



**WHAT ARE GOOD SCHOOLS
AND WHY ARE THEY SO HARD TO GET?**

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Biographical Note: Trained as a historian, Professor Cuban received his education at the University of Pittsburgh, Case-Western and Stanford. Throughout his career, he has been intimately involved in the educational process at all levels, from teaching in urban ghetto schools to acting as superintendent of the Arlington public school system. He has been voted teacher of the year six times at Stanford. His books include *Tinkering toward Utopia*, *The Managerial Imperative: The Practice of Leadership in Schools* and *Urban School Chiefs Under Fire*.

I'm very pleased to have been invited to speak at The Vancouver Institute and to honour the fortieth anniversary of the University of British Columbia's Faculty of Education. I'm still shocked that so many people would come out on a Saturday night. This is not usual behaviour that I am familiar with in California. UBC's Faculty of Education has good reason in 1997 for celebrating the last four decades since its founding when Dean Neville Scarfe and the first faculty of forty-two professors took over the responsibilities of preparing practitioners, undertaking research, and serving the province. Its size, the comprehensive program for teacher education, the research agenda, doctoral preparation and attention to First Nations education and particularly responsiveness to the field, mark it as exemplary in the province and the nation.

Someone once said that there are two kinds of speakers. Those who chew more than they bite off and those who bite off more than they can chew. I belong to that adventurous latter group. What that means of course is that I run the risk of running on. As a result I offer to you the advice of one speaker who said, "My job is to speak,

your job is to listen. If you get finished before I do, please leave quietly.” To answer the question that is the title of this presentation, I will analyze the idea of a good school by offering three portraits of schools and then examine how each was a good school and is a good school. Now I will do this for U.S. schools which I know far better than Canadian schools. By holding up a mirror to schools in my country about ideas of goodness, perhaps I can get you to re-examine your views of goodness, reflect on how your views influence what you define as a good school and figure out why such schools are so hard to build and sustain.

So what follows is a verbal collage of two elementary schools that I know very well. They may resemble schools that you know in Canada. Both are in a middle-class California community. Both are public schools to which parents can choose to send their children. Both schools have staffs that chose to work there. And both schools have been in existence for twenty-five years. The first school I will call School A. This school is a quiet, orderly school where the teacher’s authority is openly honoured by both students and parents. The principal and faculty set high academic standards and demand regular study habits. Drill and practice are part of each teacher’s daily lesson. Teacher’s will say, “We like the way we were taught, so we teach the same way. We expect kids to adapt to our standards.” From a first-grade classroom, children learn how to spell six new words a day. Report cards with letter grades are sent home every nine weeks. Once a week, teachers send home mini report cards. A parent quote: “If my kid can truly do something better, I want her to be asked to do it again until it’s done right. That’s what they do here at this school.” The principal of the school says: “Our kids are happiest when taking a test.” I knew you would laugh, I knew you would. “The more challenged they are, the better they perform. The harder they work, the better they feel about themselves.” There’s a banner in this school and it says: “Free, Monday through Friday: knowledge. Bring your own container.” A parent quote: “Creativity can’t occur until the building blocks are in place. If you’re good at sports, you scrimmage. If you’re good at music, you practice scales.” An alumnus of the school: “It was always a

standard and a great incentive system that drove you to meet it.” That’s School A.

School B prizes freedom for students and teachers to pursue their interests. Students call most of their teachers by their first names. There’s a banner in a classroom that reads: “Children need a place to run, to explore a world, to discover.” Every teacher encourages student-initiated projects. Teacher quote: “We trust children to make the right choices.” Most classrooms in School B are multi-aged. There are six- to nine-year olds in many of them and seven- to eleven-year olds in the others. Principal quote: “We don’t compare John with Sarah, we compare John with John.” In this school there are no spelling bees, no accelerated reading program, no letter or numerical grades. Instead, there’s a two- to six-page year-end narrative in which a teacher describes the personal growth of each student. Students in this school take only those standardized tests required by the state. Competition among students is discouraged. An alumnus quote: “The openness, the freedom, it all taught you to take responsibility for yourself.”

