

Message and Meaning

Reclaiming the Link Between Independence and the Essence of American Education

BY PATRICE O'NEILL MAYNARD

When the Association of Waldorf Schools found a public relations firm to help develop a “messaging” package and strategy, the firm’s CEO said it was amusing to him to assess our schools as a whole. Usually organizations have a product they want to offer, and then build an atmosphere around it — “branding” the product, as the saying goes, so that people associate positive feelings and experiences with it. With Waldorf schools, he explained, the substance of the brand — the positive associations — already exists within individual school communities; but the collective group of Waldorf schools has not yet harnessed this public perception in order to declare a “brand.”

Walking into any Waldorf school, one experiences an array of sensory impressions: beautiful colors, vibrant paintings, and drawings on the walls; interesting architectural detail; the sounds of recorder music, lyre music, orchestral music, children singing, rhythmic stamping or clapping; and interesting smells of popcorn popping in a classroom somewhere, or beeswax or paint, or furniture wax wafting from the woodworking studio. Each of the sensory experiences in a Waldorf school, in and of itself, is not usual for schools. But taken together, these experiences underscore some of the essentials of a genuine Waldorf school. This is, in part, what the public relations expert meant by the substance of the “branding” being already in place instead of *developing* the substance of the “branding” so that people wish to buy a product.

As we proceeded in the process of developing the Waldorf message — considering this difference between trying to brand what already exists and developing

language designed primarily to attract families — prompted an interesting debate about where the line exists where the language exceeds its ability to carry and represent the substance. The danger in having something that is rich with meaning and depth is that it defies “sound bites” and gimmicks. Go too far out into language that sounds catchy and the meaning might be lost. Cynicism will then follow, starting with your own people!

The challenge for all independent schools is in making sure that the language in our mission statements and in our marketing materials is real, that there is a clear line of connection between what we say we do and what we actually do. It may be tempting these days to overstate what we do in order to “compete” with other schools. Or schools may feel the pressure to adapt a posture of academic competitiveness to assuage the fears of parents who think narrowly about their children having good careers some day. But I’d argue that we need, first, not to panic and let fear drive our thinking or push us to adapt approaches to education that run counter to our core beliefs, and, second, take a good long look at what independent education has offered in the past, and can offer in the present and future.

Transforming the View of education Together

In a recent paper developed cooperatively with European and American Waldorf educators, this point is made eloquently: we have lost the appropriate imagination of what education is and what it is supposed to do for developing human beings. The paper — *Assessment Without High Stakes Testing: Protecting Childhood and the Purpose of School*, by David Mitchell, Douglas Gerwin, Ernst Schuberth, Michael Mancini, and Hansjoerg Hoffrichter — addresses in depth the crisis of contemporary education. It posits that we have forgotten or suppressed the true purpose of education in the materialistic drive to train instead of cultivate, to drill for good test results instead of developing human

capacities.

The authors define this crisis in our comprehension of education as a crisis of imagination, not of global competition for jobs. They remind us that children are unfolding human beings who learn in a variety of ways, but learn best when surrounded by a world made as beautiful as it can be, with teachers who are keenly interested in everything — especially their students — and a community that values its students because of their innate mystery and potential, that values the truth, ethical behavior, and the goodness of the world.

Instead, in our fear, we have slipped into a kind of crippled imagination of education that holds human beings as pails to be filled up with information, spilled out to see what’s there, and then filled up again. This way of thinking thrives on fear that inspires a maximum of cramming for tests, and a minimum of self-reliant thinking, imagination, creativity, human capacities like empathy and compassion, and disciplined selflessness for the common good.

Towards a Re-imagining of Education

Courage is one of the best responses to an imagination crippled by fear. To muster something from the essence of the heart and decide to ignore fear, or to use it for strength, is courage (*couer*, root word for courage, is the French word for heart). Is it possible for educators, particularly those in independent schools who are not “state employees” as our public schools colleagues are (equally committed but not equally able to decide on curriculum and approach), to muster courage and to build a richer, fuller, more complete imagination of education for our culture? I think the answer is *yes*. Specifically, I think we have the capacity within the broad independent school community to offer a re-imagined vision of education that is more hopeful than anything we offer today — and we start by reclaiming the word “Education” — and by underscoring it in our missions and marketing. Test

scores, college admission, competition, and performance might very well be part of the true value of education at some schools, but they are never the goal of true education.

In Waldorf schools, the world I can speak of best, we assume and expect that developing human beings who are acknowledged for all their gifts, who are stimulated to engage their hearts (as well as minds and bodies) in all they do, will actually stimulate performance from self-motivation and not from fear. To give students and their families truth, beauty, and goodness as the guiding principles of all education produces engagement, commitment, dedication, and performance. The performance produced is not for its own sake, but rather to build an inner habit of doing one’s best, making things as beautiful as they can be, leaving one’s world better than one found it, completing things for the sense of completion and its satisfaction.

