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COMMENTARY

What Defines a Good School?

By **David Gamberg**

Words matter. They matter in all aspects of life, especially when we are talking about how to define a school. Of course, brick and mortar are only a small part of the story. The academic and emotional climate, both inside and outside the physical space, gets us closer to an understanding of what forms the basis of any school. Throughout our country, we have many opinions, positions, and reform efforts competing to control the narrative not only of what defines a school, but also, more significantly, of what it means to be educated in 2016 and beyond.

My daily travels in the schoolhouse as a superintendent give me an inside look at what constitutes a school. I am fortunate that my professional work over the last 30 years has put me inside dozens of schools and in contact with hundreds of educators, scholars, and support staff. I have also had the good fortune to be in the company of thousands of children and their families. No, I do not consider myself an expert on all things that define a school. I do, however, have a vested interest in seeing that the schools of today and those that are created in the future are shaped with the care and respect they so richly deserve.

The call to have children as young as 8 or 9 years old "college- and career-ready" does not create the same narrative as building a sound foundation in childhood filled with play and creativity. Among the many other more important ways to engage the hearts and minds of our youngest students, we must promote the childhood experience in all its wonder.

Schools have always existed as an expression of how a given community values its children, and how a society looks at the future—a covenant handed down from one generation to the next. The problems that beset our social, political, and economic well-being as a nation are, in fact, *not* born at the doorsteps of our schools. They are certainly not derived exclusively from the province of our public schools. The crumbling roads, bridges, and tunnels of the infrastructure that is the lifeblood of a thriving economy demand our

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learners of a true school. A climate of fear and hostility, or a tone of acrimony and mistrust, will yield neither a school that serves the needs of children nor the globally competitive country that some imagine will arrive when we replace the old with the new. Schools of the future—no matter their size, technological sophistication, or cost-effectiveness—should always begin with the best qualities of our humanity.

We must choose our words carefully in this fight. We must strive to retain the core values that define a school as a place that upholds the tenets of our democracy and cares about people, rather than a place that efficiently manages the system or pits stakeholders against one another. "Education," in the words of John Dewey, "is a process of living and not a preparation for future living."

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