

What is the Difference between the North Star and Northfield?
How Educational Goals and Ideals Become Confused*

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I have a simple point to share with you. Trouble is, I'm going to beat it near to death. The reason for doing so is that it is a very important point. But because it is simple, it is easy to miss. And when it is missed, all kinds of bad things follow.

The simple point is this: There is a difference between what we can do and what we ought to hope for. Between what is real and within the realm of possibility, on the one hand, and what is ideal and impossible, on the other. "Yup," you reply, "that's simple, all right. So what?"

The answer to "So what?" is that much trouble arises when we forget the difference, when we merge the real and the ideal, and we think we can make the ideal real. Here's a good example, one you have all heard before: "By the year 2000, all children will enter school ready to learn." When this ideal became one of the Goals 2000, did anyone notice that the U.S. had one of the highest child poverty rates of any industrialized nation? Did anyone notice that the absence of universal health care would leave many children without adequate nutrition and medical care? Did anyone seriously engage the massive body of data showing the very tight relationship between socio-economic class and readiness to learn, such that even if all children somehow entered school ready to learn some would be a whole lot more ready than others?

When the hope that all children would enter school ready to learn became a goal, when it shifted from an ideal to something we could make real, it became a standard as well as a goal. That is, it became something on which we would be judged. When goals become standards, they serve as a basis for appraising our labors. Given that goals so easily become standards, you would think we would be very, very careful about what we allow to become goals. But we are not. As you know, it turned out that by the year 2000 all children were not entering school ready to learn. It appears someone failed—and we all know who that someone is.

Perhaps the fact that we harnessed the atom, placed men on the moon, mapped the human genome, and occupy the premier position among Earth's nation-states leads us to think that there is almost nothing we cannot do. With such an attitude, why not then convert our ideals to goals, hold them proudly before an adoring public, and willingly risk the possibility of failure? After all, there may be some slim chance of success, and if it were obtained, what an enormous coup it would be. Those who hold such hopes before us not only delude themselves, they bring harm and defeat for those who are captured by this idle rhetoric and these false promises.

*An address presented as the concluding session of the Summer Institute for Superintendents on Probing National Issues in Education, held on Mackinac Island, Michigan, July, 2000.

Mythology and scripture are filled with grand characters whose lives were impaled by such overweening ambition. The Greeks had a name for it: *hubris*. A pride and an arrogance so great it cannot be realized, but which so preoccupies the person that it ineluctably brings about his or her destruction. Given the goals for school children and for teachers one hears today, it seems that *hubris* has become the educational affliction of our times. Certainly it has in that domain where education and politics intersect.

Am I saying that ambition is wrong, or that ideals are out of place? Decidedly not. What troubles me is the act of confusing goals with ideals. Doing so is something like confusing Northfield with the North Star. Northfield, you see, is the place you want to go. The North Star provides a way to guide you there. You aren't going to the North Star; you're going to Northfield. On the journey to Northfield, the North Star is the means you use to establish the correct direction for your travel.

Ideals are like North Stars. They are orienting devices; they offer us a sense of direction. They guide our journey to a destination. But they are not the destination; they are not the objective or the goal. Northfield is the goal, for it is the place we are trying to reach. And Northfield is a very different kind of place from the North Star. You can see what happens when these two become confused, for how would you set out on a journey for which you were not sure whether you were going to Northfield or the North Star? For Northfield you need a car and gas and a day-and-a-half. For the North Star, you need a rocket ship, propellant, a very different navigational geometry, and far more than one lifetime to make the trip.

The value of the North Star is not as a place to get to, but as guide to getting to places you can get to. Ideals serve that purpose; they orient us and provide direction to our efforts, but they are not the same as the places where we are going. They are not our goals, our objectives, or our standards.