On most points then, School A and B were very different from one another. What each group of parents, teachers and students valued about knowledge, about teaching, about learning differed. Yet each school enjoyed the enthusiastic endorsement of their teachers and parents. The evidence for such support is both clear and strong. Annual surveys of parent and student opinion registered praise each year for each school. Each school has had a waiting list who wish to enrol their sons and daughters. Teacher turnover at each school has been virtually nil. Moreover, by most student outcome measures, both schools have compiled enviable records. In academic achievement measured by standardized tests, School A was in the top ten schools in the entire state. School B was in the upper half of the state schools.

Now to complicate matters, I want to describe another school, which I will then call School C. I offer again a verbal collage, but these will be taken from a composite of schools, past and present, that have shared these common features. This is a high school of about a thousand students in a working class neighbourhood of a

large city. The high school has experienced declining academic achievement, poor attendance and a deteriorating building. High teacher turnover each year created vacancies that had to be filled with inexperienced teachers. The parent/teacher association had dissolved. A new principal came to this high school five years ago and brought with her a cadre of experienced teachers from the previous school where they had created a community-based school program. Here are some of the activities and quotes drawn from this high school over the last five years. A twelfth grade government class had prepared a map of the eight blocks that surround the high school with symbols on this map for stores, bars, the police station, the park, and abandoned homes and cars. They posted the map in the main hallway. They had a sign-up list for student volunteers to work on weekends with city workers who would help students clear abandoned cars and trash from the empty lots. A tenth grade science class worked with a retired biologist in the community to test water in the nearby park creek for pollutants. Ninth and tenth grade classes spent a half day tutoring first graders at nearby elementary schools in the community. A principal's quote: "My aim is to bring the community into the school, so that our youngsters might better grow at understanding and participating. We want them to be good citizens." A parent quote: "We asked the principal to do something about a rash of traffic accidents near the school. She got students, parents, store owners and police officials to pitch in and to clear three empty lots for the children to use as playgrounds and to re-route the traffic. I can't say enough about our principal." The school-site council and the principal hired five community aids, parents of current and former students, to do a housing survey with a neighbourhood retired inspector. They reported to the city's Director of Housing which homes in the neighbourhood violated the housing code.

Now the evidence for support of School C has been, like Schools A and B, clear and strong. The last two years of annual surveys of parent opinion praised the community work of this school and, for the first time, gave high marks to the academic program. Student attendance had increased by a third in the last three years. Teacher turnover had dropped by half. For the first time, over fifty

neighbourhood stores contributed to the scholarship fund. The parent/teacher group that had dissolved a decade ago had been resurrected by a few parents and teachers growing from a membership of fifty the first year, to five hundred in the fifth year. Moreover, by most student outcome measures, School C had made substantial gains. In academic achievement, measured by state standardized tests, School C went from the thirtieth percentile in reading three years ago, to the fifty-second percentile last year. In math, the figures went from the twenty-fifth to the sixtieth.

Now from this collage you have probably formed an impression of each school, and even given the school's names or labels. I suspect you even have a preference for one or more of these schools for your children, grandchildren, nephews or nieces. Let me check. You can vote more than once if you wish. How many of you would send your children, grandchildren, favoured nieces and nephews to School A? How many would send your kids to School B? How many to School C?

The results: there is a solid representation for School A. School B has the largest number of votes. School C has about the same as School A. Now, the test that I just offered you was the one offered by John Dewey, a prominent American philosopher whose early part of his career was spent in education. He created his own school, and that was a test that he used. He said, "A school is good that I would send my own children too." I think that's a good school that I would send my own kids to. Now in the U.S., School A would be called traditional or conservative, with pride by supporters and scorned by opponents. Schools B and C would probably be called progressive or non-traditional — also, with pride or scorn, depending on people's preferences. I understand the same terms are familiar to Canadians.

