic case for schools emphasizes two key expectations: assuring the availability of a quality workforce and ensuring that the region is attractive to new businesses and their employees. The public, recognizing the value of good jobs and economic independence for everyone, and seeing how few good jobs are available for the unskilled and under-educated, has joined in support for high standards and greater accountability for schools.

Public schools are also seen as places where social problems can be solved or prevented, and where young people can learn to participate fully in their communities. When the rate of teenage pregnancies and age of sexual activity became issues of concern, some constituents called on schools to offer sex education as part of health classes. Growing realization that young people have very limited knowledge about financial management has prompted Ellis Traub, a South Florida entrepreneur, to found the Financial Literacy for Youth Foundation “to see that every child in the United States is taught everything he or she needs to know about money before leaving high school.” The current alarm about childhood obesity includes calls for changes in the meals and snack choices provided at school, increases in the amount of physical education offered, and renewed attention to including nutrition education in the health curriculum.

Public schools have been instruments of social change in society as well. The Common Schools had as a major goal the development of an American citizenry out of an immigrant population. The Supreme Court’s decision (Brown v. the Board of Education, 1954) struck down the doctrine of “separate but equal,” and the integration of the schools became a centerpiece in the Civil Rights Movement. Calls for character and civic education and concerns about the absence of the arts in schools reflect the public’s sense of the role of schools in shaping future citizens.

Parents and students themselves, also have private purposes they expect the schools to serve. Nowhere is that more evident than in the decision-making process for middle class professionals about where to put their children in the West. In many communities, local school boards are typically elected by the votes of small numbers of eligible voters, so it is the people who exercise their control with a wholesome discretion.

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The values and beliefs of individual families may conflict with the curriculum and philosophy of the public schools. When the public purposes of schools do not mesh with a family’s private interests, they may choose to send their children to private schools or to school them at home. In 2002-03, 11% of high school graduates in Oregon attended private schools or were home schooled. In Washington 7% of school age children attended private schools.

In this region, more than three quarters of residents do not have children who attend public schools. Schools often find it difficult to attract their interest in learning about schools’ problems and accomplishments. In some communities fewer than half of the eligible voters participate in school board elections, and districts often struggle to meet requirements for double majorities in funding elections. Studies have shown that parents form their opinions of public schools from experiences with their children’s schools. Where does the other 75% of the population get their information about schools?

Many people’s opinion of schools is shaped by what they read in the newspaper or see on television. Sensational stories about discipline problems, achievement disparities, and budget shortfalls influence public perceptions of the quality of public schools. When Clark county residents learn that more than one-third of tenth graders met the standards for all four subjects required for a certificate of mastery, they are rightly concerned about the quality of their schools. However, if they compare those results with the statewide averages, and when they see the steady upward trend in all subjects tested by the state assessment system, they may recognize the improvement that is occurring and ask questions about what help schools may need to assure that all students meet the standards.

While tenth grade assessments in metroscape school districts show that many students are not meeting the requirements for the Oregon Certificate of Initial Mastery or the Washington Certificate of Mastery, the test results across the region track closely to statewide scores. Many people assume that a lower percentage of students in the Portland Public Schools meet the state standards than in other districts in the region, but the assessment results do not support that conclusion. Portland’s scores are very close to, or above, the state average.

Of course, we can’t say that all is well in the region’s schools when significant numbers of students do not meet the state standards for academic achievement. The disparities in achievement for children whose families are poor, children of color, and children who are learning English require focused attention, new instructional and organizational strategies, and a commitment to assuring high levels of learning by all students in the schools. We must be concerned about students who are not meeting the standards. We also need to recognize that achieving the goal of all students learning to high levels requires community-wide involvement and can’t be left to schools alone.

Public schools face serious threats to their ability to serve the public’s interests. The one we hear the most about is the instability of funding for the schools at a time when the external demands on schools are escalating. If the Multnomah county income tax is repealed, the Portland Public Schools will lose $48 million and that will result in a school year that is reduced by 10 weeks in 2004-05.

Current standards call on the schools to assure that all students meet the same rigorous standards on a common timetable, without regard for external pressures, natural differences in rates of development, and circumstances in their lives. Schools face growing costs of serving children from families in economic distress and children with special needs. Schools struggle to find a balance between the need
for consistency and equity on one hand and calls for decentralization and auton-
omy for schools on the other. Groups with conflicting views of the purposes of
schools pressure the schools to conform to their particular expectations. Propos-
als to fund private schools and to support autonomous start-up schools with public
tax dollars threaten to dilute already inade-
quate resources. Costly accountability systems take time and money from class-
rooms and divert from the need for a bal-
anced and enriched curriculum. Private philanthropy now is called upon to fund
what have traditionally been civic com-
mittments.