Consider President Clinton's recent declaration that all children should leave school ready to succeed (presumably the soul mate of the earlier goal that "all children will enter school ready to learn"). As educators we can interpret this declaration in two different ways. We can, on the one hand, treat it as a goal, wherein we would then operationally define "success," hire test makers to measure it, and fashion some system for apportioning accountability for the results obtained. Or we can, on the other hand, hold it as an ideal, wherein we would ask whether the work in which we are already engaged and such progress as we are already making show any likelihood of enabling graduates to be successful. That is, we can examine the objectives and standards we have already set to determine if they are oriented in directions likely to yield success after school.

What's wrong with being held accountable for having all children leave school ready to succeed? The same thing that's wrong with being held accountable for getting to the North Star. We cannot accomplish either one with the means at our disposal. A young adult's success after school depends on far more than what happens to that person in school. As these economic boom times have made evident, in good times there is a lot of success to spread around—independent of how one performs in school. We also know that in times of economic distress, success can be hard to come by no matter what the schools do. It is also fascinating to note in this age of the burgeoning Internet that success appears to be available

even to those who drop out of school—provided they have computational skills and find work with some promising Internet start-up. There is, indeed, silliness and futility to be found in making the ideal of leaving school ready to succeed into the goal of leaving school ready to succeed.

Indeed, there is more than silliness and futility involved. There is also the possibility of outright harm, particularly for the very children one is putatively trying to aid. The harm arises when the conversion of an ideal to a goal brings about a huge rise in expectations for the schools. When these expectations prove impossible, judgments of failure ensue, typically leading to the consequence of eroding support for the schools. I believe that this chain of events is occurring in the case of the high-stakes testing movement. There is abroad in the land a sense that the schools can succeed with every child, that every child can be taught so that he or she will attain some acceptable level of literacy, numeracy, social competence and occupational skill. These outcomes are somehow to be realized regardless of differences in family background, experience, health care, and levels of school funding. This objective of preparing each child to leave school ready to succeed, once an ideal of American public schooling, is simply beyond our actual grasp, for it would require profound alterations to our political economy and social institutions to even approach it, to say nothing of the logical impossibility of achieving the Lake Woebegone Effect (where all the children are above average) implicit in this and other recent educational reform goals.

As the larger public becomes witness to the test results, to the machinations to which some schools and their administrators and teachers will go to obtain good scores, to the frustrations of the students who face too many tests whose pertinence they cannot fathom, there follows a resulting loss of confidence in the work of educators. This loss of confidence can take many forms, including poor publicity in the media, enhanced initiatives for alternatives to public schooling, and even a reduction in funding for schools.¹ Such are the possible costs for confusing goals and ideals, for adopting our ideals as our goals.

We can be extraordinarily naive about the goal-setting process. Consider this rather nasty implication of another of the original Goals 2000. Remember the goal that by the year 2000 more than 90% of students will graduate from high school? This goal is a quite marvelous example of that old aphorism, be careful what you wish for, for you might get it. While this goal sounds laudatory, it carries serious downside consequences, for it is completely oblivious to the realities of marginal utility, wherein a high school diploma that is possessed by almost no one or by almost everyone is not a very valuable commodity. Employers are **not** likely to use a high school diploma as an employment criterion if only a very small percentage of the populations has one, or if nearly everyone has one.

Quite the contrary. If virtually everyone holds a high school diploma, the diploma is actually less valuable as a device for economic success. We see something of this phenomenon in the upshifting of the qualifications for good jobs from a high school diploma to a college degree, where the higher the percentages of students who complete the 12th grade, the more likely employers are to turn to the college degree as the standard for entry into the array of occupations leading to middle and upper class incomes.