Now can these three schools all be good? They differ dramatically from one another in social background, size, and level of students. They differ dramatically in how teachers organize their classrooms, view learning, teach the curriculum and connect to the community. For me, the answer to my question, "can they all be good?" is unequivocally, yes. Yet my straightforward answer that

all of these schools are good, ignores two important points. First, what might have made these schools good? And second, why has there been so much conflict in the United States in this century among policy-makers, academics, parents, practitioners, and taxpayers, over which kind of schooling — progressive or traditional — is best for children?

What accounts for these schools being good? I cannot say for sure, but I can identify the following factors as probably being important in making these schools prized by their students, parents and teachers. School A and B were in middle-class communities. Parents and teachers chose each school. Over twenty-five years, committed teachers and principals who also chose to be at each of these schools work closely with parents to make each what it is today. Now School C on the other hand, in a different kind of neighbourhood, had a new but experienced principal and teachers, committed to a philosophy of making the high school an integral part of the community in what was studied and how academic subjects were taught. They had worked together on improving the school for at least five years. Students learned that where they lived was valued and needed improvement; not contempt. The school became embedded in the community, rather than divorced from it. What we have here in three schools are stable staffs, committed to core beliefs about what is best for students, and the community, parents with beliefs that mirrored those of staffs. It is competent people working together and, of equal importance, time to make it all happen.

Now these may well be the factors that made these schools good. Not whether the school was progressive or traditional. The century-long war of words over traditional versus progressive schooling, replays tired old arguments and evidence that School A is better than School B or C. I believe that that's a cul-de-sac — a dead end of an argument, that needs to be retired once and for all. It probably won't be. For this entire century there have been conflicts among educators, public officials, researchers and parents over what kind of schooling is best. Canada has experienced similar conflicts. For evidence I could use a quick verbal collage: the Sullivan Commission, the Year 2000, basic skills, Mike Harcourt, high school exami-

nations. Now I can't explain the particulars for Canada or British Columbia, but I can try to explain the U.S. situation and ask you to draw any parallels if such parallels exist.

In the early twentieth century, a version of progressive schooling, drawn from the work of John Dewey, and many other school reformers, swept across the United States, changing curricula, partially modifying instruction and expanding the role of the school to take on duties of the family, that the family had once discharged. Progressive reformers scorned traditional schooling of the day, with its bolted-down desks, memorization of facts, blind obedience to authority and divorce from the world outside of the classroom door. They wanted to focus on the personal and social development of students. They wanted schools to be part of the community rather than separated from it. They wanted to offer many choices to students inside and outside schools that would fit their different futures in the world of work and as citizens in a democracy.

By the end of World War II, progressive educational ideas and practice had severely declined in popularity, giving way to new programs triggered by national fears of the Soviet Union. The Cold War revived interest in students learning more math and science to become engineers and scientists, who could defend the U.S. against the powerful enemy. New math and science projects and national test and programs geared to increasing respect for a school authority — practices usually associated with traditional schooling — replaced progressive programs. With U.S. Supreme Court decisions on race in the 1950s and a growing civil rights movement in the 1960s, however, the troubles of urban schools and the neglect of personal and social development of students led to a strong revival of progressive ideas in what was called then “open classrooms” and “open space” schools. Federal laws created many new programs for poor and minority children. Court cases extended to students constitutional rights to express opinions and to have due process in the handling of disputes within schools. By the early 1970s, however, with the Vietnam War still dividing the country and reduced funding for schools, enthusiasm for progressive forms of schooling had spent itself. Since the late 1970s another version of traditional schooling, focusing on

high academic standards, strong school discipline and a standardized curriculum and testing has become dominant. Yet, in the late 1980s and early 90s, continuing now to this very day, there are now forms of progressive thinking that have again revived among practitioners and academics around teaching, learning, assessment, and curriculum.

