AN EDUCATION OF VALUE

An education of value

The purposes and practices of schools

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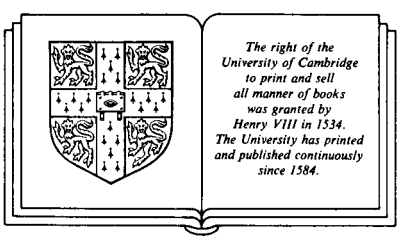

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TO

Stephen Kemp Bailey
(1916–1982)
and our children,
Jared,
Kerry,
and
Kate

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FOREWORD

This book offers insights into the schools of the United States that are broader and deeper than those in many of the recent reports on education. It brings together a historical sense of how our schools reached their present status, a perspective on the values that undergird educational quality, and a practical concern for how the schools work and what can be done to make them work better.

In dealing with the difficult problem of making useful generalizations about the variety of American schools, this volume is more successful than any we know. It recognizes the diversity, the quality, and the very great achievements of the schools, yet it is uncompromising in calling attention to shallowness within them or in the attitudes of those who plan for their needs. It recognizes significant controversies and deals with them evenhandedly.

An Education of Value is primarily about what goes on inside schools rather than about the activities of state and national governments. When it addresses such national issues as equality of opportunity, it considers their impact on teachers and students. It is full of ideas that can move people who work in schools to action. But these ideas are not presented as a series of steps for improving schools to be used in cookbook fashion. Instead, they are discussed with attention to their origins and values, so that readers are given concepts to inspire action and understanding to ensure that action is based on wisdom.

We undertook to write this brief foreword because both of us were long-time colleagues of Stephen K. Bailey, who originally planned a book about schooling in America with an emphasis on values. We knew him as a thinker and scholar and also as an activist and participant in public affairs, and we admired his capacity to weave these usually separate roles into one life. There are too few like him.

In a sense, the book that has emerged reflects these two faces of Steve Bailey. In doing so, it reaches back to historical and philosoph-

ical sources of the American experience, and it combines these with a recognition of what schools are like and what tasks teachers confront. In addressing the large issues of our national experience in education such as the tension between equality and excellence, the book brings qualities of balance, common sense, and understanding based on the historical record that in our view are uniquely valuable to those who must adjust education to the demands of a changing society and economy.

That these qualities pervade the book is partly the result of Stephen Bailey's original conception and his work on the early drafting; they are also present because of the skills and the perceptions of the three co-authors he brought together to work on the manuscript. Marvin Lazerson, Bruce McPherson, and Judith McLaughlin combined scholarly backgrounds in history, the humanities, and education with practical experience to produce a truly interdisciplinary study. They have written a clear and powerful statement about where our schools are, how they got there, and what broad values of the American tradition should be kept in mind by those who would improve them.

Harold Howe II
Francis Keppel
Harvard Graduate School of Education

PREFACE

From September to June each year, some 40 million young people are enrolled in the nation's public schools – kindergarten through twelfth grade. Patently, and in spite of dire claims to the contrary, public schooling is valued. If it were not valued, the nation's citizens would not invest about $127 billion annually in its maintenance. Current expenditures for public schools, even allowing for inflation, have more than tripled in the past twenty-five years. By 1987 they will be at least four times the 1957 expenditures. And, at least in recent years, in most parts of the country these increases have occurred in the face of declining school enrollments.

What is remarkable about the present condition of American public schooling is not the shrillness of public criticism, or the bog of professional despair, but the unfailing continuity of public support. Whatever the doleful criticisms and dire forebodings, public schools remain stable institutions. Viewed historically, they are a remarkable success. Since World War II alone, the percentage of 17-year-olds who graduate from high schools each year has risen from 48% to 75%, from just over 1 million in 1946–7 to over 3 million in the early 1980s – an extraordinary achievement. An increasing number of these youths have come from backgrounds that are educationally and culturally disadvantaged. Schools, to paraphrase Winston Churchill, have brought a growing percentage of the school-age population "under the Constitution."

And yet, paradoxically, the signs of public disaffection with the schools are legion. In 1979, a national sample of 16,000 high school seniors reported that only one-fifth of those questioned were "completely satisfied" with their educational experience. Forty percent were "neutral" to "completely dissatisfied." At the beginning of the 1980s, the Gallup Poll revealed that almost half of the public believed that the schools were doing a poor or only fair job. Only one-third had a

great deal of confidence in the people running educational institutions. Recent outbursts of concern from national commissions and studies, and from countless numbers of parents and students, attest both to the sense that something is wrong and to the determination to set the schools right.

To achieve the latter, Americans must take learning and learners seriously. America's schools can be reinvigorated. Young people can learn qualitatively more than they presently do. But these aims will require higher levels of political, moral, and financial commitments to schooling than currently exist. Teaching and learning can be substantially improved. But this will mean valuing teachers more highly and providing the working conditions and incentives that affirm their value.