In the face of this trend, it is all the more remarkable to contemplate the possibility that we might accomplish more social justice by adopting policies that diminish the number of students who receive the high school diploma. Just how this might work is explained by the philosopher and policy analyst, Thomas F. Green.² If the schools reduced the number of diplomas awarded, from say 75% of the age cohort to, say, 60% of the age cohort, employers would be forced to use other criteria to assess the qualifications of job applicants, inasmuch as employers could no longer find enough diploma-holders to fill the available jobs. These alternative criteria might more readily allow those who, for a myriad of reasons, did not or could not complete school to apply for and receive jobs that provide respectable wages. Thus it may be possible to achieve a higher degree of social justice by restricting entrance to the high school and its diploma than by expanding entrance and diploma-granting.

In raising this possibility I do not wish to imply that employers would seek illiterate or unschooled workers. Schools would remain necessary and essential, but their commitment to vocational readiness would not be marked so exclusively by the high school diploma. If vocational readiness were supplanted as the primary rationale for school, particularly secondary school, what then would take its place or at the least share top billing with it? Ah, there's the rub. We have just raised the keystone question, What are schools for? The answer—you know what I am going to say, don't you?—requires a statement of our ideals. Not goals, not objectives, not standards, but ideals. We're not looking for Northfields here. We're looking for North Stars. We are looking for those ascendant, shining lights that offer guidance and direction as we try to find our way through the daily trials of setting and meeting goals and standards.

If I asked you to take out a sheet of paper and write down your North Stars, could you do it? Could you frame two, three, or four high ideals that serve to guide your work, that permit you to assess the direction of your travels? Suppose I asked if your staff knows what your North Stars are? How about your Board members? A superintendent friend once told me, in a humorous but revealing moment, that his board's agenda consists of the 5 B's: Buses, Boundaries, Bricks, Budgets, and Bastards. It may be inevitable that school board agendas are often consumed by the 5 B's. My concern is whether, in the course of such deliberations, the board and the superintendent have and use a common cluster of North Stars to guide their deliberations.

If I have accomplished what I hope to accomplish, you now have a somewhat more refined appreciation of the difference between goals and ideals, and for the nasty things that can happen when the two get confused, especially when ideals get converted into goals. If I have made my case persuasively, you might be thinking that you would not mind having a few more North Stars in your arsenal. Perhaps, if I am truly fortunate as a speaker, you're hoping that I'll offer a few for your consideration. Well, I'm glad you asked (you did, didn't you?), because that is exactly what I propose to do.

The Pursuit of Worthy Ideals

In his ruminations on education, Aristotle thought of teachers more like farmers than carpenters. Wood does not become a chair unless the carpenter acts upon it to change its form and function. A seed of corn, on the other hand, will become an ear of corn without any intervention to change its form or function. Nature, not man, turns the seed to an ear of corn, while man changes the wood to a chair. What the farmer does is increase the likelihood that the seed will become what it is destined to become, and that more seeds will become fine ears of corn than would be the case were it not for the attention of the farmer. So it is with the child and the teacher. The child will grow to an adult without the teacher. But with worthy teachers constructively engaged with their students, more children will become fine adults than would occur otherwise. What is it that teachers and schools and administrators do to nurture and guide the child's development into a fine adult? The answers to this question constitute the search for our North Stars.

The first of the North Stars in my sky is the cultivation of the child's capacity to reason, to analyze and synthesize phenomena and ideas, and to discern true from false, good from bad, beauty from ugliness, and the practical from the impractical. Of all the things that teachers and schools may do to assist in the development of the child, perhaps none is more important than enhancing the capabilities of the mind. The reason why the school and its teachers are so important to the success of this venture is that they have no other goal for the child but that of enabling him or her to be the very best that is possible for the species to be. Achieving a good result in this regard calls for a setting where teaching and the learning are as free of dogma, ideology, convention and stereotype as humanly possible. The school assumes this neutrality perhaps better than any other institution in society, and thus holds a special place for the cultivation of the powers of the child's mind.