Why has this pendulum-like swing between traditional and progressive schooling occurred time and again? This century-long seesaw debate over what is the better form of schooling, is really, in my judgement, a deeper political conflict over what role school should play in society. Should schools in a democracy primarily concentrate on making citizens who fulfil their civic duties? Should schools influence students to prize both individual freedom and authority; to think independently, yet embrace community values; to honour individual excellence, yet treat everyone equally? Should schools focus on efficiently preparing students with skills and credentials to get jobs? Or should schools do everything they can to develop the personal and social capabilities of each and every child?

Now over the last two centuries of tax-supported public schooling in the United States, all of these goals have been viewed as important and achievable. Yet these goals of American schooling are in tension with one another. There are insufficient resources to fully achieve all of them and, of equal importance, they contain internal contradictions. Making sure that students respect authority conflicts with wanting students to think independently, even to the point of going against what parents, teachers and principals want. Preparing students with skills for jobs in order to fit into a society with its many social and economic inequities conflicts with teaching those very same students to seek social justice. Wanting to fully develop a child's capabilities while treating all children equally becomes virtually impossible when teachers work with large classes and insufficient help.

The tensions that reside in these larger goals for schooling in a democracy have persistently become skirmishes in local school districts. For example, a persistent battle between progressives and traditionalists is over discipline. For traditionalists, teaching chil-

dren the importance of authority and the rule of law in a democracy demands that schools make sure that students obey school rules and respect the teacher's authority. Since 1969 public opinion polls on education have asked Americans to identify the single most pressing issue that they saw in schools. Every year, parents and non-parents named school discipline as one of the top three problems that schools needed to address. Incidents of school violence such as robberies or attacks on teachers became front page news and TV stories. The media amplified views of parents and taxpayers that schools were failing to fulfil their primary task, which was to provide security for children and teach respect for authority. For traditionalists, cracking down on students that disobeyed school rules was the best way of teaching respect for authority. Some sought a return to corporal punishment. Others wanted to expel unruly students and tighten school security by including the presence of police.

For progressives, school discipline was a community problem. Growing violence in the larger community in a media-saturated society was a problem that public officials had neglected. Blaming schools for a larger social problem was scapegoating a vulnerable institution. This is what they said. Moreover while progressives shared the traditionalists' concern for discipline and respect for authority, they felt strongly that resorting to corporal punishment or imposing stiffer penalties was counter-productive, by diverting attention from deeper social problems in the society, while creating a police-state climate within schools. Progressives — and they were quite often understood for this — were not opposed to punishing unruly students for acts that hurt peers or the school. But they also sought non-punitive ways of helping children become self disciplined and respectful of others' rights. They wanted students and parents and neighbours to come together to deal with troubling incidents in schools. For the last thirty years, there have been few resolutions of these differences over the best way to deal with school discipline. What has remained constant has been the public's desire for more orderly schools and the belief held by both progressives and traditionalists that respect for authority is important. These progressive versus traditionalist struggles over discipline, however, have been

defined in very narrow terms. Debates over school questions have also included national tests in the United States, tracking students by their performance, school uniforms, or even the use of calculators in teaching math. All of these struggles obscure a more fundamental political tension in the U.S. over which goals for public schools should have priority.

The problem then is not about progressives versus traditionalists, nor is the problem knowing how to make schools better. For many parents and educators already know what they want, and possess the requisite knowledge and skills to get it. Schools A, B, and C, which you would send your children to, are examples of that knowledge in action. The problem is determining what goals public schools should pursue given the many goals that are desired and the limited time, money and people that are available. Determining priorities among goals is a political process of making choices that involves policy-makers, school officials, taxpayers and parents. Deciding what is important and how much should be allocated to it is at the heart of being a democratic citizen. This process, however, is not a technical problem that can be solved by experts or scientific investigation to determine whether or not traditional or progressive approaches work better than the other. It is a struggle over priorities that are worked out in political campaigns for public office, in tax referendums, in open debate at meetings, in newspapers and, yes, even radio talk shows. Yet these simple distinctions between the political and the technical, between goals for schools in a democracy and the crucial importance of the democratic process determining which goals should be primary, seem to have been lost in these squabbles over whether progressive and traditional schools are better than one another.