An Education of Value is designed to stimulate new ways of thinking and talking about schools; it offers an alternative to many educational discussions that too often lead to simplistic solutions to complex problems. Long after the current wave of public interest in the schools has disappeared and the quick fixes have come and gone, the need to continue thinking creatively about schools will persist.

The human dimensions of education complicate the process of improving the schools. Schools are complex institutions. Teaching and learning are exacting activities involving a wide range of emotions and interactions as teachers and students establish who they are and what they want to achieve. The aspirations, fears, frustrations, joys, failures, and accomplishments are intimately bound up in teaching and learning. To treat the problems and the promises of schooling as if these dimensions did not exist, or as if they ought not to exist, devalues what we should cherish. Learning is more than just a cognitive activity; it involves all human experiences. Simplistic notions of learning and teaching limit their possibilities.

Just as the human interactions in school are complex, so too is the institution itself. There is no single "problem" of schooling. The expectations we have for our schools are enormously varied. Yet education is about the things we value. The schools Americans have created are and always have been value laden, and that has aroused inevitable controversy. But we can hardly imagine schools without values, and as long as we differ in values, we will disagree on what we want from schools.

These varied expectations and the multiplicity of values are a strength of our schools. It is a strength we sometimes are too ready to dismiss

in the face of demands that the schools "do it right." We want definite outcomes, clear returns on our investments. So we tell teachers to teach in a certain way or students to learn in a specific manner. But certainty is an illusion. There is no one best way to teach or to learn, no one best form of school organization, or curriculum, or teaching method that applies to us all.

If we can accept the reality that schools are value laden, and that as long as we care about schools they will touch our deepest emotions about ourselves, our children, our past, and our future, we will have come a long way in reshaping our approach to education. We will be able to understand that appeals to or demands for simple solutions, quick fixes, and technological cure-alls are often misguided and counterproductive.

A democracy requires twin goals for education from which there can be no retreat. Schools must be both equal and excellent. Equality in education is predicated on the belief that in a democracy all citizens are entitled to the skills necessary for thoughtful and active citizenship. Excellence in education comes from a commitment to learning, ranging from the basic skills of literacy and problem solving, to creative and critical thinking, to the desire to expand still further one's knowledge and skills. Equality does not require that everyone learn exactly the same things in exactly the same ways. It does require that differences in rates of learning, in interests, and in the purposes of schooling not be used to diminish opportunities to learn or to gain access to knowledge. Differences should not be converted into inequalities.

An Education of Value treats these issues in terms of public schooling. Since its origins in the nineteenth century, the public school has been central to the articulation of America's common purposes. It has embodied the commitment to opportunity and to social improvement, and for that, it has received enormous public support. But it has also been the target of widespread public dissatisfaction. Both the support and the dissatisfaction are measures of the public school's centrality to American life. This book reaffirms that centrality. It expresses the dissatisfactions and hopes in the struggle for schools that are both equal and excellent for all students.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I, "Recurring Priorities, Recurring Tensions," examines the varied historical expectations Americans have held for the schools, how great those expectations have been, and how they have changed over time. The historical

analysis presented in Chapter 1 reveals the oversimplifications that can mar our understanding of education. It is designed to distinguish the persistent dilemmas that have faced the schools and to separate them from the ephemeral issues that so often dominate contemporary concerns. The historical record reveals the tension between schools open to all and yet not serving all adequately.

These themes are further developed in the discussion of curriculum reform in Chapter 2. The curriculum is where questions about the transmission of knowledge are centered. What knowledge is most worth having? Should all students learn the same things? Can one curriculum simultaneously enhance equality and excellence? How should we determine what should be taught? Who should make that judgment? These questions have generated some of the most heated controversies in American education. During the 1950s and 1960s, the last great era of curriculum reform, they were manifest in the creation of new curricula in the sciences, mathematics, social studies, English, and foreign languages. The expectations were grandiose, the commitments passionate. The results were often disappointing, in part because the reformers misunderstood the culture of the school. How the curriculum reform movement evolved, and why the disappointments were greater than the satisfactions, is the central focus of the analysis.

Part II, "The Purposes of Schooling," examines equality and excellence. Chapter 3 shows how the shift in education from a nineteenth-century concern with preparing students for moral and political purposes to a twentieth-century concern with preparing them for economic roles sharpened the conflict between equality and educational excellence, at a cost to both. The most obvious manifestation of this has been the tracking system that now afflicts most schools – a way of grouping students that exacerbates their differences in learning styles and capabilities and converts those differences into unequal access to knowledge. The exaggeration of inequality and the lack of excellence serve to undermine one of the most important purposes of schooling: the education of youths for intelligent and active citizenship based on shared skills and knowledge. Excellence for some should not be obtained at the expense of others. The acceptance of inequality corrupts our commitment to learning.