This ideal of cultivating the child's power to reason directs our journeys through the several subject matters of the curriculum, such as arithmetic, language development, and such disciplines as history, biology, and the social sciences. To hold this ideal high is to show less concern for how well the youngsters score on a standardized test and more concern with whether they can think through a life experience using what they have learned in their subject matter classes. In so arguing, I do not wish to belittle the salience of standardized testing in the lives of educators. That would be foolish of me, given how much attention is currently focused on tests. Yet I do want to say that if you as a superintendent cannot detect a strong relationship between the tests and the student's capacity to reason, then the tests must be condemned. For if they are not, it is the cultivation of the child's power to reason that will be condemned.

The second North Star is fostering moral discernment and right action. Moral discernment is the ability to distinguish right from wrong, good from bad. It is more than *knowing* what is good or bad, or right or wrong; it is also being able to figure it out, to work it through for oneself. Very little of what we encounter in our lives is clearly right or wrong. Rather, human action falls along an incredibly wide continuum, and only at the very ends of this continuum are actions clearly right or wrong. To handle all the many cases of moral and ethical action that fall in the great in-between, we must be able think carefully about what we

and others are doing, connecting our actions to grand principles, important customs, and valued norms. That is what the cultivation of moral discernment is all about.

Moral discernment and right action are often at odds with one another, as when we want to tell a child the right thing to do in contrast to helping the child think through the right action for himself or herself. This tension ought to be a key part of the education of the young, but it is unfortunately too little attended to in these times of character education, life skills, and virtue-based curricula. In our efforts to attend to such things as school violence, intolerance, lewdness, and customs of dress that challenge standards of taste and decorum, I believe we incline too much to telling the young what to do and far too little to assisting them with thinking things through for themselves. Our moral codes and creeds become lopsidedly impositional, without encouraging the needed reflection, appraisal, and experimentation with alternative courses of action.

In so stating, I do not wish to impugn imposing moral strictures on students. Our aspiration should be to strive for a balance between a small number of well-enforced moral rules in relation to a larger number of moral issues and problems to be pondered and worked out by students. Here again the school is an ideal place, for it more than any other institution for children ought to encourage exploration in the cultivation of moral discernment, as it sets forth a limited number of clear guidelines for right action.

The third North Star is one with which you are very familiar. It pertains to the cultivation of citizenship. However, I believe you will find my version of this notion different from what you have heard before. The ideal to be sought here is the preparation of the student for effective participation in public space. By “public space” I mean the places where we assemble to forge a community, earn a livelihood, and conduct the affairs of civil society. Democracies depend on strong public spaces, places where people congregate to form neighborhoods, enact laws, dispense justice, govern their schools, and offer care for those in distress or under duress. It requires considerable skill to function well in public space, as one must be deeply informed and passionately committed in order to be effective there, but one must also be able to listen attentively, hear views that contrast with one’s own, and be prepared to accept adjudication and compromise.

Public space is the setting you enter with your most devoutly held beliefs and principles, while understanding and acknowledging that others will not share your beliefs or your principles. Public space permits you to express your beliefs, but disallows you from compelling others to adhere to them. Public space is where difference is honored in the course of searching for common ground, ground that preserves and protects the general good with the smallest possible consequence for personal and particular goods.

If we possess an understanding of public space and a competence to function there, we are able to assure one another large measures of liberty while nurturing the good that is common to us as neighbors, workers, citizens, and members of the human race. Strong public spaces permit us to resolve differences with words rather than fists or guns. Strong public spaces permit us to live amicably beside those who differ from us, taking an interest in the

promotion of their welfare as well as our own. Strong public spaces are wonders to behold, for they are the bedrock of democracies and the guarantors of liberty.

America's schools are remarkable public spaces. They are stunning settings for teaching the young how to qualify for and take membership in public space. It took us a long time and a great deal of struggle to fashion schools that are such wonderful analogs of strong, adult public spaces. We must use them well, as places where children learn to listen to those who are different from and who differ with them, while gaining respect for those differences; as places where the young come to understand that it is not easy to find common ground while honoring one another's differences, but that the struggle to do so is essential for democratic institutions; and finally as places where reason and evidence must prevail over privilege and power.