That is why I began with my description of the three schools. They represent for me a way out of this dead-end struggle over what kind of schooling is better than the other. I argue that all of these schools are good. One is clearly traditional in its concentration on passing on to children the best knowledge, skills and values in society. The other two are progressive in different ways, in their focus on personal and social development of individuals, in making the community a part of the school's curriculum. Neither is better than

the other in the eyes of the parents, teachers and students. Each serves different goals. Each honours different values. And yet — and this is the important point that I want to drive home — the seemingly different goals are not really different. They derive from a common framework of what parents and taxpayers want from their public schools; what they want their schools to achieve. What is different is the relative weight that each good school gives to these goals, how they go about putting them into practice, and the rules they use to describe what they want. The common framework that I speak of is the core belief undergirding all tax-supported public schools. And that core belief which is the fundamental duty of public schools is to inculcate in the next generation democratic attitudes, values and behaviours.

Now usually, when speakers start using grand phrases like democracy and the duty of schools, eyes glaze over. Yawns are stifled. Please bear with me because just as a fish takes for granted the water in which it lives, too often we take little notice of what we take for granted in the linkage between the schools that we have and the kind of civic life that we want for ourselves and our children. This is especially so at times such as these in the United States when the primary responsibility of schools, as so often expressed by public and corporate officials, is preparing students for the labour market. Within this common belief and this common framework that I claim both traditionalists and progressives share, exactly what do I mean by democratic attitudes, values, and behaviours? A short list should give you a flavour of what I mean: open-mindedness to different opinions and a willingness to listen to such opinions; respect for values that differ from one another; treating individuals decently and fairly regardless of background; a commitment to talk through problems, reason, deliberate and struggle toward openly arrived at compromises. I could go on. But you probably understand what I mean by democratic attitudes, values, and behaviours.

These are learned, of course, in families, at work and in the community. But most important, they are what schools at the minimum are expected to do. Tax-supported public schools in the U.S. were not established a hundred and fifty years ago to get jobs for

graduates. They were not established to replace the family or the church. If you would read what Thomas Jefferson, Noah Webster, Horace Mann and dozens of other founders wrote about what was then called the common school, it becomes clear that they believed that democratic society had to have schools that produced citizens who could fulfill their civic obligations. They were established to make sure that children would grow into adults that respected authority, could make reasoned judgements, accept differences of opinion, and fulfil their civic duties to participate in the political life of their community. Over time, of course, as conditions in the U.S. changed, other responsibilities were added to this charter for public schools. But the fundamental duty of schools, teachers and administrators, past and present, has been to change the students into citizens who could independently reason through difficult decisions, defend what they have decided, and honour the rule of law.

Now return with me for a moment to our three traditional and progressive schools to see if they were working on this taken-for-granted task. Let me do this by concentrating on two democratic values that are in tension with one another: individual freedom and respect for authority. In our traditional School A, students had freedom in many activities as long as they stayed within the clear boundaries established by teachers as to what students can do and say and what subject matter they had to learn. On occasion, classes would make decisions on questions that were framed by the teacher. On questions considered important by the school, it was a teacher's word that counted. Rules for behaviour and academic performance were often set by adults. Students accepted these limits easily, even enjoying the bounded freedom that such rules gave them.

School A's teachers and parents believed that students' self-discipline grows best by setting limits and learning what knowledge previous generations counted as important. From these would evolve students' respect for the rule of law and their becoming active citizens.

In School B, more emphasis was placed on children's individual freedom -- to create, diverge from the group, and work at their own pace. Students worked on individually designed projects,

students respected the teacher's authority but would often ask why certain things had to be done. The teacher gave reasons and on occasion there would be some negotiating over what and how the task would be done. School B's teachers and parents believed that students' self-discipline, regard for authority and future civic responsibility evolved out of an extended individual freedom.

