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# Educators for a Democratic Way of Life

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Today, many Americans, including educators, are alarmed at anti-democratic trends in our society. Fragmentation, prejudice, and violence surround our schools and poison school cultures. High-stakes testing and privatization of schools erode teachers' authority and agency of teachers, students, and communities. Teacher-blaming further undermines the dignity of the vocation of teaching and the power of educators. Educational institutions of all kinds are under financial and political attack.

What can we, as citizen educators and lay citizens, do to reclaim our schools and higher education institutions as civic anchors of our democracy? We claim our responsibility as educators to prepare citizens as co-creators of the democratic way of life.

This understanding of education and this view of citizenship and democracy are rooted in a dynamic and evolving tradition with profound relevance in an age of diminished hope.

The story of education in America, like the story of democracy, has chapters of tragedy and injustice that need to be acknowledged—segregated schools which were far from “separate but equal,” tracking systems which consigned students to numbing labor stripped of dignity and intellectual life.

But the story of education in America also includes great wellsprings of democratic energy which constitute a heritage of what John Dewey called “social intelligence,” accumulating and passing knowledge and insight from one generation to the next.

At the heart of the democratic educational narrative was the ideal of education and learning as a co-creative process that liberates the talents of each person, each community, and each cultural group for contribution to the whole. Jane Addams, the settlement house leader who helped generations of immigrants contribute to American democracy, expressed it well: “We are gradually requiring of the educator that he shall free the powers of each man and connect him with the rest of life.” W.E.B. Du Bois, who influenced the black freedom struggle across the 20<sup>th</sup> century, said the aim of black striving in a hostile world is “to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture...to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius.”

Educators in many settings are re-articulating why the *public* matters in education and why education's deepest purpose is preparing students to be agents of democratic change and contributors to a democratic way of life. In recent decades, tribal colleges have stressed the importance of culture and community-building. Broad based community organizations have conceived of themselves as “universities of public life” where people learn skills of effective and powerful public action and decision making, in the phrase of the community organizers like Ernesto Cortes. Here and there schools and institutions of higher education aspire to become “democracy schools,” “democracy colleges,” and “democracy universities.”

This narrative, widespread but largely invisible, needs a spotlight. It also needs to become a foundation for a united movement of educators across all levels of education for the democratic way of life.

In American history, democracy has been “a word the real gist of which still sleeps, quite unawakened...a great word, whose history remains unwritten,” as the poet Walt Whitman put it in *Democratic Vistas*. We commit to the work of writing democracy's next chapter. We are launching a national discussion, to be hosted on the John Dewey Society Democracy in Education site, to develop strategies for building this movement and ways for people to join in.

If you or your group are interested in this work, contact us; send your ideas for actions; and help to develop our strategies. The email address is [democracyineducation.info@gmail.com](mailto:democracyineducation.info@gmail.com)