Chapter 4 explores a definition of excellence in learning that sees it as an expansive process involving intellect, emotions, intuition, and will. Learning is objective, passionate, and social. This concep-

tion of learning takes us considerably beyond the current view that the schools should first teach basic skills and only later more creative and sophisticated skills. The basic skills of reading, writing, and computing cannot be effectively or meaningfully taught if they are separated from such educational goals as imaginative expression and critical thinking. They ought not to be separated from aesthetics, imagination, and reasoning. Literacy that assumes minimal skill levels is not likely to be achieved, but even more important, it will not motivate students to continue learning. Nor will such low expectations lead to schools in which teachers are passionately committed to teaching.

Part III, "Learning and Teaching," turns to those two issues directly. As a concrete example of the curricular change issues raised in Part II, Chapter 5 examines the promise and the difficulties that educators face in using microcomputers to enhance learning for all students. It addresses questions of access to computers, the use of computers, and how teachers can learn to think imaginatively about their educational uses.

Chapter 6 considers the practice of teaching. The present conditions of teaching militate against new, energetic, creative teaching practices. Teachers are overburdened and underrewarded; they are given few useful opportunities for personal and professional renewal and refreshment. Overwhelmed by the ambiguities and uncertainties inherent in their craft, they know better than anyone else how difficult it is to produce major change in schools. They understand, too, that teaching is a complex and negotiated process; although the teacher teaches something to someone, the learner shapes what and how the something is taught, and in doing so, reshapes the act of teaching itself. Unless teaching is understood as a complicated practice in which the outcomes are always uncertain, and unless what teachers do is taken seriously, there is little chance that learning in the schools will be improved. We need to see teachers as learners and provide them with opportunities to take their own learning seriously.

In Chapter 7 we argue that historical issues in schooling are still active forces, and often powerful determinative factors, in the forging of contemporary policies. The chapter concludes with a reform agenda that begins with the proposition that most reform, to be effective, must begin with empowering teachers, principals, and other educators to improve their own teaching and learning. This agenda emphasizes the desirability of individual schools to have a sense of

mission, examines ways in which the quality of teaching and teachers can be improved, and recommends improvements in the selection, education, and perspectives of principals. It urges the formation of coalitions to support public schools and recommends organizational and other changes to enhance the educative power of schools.

Throughout this book, we refer to *American education* and the *schools,* as if there existed a monolith called the *educational system*. But all schools are not the same. Changes will vary with the nature and quality of each school. There are 87,000 public schools in America, located in 16,000 school districts. The problems of an urban secondary school in polyglot Los Angeles are, in many ways, far removed from those of a rural school in South Dakota. Some schools are staffed with well-educated, talented professionals; others are all but overwhelmed by staff mediocrity. These and other variables mean that any generalizations about what exists or what ought to exist in the schools must necessarily be subjected to refinements and qualifications demanded by local specificity. And yet, we can talk about the totality of American education because the cultivation of an informed and expanded intelligence, the enhancement of creative expression and critical thinking, and the development of active and meaningful citizenship cross regional, racial, and class lines.

Many of the recent discussions of education tend to treat the schools in utilitarian terms, arguing that an improved educational program can enhance America's prosperity, increase productivity, and reduce unemployment. We hope that schools will in fact contribute to these ends. One of the functions of this book is to reaffirm the instrumental potential of education. But we also believe that education is more than an instrument. Education is preeminently its own justification, and in the process of becoming educated we become more fully human. From this may flow all kinds of derivative values, but the ultimate value of education is an enlightened mind and the released powers of individuals – alone and together.

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An Education of Value came into being through the initiative of Stephen K. Bailey, former Francis Keppel Professor of Policy and Administration at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Steve Bailey spent most of his professional life engaged in efforts to improve American education. Believing that public education could enhance individual freedom and foster democratic communities, he made what he called "the case for optimism." When he surveyed the educational landscape in the early 1980s, however, he was deeply disturbed by the loss of faith in schooling. This book grew out of his belief in the need to elevate the caliber of the discussion about schools.

As president of the National Academy of Education, Steve Bailey organized a panel of distinguished educators who informed the early stages of this study. Our thanks to José Cardenas, Joseph Featherstone, Patricia Albjerg Graham, Thomas Green, Arthur Jefferson, Diane Ravitch, Joseph Schwab, Lee Shulman, Theodore Sizer, Martin Trow, and David Tyack.

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On March 27, 1982, with the study in its early stages, Steve Bailey died of cancer. As Steve's co-authors, we undertook to complete the work he had set in motion. *An Education of Value* was inspired by Steve's vision for American education and stands as a memorial to him. Full responsibility for its contents, though, rests solely with us.

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