In School C, where there was a standard high school academic curriculum with individual teachers in charge of teaching particular subjects and a principal who ran the school, this meant that traditional authority of the school's and teacher's were in place. What made School C different, however, was the integration of the community into the curriculum, thus giving far more play for both individual teachers and students to design and carry out projects. Teachers and students had freedom to develop creative ways of helping neighbours and parents improve their living conditions. There's an opportunity for a school community to pursue social justice within a neighbourhood. Within this mix of traditional and progressive freedom and authority, of deep involvement in the local community, School C's parents and teachers believe that students and a sense of civic responsibility would emerge.

Thus, I would argue that all three schools prize individual freedom and they prize respect for authority, but each gave it a different spin on how they organize the school, how they view the curriculum, and how they engage in teaching. Neither value is ignored. Each school, in its unique way, cultivates the deeper democratic attitudes of open-mindedness, respect for others' values, treating others decently, and making deliberate decisions. What matters to me in judging whether schools are good, is whether they are discharging their primary duty to help students think and act democratically. What we need to talk about more openly in our debates about schooling is not whether a traditional school is better or worse than a progressive one, but whether a school concentrates on instilling within children the virtues that a democratic society must have in each generation.

The current conversation about goals in the United States is *not* about what I would call the primary goal of schooling. It is about being first in the world in science and math achievement. It is about

preparing students to use technology to get better jobs. Very little is said about the primary purpose of schooling, except in occasional one-liners, or a paragraph here and there in speeches of top public officials. I have been told that the situation in Canada is not very different.

But wait a minute. In this argument that I'm making, I can be accused of playing a shell game on you. I quickly show a pea in one shell, while hiding it under another, thus deceiving you. Do you remember that I pointed out repeatedly that neither school is better than the other? Of course you do. Yet, do you recall what evidence I used? The evidence that I used was standardized test scores, attendance, parent's satisfaction with the school, etc., etc. I implied that Schools A, B, and C had done well on these quantitative measures; therefore they are good. A careful listener among you — and I know there are many of you out there — would say, "Whoa, Mr. Cuban. You're using traditional outcome measures that are really aimed at school A, and are generally accepted by the vast majority of Americans. Such outcome measures do not necessarily match what schools B and C seek to achieve for their students." Such careful listeners would be absolutely correct in implying that I am trying to slip something by you.

So rather than be accused of trying to deceive you, let me return to this point of what determines goodness in schools. To figure out whether a school is good, one needs some standards in making a judgment. For schools A, B, and C, I offered criteria, like parental satisfaction and staff stability, as ways of judging a school's success, and, therefore, being good. Then, I slipped in test scores, attendance rates, and other measures customarily used to judge U.S. schools today. All of these criteria — *all* of them — would fit the aims of school A and would be used often. I did that — and I must confess to you — because I feared you would not accept my argument of all three schools being good unless I threw in test scores and the other usual indicators of school success. Now, it's not because I don't trust you. It is because we in the United States have become so used to equating goodness with high test scores and other quantitative measures that it might have slipped over the border. So I wanted

to hedge my bets with this audience. Remember, also, that it is important to not only figure out what criteria for success in goodness get used — as I have tried to critique what I gave you — but we need to keep in mind whose criteria are they?

The telling signs of school goodness in the U.S. are test scores and other quantitative measures that come from the last 30 years of policy makers' judgments of what can be called a good school. These judgements are, for the most part, derived from efficiency measures largely generated by economists. Parents and taxpayers, for sure, have embraced these measures, if public opinion polls are to be believed.

But as popular and pervasive as these criteria may be, they are not the only ones that can or should be used. So let me now suggest other criteria for judging goodness. I have already suggested parent, student and teacher satisfaction as reasonable standards to use in determining how good a school is. I would go further and add: to what degree has a school achieved its own explicit goals? -- not ones that are implicit, but ones that are made public. Traditional School A was a clear success by these criteria. School B, however, was uninterested in test scores and even report cards, if you recall. Teachers wrote narratives instead of giving letter grades. What school B wanted most was students who had grown intellectually, personally and socially; students who could think on their own; students who could work easily with those who were different from themselves; students who cared for one another and were self-confident. Parents and teachers had plenty of stories and plenty of evidence about teachers reaching these goals. They were convinced. Few tests or quantitative measures, however, now exist that capture these behaviours that School B sought.