Sending a message to the world about the ways of true learning communities — a world filled with educated people, interested in learning in school, out of school, and for life — along with a vision of such learners engaged in focused interest in the world, in each other, in inclusion, cooperation, and building community, might just be the best message we can send culture regarding the re-definition of education.

Other independent schools may differ from Waldorf schools in their approach, but I know that most hold similar ideals about the essence of quality education — about learning, inclusion, cooperation, community building, and truly healthy engagement with the world.

The “Brand Essence” of Education

The “brand essence” of education is this: “Giving a child tools to accomplish a life of fulfillment.” Skills for life, skills for any century, and skills for processing the world as good are skills that offer a young person possibility in many areas and, best of all, hope. Good teachers know that if a child’s

heart does not rise and engage with learning, little will be truly learned or remembered. If, on the other hand, a child hears or reads a lesson and is inspired, or loves the story, or loves a character in the story, or realizes that he or she could do something remarkable — and realizes this because of a well-done lesson — then hope rises in the child’s heart. Willingness follows hope. Striving follows this willingness. Miracles follow striving. Then there is completed education, transformation, and the realization of a human being’s potential.

Skills that teach the use of one tool or another — a computer, a pencil, or a math logarithm — offer definite possibilities. However, learning to use a tool does not, in and of itself, necessarily generate hope. Rising to the surface in our culture is the realization that clear thinking, feeling capable of solving any challenge that comes along and instinctively giving back to communities that have given to us, have been suppressed on the road of competitive achievement, the road to self-improvement at the expense of others, in striving to “triumph in the global market” instead of triumphing in self-mastery.

“Messaging” Is to Communicate meaning, Not to Sell Something

How bold can we be as educators and as independent schools? Can we redefine the meaning of education in our culture? Can we acknowledge the privilege it is to pursue education and to own the responsibility that comes with great privilege? If we are to tell the truth in our messaging, it must be to communicate the compelling truth that, once we learn, we can understand the world and we can work in the world. Once we can work we can heal and solve problems and share the privilege with others. We can learn, of course, and get a good job, and spend the money we earn on pleasure and comfort. But fulfillment comes most frequently from self-discipline and self-mastery in service to others. Giving and receiving gracefully provide

fulfillment and satisfaction most of all.

So, if it is a truthful message, the message of education is: come to learn, to grow, to be more than you originally thought possible, to gain insight, to understand yourself better so as to understand the world better; to understand the world better so as to understand yourself better. All education is, after all, self-education. Educators lead young people to find things out for themselves. Educators inspire a love of learning. Educators provide others a rich learning environment, rich substance to consider, and hope in every heart for fulfillment.

Messaging for All of education

There are messages for independent and faith-based schools in our culture to develop together especially in this time when public schooling — especially in the form of charter schools, most of which are imitations of independent schools — is commanding much public and philanthropic attention. Our community idealism wants good education to be available to all children for maximum success.

During this time it would be good to build a picture of the national heritage we enjoy of a complex variety in the ways of educating our youth. We can remind the nation and world that the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution were forged by men and women who were educated in many different ways. They were all schooled in tolerance for differing opinions and rigorous debate. Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Ben Franklin, Abigail Adams, Dr. Joseph Warren, Samuel Adams, Patrick Henry, Thomas Paine, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton were educated in home-schooling settings, boarding schools here and abroad, one-room school houses, private schools, town schools, and through self-education through reading and writing. Independence in education is a grand tradition in America unparalleled in the world. Had our founders all been schooled in similar ways, with a requirement to all

pass the same set of standardized tests, it is unlikely that we would have these enlightened documents or the democracy we enjoy today.

The United States is one of the few countries left with some forms of education not completely ministered by the government. It is in independent schools where new ideas can be forged and tested, unencumbered by government’s necessary oversight of taxpayer’s dollars.

If we can identify for our culture the unique opportunity available in America, a national treasure of freedom in education, with rigorous debate between independent schools and government-provided schools, we can protect the variegated landscape of ideas and methods available to us into the future. If we can build a platform for discussion about education that transcends special interests (industries, unions, politics, ideologies) and squarely debates the needs of our nation’s youth, we can lead the world in forging true excellence in education.

Indeed, to declare independent education as a necessary leaven in the development of excellent ideas for education, with sharing back and forth between government-funded schools and faith-based or ideology-based schools, we could protect and nurture the national treasure that is uniquely American.

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