No other institution is so well positioned to cultivate the child's competence for functioning in public space. This North Star, this ideal, harks back to the very reasons for the establishment of a system of public education in the United States. What a remarkable dream that was, that every person, regardless of birth or station, creed or color, dream or deficit, could participate in the governance of the nation while pursuing his or her own vision of the good life. This dream is made possible by the guarantee of an education to everyone. But unless this education includes a preparation for public space, for a coming together for the common weal and the maintenance of a civil society, it is a dream denied. This particular North Star is not much discussed in the contemporary rhetoric of educational reform, yet unless we make it a key element in orienting our journeys as educational leaders, we place our own democracy at grave risk.

There is one more North Star. Actually it is a cluster star, consisting of three smaller stars. They are wonder, curiosity and imagination. What an ideal we embrace when we assert that our schools are committed to the nourishing of wonder, curiosity and imagination. I want to say just a bit about each of them.

Wonder. To be in awe of the mystery, the magic, the scale, the depth, the nuance, the clarity and the confusion. To acknowledge forces beyond one's own powers and any powers of which one is aware. To understand that luck and fate and chance can never be fully placed within the harnesses of human control. To grasp that no matter how much we try to transcend ourselves, there will always be that which transcends us. To love the world so much that you are one with it.

Curiosity. To thirst for understanding. To accept that there are matters which one will not or cannot understand, but to refuse to abandon the search for understanding. To want to know, not only by means of eye and ear, but by smell and taste and touch. To ask why, and how, and when, and where, and with whom. To go where others have already been simply because you have not yet been there, and to go where others have not yet been because you want to be there. To seek a sense of one's place in the history of the human race, knowing that the search itself will reinterpret that place.

Imagination. To turn your thoughts inside out and upside down. To break through the barriers of mind that others innocently or willfully place before us. To turn around and go backward. To turn around and go forward. To just turn around. To conceive. To dream. To see where eyes cannot peer, and where ears cannot hear. To play with one's work and work with one's play. To turn a memo into a concerto; an agenda into a poem. To fashion one's ideas as if they were to be rendered in clay or bronze. To paint one's own life as if it were a beautiful canvas.

Wonder, curiosity and imagination. A grand cluster of stars, comprising surpassing ideals for educators. Most young children enter the school with them, and then seem to lose them over time. Some have said it happens because of the school. The French philosopher, Helvetius, said: "Children are born ignorant, not stupid. It is education that makes them stupid." I do not agree. Oh, I agree that it can happen, but not that it need happen. It is more that school happens at a time when mind and body are called upon to attend to what we might call the facts of existence, rather than the fantasies. The school abets this process when it insists that the student put away the things of childhood, for so often among these are wonder, curiosity and imagination. The challenge for educators is how to nourish these traits while attending to the facts of existence, such that the learner is not asked to abandon wonder for reality, curiosity for authority, or imagination for acceptance.

Although any of the traditional school subjects can serve as occasions for nourishing wonder, curiosity and imagination, the fine and performing arts seem especially well suited. Art, music, dance, and theater are replete with opportunities to nourish these enchanting habits of mind, as anyone knows who has experienced the wonder of standing before Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, or sensed the imagination in the paintings of Dali and Kandinsky, or witnessed the uses of curiosity in a Greek tragedy or Shakespearean drama. However in these times of attention to proficiency in writing and calculation, and to the hard sciences and higher mathematics, the arts struggle mightily for our attention. It is strange how a goal of being first in the world in math and science passes our lips without so much as a pause, but that of being first in the world in ballet or symphonic composition seems almost humorous to many of us.