Similarly, school C had aims that went well beyond the popular ways of judging goodness in schools. The principal and staff set close connections with the local community by extending academic content and instruction into the neighbourhood. Moreover, students and teachers in School C wanted to make a difference in the community by actively working to improve it. Again there are no current tests that can capture how well the school did at what it said it wanted

to achieve. There are indirect measures, like growing parent involvement, more participation in school life by neighbours and student's satisfaction. But, beyond that, there is very little quantitative evidence. Nonetheless, parents and students were convinced that the school had succeeded.

I can even suggest another standard to judge goodness in a school that some members of the audience may have already anticipated. Recall that I claimed that the fundamental purpose of schooling in the U.S. is to produce graduates who possess the democratic values, attitudes and behaviours that I mentioned earlier. I believe this is the common framework for public schools in the U.S. It has been lost in a battle of words among public officials and educators who champion traditional or progressive schools. A good school, I would argue, is one whose students display those virtues as students and afterwards as well.

Now, there might be some restlessness here. Someone might say, "Mr. Cuban, how in the world can you ever measure whether the schools have achieved those kind of outcomes?" People who are scornful of progressives might say "those touchy-feely outcomes." Certainly, the current ways of measuring goodness in schools didn't even remotely come close to what I am suggesting. Schools B and C lack tests that would capture the worthwhile activities. There have been previous efforts to do so, at least in the history of the U.S., but they have faded from the memories of current educators and public officials. I suspect that smart folks will figure out again ways of measuring democratic behaviours and attitudes among students. I doubt, however, whether such talent and energy will be mobilized, because current criteria for measuring goodness look for what can be counted, not necessarily what is most important.

So here are my criteria for determining good schools. Are parents, staff and students satisfied with what occurs in the school? Is the school achieving the explicit goals that it has set for itself? And finally, are democratic behaviours, values and attitudes evident in the student?

By now, if you have followed this argument, you probably have a sense of why it is so hard to get good schools. First, notions

of goodness vary. Second, these notions of goodness contain within them contradictions. There is nothing wrong with either since they reflect the larger society where ideas of what kind of government is best vary, as do views of what is a good person. Moreover, we face century-old intractable dilemmas that have hardly been reconciled. From Plato to Rousseau, to contemporary talk shows, there has been constant and intense disagreement over these fundamental issues. So why shouldn't these be present now?

Third, these valued notions of goodness and contradictions have become mired in the endless and fruitless debate between traditionalists and progressives. The deeply buried but persistent impulse in the United States to create a one-best system — a solution for every problem — has kept progressives and traditionalists contesting which of their innovations are better for children. They have ignored that there are more ways than one to define goodness in schools.

Fourth, creating good schools is also hard because few advocates of progressive or traditional schooling take the time to be clear about which goals are most important to them, including the democratic imperative. Moreover, even fewer recognize that not all of the announced goals can be achieved because of limited resources and that the goals one would concentrate on would often contain contradictions. Most of that is ignored by progressives and traditionalists in that fruitless debate that I have characterized.

Lastly, if being clear about goals is important, then being especially clear about what criteria to use to measure success becomes critical. Knowing whose criteria are being used, whether they fit the goals of the school, and determining what constitutes sufficient evidence to satisfy parents, staff and students, and taxpayers — all of that becomes essential.

And that is why good schools are hard to get. It is not because we lack the technical expertise. We have it. It is not because we lack the will. Parents and educators have created good schools often. Good schools are hard to get because of an unexamined bias for only one version of what is a good school. They are hard to get because we have not examined carefully, deliberately, and openly

different conceptions of goodness and how each view is connected to democracy. Until Americans shed the view of a one best school for all, the squabbles over whether traditional schooling is better than progressive will continue. Such a futile war of words ignores the fundamental purpose of public schooling as revitalizing democratic virtues in each generation. And this sadly — most sadly — ignores the many good schools that already exist.

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