In the midst of all these challenges and
what sometimes appears to be diminish-
ing public support for public schools, Oregon citizens surveyed in the 2002
Oregon Values and Beliefs Study named public schools as one of the three most
important services provided by state gov-
ernment. Respondents recognized higher
education and k-12 education as priorities
for a healthy economy, and they reported
greater satisfaction with their schools
than they did in 1992. Nearly half said
that Oregon is doing a good job of pro-
viding primary and secondary education,
up from 38% in 1992. They identified
the most important needs of their local
neighborhood schools as better funding,
increased quality, and teachers who are
paid better, have more training, and are
more effective.

For public schools to continue to serve
as key elements in a system of public edu-
cation for democratic citizenship, support
for schools must be translated into active
caring by their communities. When the
question is asked, “who cares about the
public schools?” we must respond, “we
all do!” and really mean it.

What does it take to care about the
schools? Genuine caring goes beyond the breast-
beating rhetoric and exhortation of politicians to the
very heart of citizens’ relationships with the insti-
tutions that they value. Steve Duin, columnist for
the Oregonian, called schools “the last great civic
institution and most of the remaining acreage in our
common ground.” The public must help schools find
a balance between the private interests of students
and their parents and the public’s interest in a vibrant
and effective system of public schools that serves the
diverse needs of a multicultural community. Schools
must be one of the public spaces in the commu-
nity where people come together to find solutions to
common problems. “Schools must attend both to
preparing future citizens and to engaging current
citizens in solving community problems.”

Nell Nodding, a Stanford University professor, de-
veloped what she called an ethic of caring. Focusing
on personal relationships, she outlined two key re-
quirements for caring for another: attention and a
deep desire to help. How might such an ethic of care
be expanded to include the public’s relationship with
its public schools?

First, attention to public
schools would be ongo-
ing and focused on what is
good for children, young
people, and the communi-
ty. Through dialogue the
community would search
for understanding of the
complex issues schools
face and develop a com-
mittance to both the pub-
lic and private purposes
of schools in our society. Standards would come to
reflect our shared aspira-
tions for the young people
of this community rather
than our fears that teachers
and children are not work-
ing hard enough. Account-
ability systems would call
for forth and recognize the
best in students, teachers,
and administrators and
emphasize the need for
continuous improvement.
The community’s concern
for schools would be a
constant that could be de-
pended on by teachers and
school administrators.

If the community were
truly attentive to the
schools, its leaders would
regularly spend time with
students, teachers, and ad-
ministrators learning about
the challenges schools
face. They would seek to understand the complex
and often contradictory expectations schools strug-
gle to meet. They would help build the capacity
of schools to respond by garnering public support and
lobbying for adequate resources.

Many of the hundreds of business and community
leaders who have participated in Principal for a Day
programs in the region report that they have come to
see schools from totally different perspectives and
that they have developed a new appreciation for the
challenging work of teachers and principals. These
leaders have gone on from their day in the schools
to find resources to support critical work in indi-
vidual schools. Their interest, respect, concern, and
sustained attention have emboldened school princi-
pants to cultivate genuine public involvement in their
schools.

Many people have a deep desire to help the schools.
They recognize that student achievement will not reach the levels the public expects without the com-
munity’s investment of its human resources in the
schools and in other parts of the community. How-
ever, they are sometimes frustrated by the schools’
seeming lack of responsiveness to their offers of as-
sistance.

Several decades of public criticism of the schools
have made some educators wary of opening the
schoolhouse doors to the community. However,
public schools cannot survive and be successful
without the public’s deep interest in helping make
schools better and their active involvement in chang-
sing schools to meet new demands and expectations.
The rich tradition of community engagement that
characterizes the metroscape can be harnessed in the
service of expanding educational achievement for everyone. Schools could become one part of a sys-
tem of education that includes parents and families,
businesses and government agencies, social groups
and social service agencies, religious organizations
and health care providers, and museums, art galler-
ies, and libraries. What would give coherence to
these efforts is a shared commitment to caring for the
children and young people of our community—not
only with eyes on their futures, but out of a desire
to making the present rich with possibilities for ev-
eryone. By themselves schools cannot solve the problems
of poverty, injustice, violence, and inequality. They
cannot make up for the effects on young people of
the society’s failings. As a part of a network of car-
ing, as a major force in the life of the community,
and as a site for connecting the common good with
individuals’ self-interests, schools can help build and
sustain healthy communities.

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