Yet it is this very inattention to the arts that may permit us to deploy them to remarkable ends. Because we are not madly writing test items on the *pas de deux*, Giotto, polytonality, *leitmotiv*, Balanchine, and pointillism, we have degrees of freedom we do not have with the multiplication tables, coefficients of friction, rules of grammar, and causes of the Civil War. The fine and performing arts are havens for the nourishing of wonder, curiosity and imagination in ways that high stakes tests too often deny to the more conventional school subjects. Might it be possible to attend to the arts in ways that foster these marvelous traits of mind and spirit? Well, it depends, doesn't it, on what North Stars you elect to hang in your educational firmament.

I have given you my candidates for the top four. They are cultivating the exercise of reason, fostering moral discernment and right action, preparing for effective participation in public space, and nourishing wonder, curiosity, and imagination. I call them North Stars because they are ideals. They are compass points for a journey to destinations of another kind. They are illuminations for the paths we take to reach the Northfields that have been set before us as places we must go. When we set out our ideals with care and commit to them with passion, they have the advantage of alerting us that we may not want to go to today's Northfield, or perhaps there is a way to get to today's Northfield that does not befoul the our compass or extinguish the light that illuminates the path.

By this time you may be agreeing with my opening remark, saying to yourselves, "Well, he said he would beat the point the point near to death, and he has." Of course, I also said it was a simple point, and it's not, is it? It is, rather, a challenging point; at least I hope you find it so. It also has some confusion about it. One of these confusions is the status of those goals that are part of Goals 2000, goals such as all children entering school ready to learn and 90+% of them leaving school with a diploma and ready to succeed. I criticized these statements, suggesting they were not goals at all and implied that they were more like ideals. But given the ideals I offered, there is not much comparison between what I described as ideals and the goals in Goals 2000. So what are those things that are being bandied about in state and national reform movements?

I don't know. They're not goals because they aren't real. They are not ideals, because they are neither deep nor profound. Perhaps they are dreams, although if we go there, some will say they are nightmares. On this question of what they are, I agree with Susan Ohanian, who in the opening sentences of the lead article in a recent issue of the *Phi Delta Kappan* (January, 2000, p, 345) writes: "George Bush the Elder called it America 2000. Bill Clinton calls it Goals 2000. I call it an alphabet soup of bureaucratic interference in the lives of children, and I say the hell with it."

Although my concerns are different from hers, I think she has the right idea. These goals are pernicious creatures, holding the potential to do serious harm by eroding support for free, public education. They are not good goals, nor good ideals. Whatever they are, they are neither guided nor illuminated by high educational ideals. If they were so guided, I believe that not only would they be very different from what they are now, they would also be heard more in the voices of teachers, parents, students, and community leaders than in rhetoric of policy analysts, reform gurus, governors, and presidents.

Is it not time for goals that are real? Goals that are connected to the lives of those who must implement them and who gain or lose from their consequences. Goals that help us advance and improve, in directions that cohere with our most enlightened and venerable ideals. Ideals that make our goals worthy of our allegiance and our best efforts. For without wondrous ideals, goals become exercises in strategy and tactics, without nobility or lasting human benefit. Yet merely having ideals is not enough. We must also refine them, share them, and lead by encouraging others to have and share ideals.

It seems a fine role for a superintendent, does it not? One who hangs stars. And polishes them so they are so much more visible to the rest of us. One who is always wondering whether and how the daily struggle brings us closer to or further way from those points of light that define what is worthwhile and important in the education. One who works at keeping goals lined up with ideals. Here are the reasons we love education so much. Where else but in fairy tales are ordinary people gifted with the power to hang stars? I'll tell you where. In education. Are we not the lucky ones, to be part of so uplifting and fabulous an endeavor?

Endnotes

1. The possibility of reduced commitment to, and funding for, public schools was suggested to me by Thomas F. Green. The current upbeat economic times do not provide a good test for this possibility. However, should we encounter a sustained economic downturn, the consequences for public schooling may become very evident.
2. Thomas F. Green, *Predicting the Behavior of the Educational System* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1980). Reissued by Educator's International Press, Troy, New York.