

Reading
Writing
Math
Civics
Geography
Science
Foreign Language
Physical education
Art and music
Organized athletics
Home economics
Vocational education
School lunch programs
Half-day kindergarten
School transportation
Business education
Driver's education
Consumer education
Advanced Placement programs
Head start
Sex education
Multicultural awareness
Antismoking education

Special education
Drug and alcohol abuse education
Peace, culture, and recreation education
Career education
Parenting education
Behavior adjustment classes
Character education
Environmental education
Women's studies
African-American studies
Keyboarding and computer education
Global education
Teen pregnancy awareness
Nonsexist education
Expanded talent and gifted opportunities
Hispanic heritage studies
Bus, bicycle, sun, and water safety
Early childhood education
Alternative education

School breakfast programs
English-as-a-second-language
After-school programs
Sexual abuse prevention
Bilingual education
Preschool programs for children at risk
America 2000 (Republican)
Child abuse monitoring
Conflict resolution and peer mediation
CPE training
HIV/AIDS education
Distance education
Goals 2000 (Democrat)
Full-day kindergarten
Health and wellness programs
Entrepreneurial and innovation skills development
Service learning
Expanded computer and Internet education
More standardized testing

Bullying prevention programs
No Child Left Behind (Republican)
Personal finance literacy
Distance learning
Expanded health and psychological services
Contextual learning skill development
Organ donor awareness
Tech Prep and School to Work programs
At-risk and dropout prevention
Homeless education
Drug resistance programs
Jump Start, Early Start, Even Start, Prime Start
Race to the Top (Democrat)
Tuition programs
Child care and after-school care programs
Test-prep programs
Obesity monitoring

Schools Cannot Do It Alone

Building Public Support for
AMERICA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

CONTAINS THE BLUEBERRY STORY

JAMIE VOLLMER

SCHOOLS CANNOT DO IT ALONE

Building public support
for America's public schools

Jamie Vollmer



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TO MY FATHER

*He was the best teacher I ever had,
but I don't think I ever told him.*

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Introduction

My father died in a spectacular room in his home on the Florida coast. Three walls of glass gave sweeping views of a white sand beach and aquamarine sea. In his final days, his hospital bed was placed against the eastern wall so ocean and sky were all he could see. Propped up by pillows, resting warm in the sun, he sat as though he were on the deck of a great ship surrounded by rolling waves.

Dad loved that room, but I was glad to be out of it. In an hour, I would deliver his eulogy. I needed a place to steady my heart and collect my thoughts. His private office at the back of the house was the place to be.

All the honors, awards, and souvenirs of his life were on display in that still, paneled room. I had known many of these keepsakes since I was a boy. His Phi Beta Kappa key sat in a glass case. His Ph.D. diploma hung on the wall. Industrial rubies and emeralds lay beside a scale model of the first Lunar Lander, reminders of his work with lasers in the early days of the space program. Desk drawers held dozens of patents and volumes of published papers. A diploma from the Harvard Business School announced his midlife transition from physics to management, and the bookshelves held plaques, testimonials, and photos that bore witness to his subsequent rise to the highest levels of corporate power.

Every one of these tokens had a story attached, and there was a time when I could recount them all. But as I sat alone in the quiet, I could feel the details slipping away. I remembered an old Ethiopian proverb: When an old man dies, a great library burns.

Now, I knew what it meant.

There was one story, however, that I could never forget.

Prominently displayed on his desk were photographs of all the people closest to his heart. (I was happy to see that I'd made the cut.) Positioned among the pictures of our extended family was a photo of an apple-cheeked woman with piercing blue eyes. With her broad smile, silver hair, and lavender jacket, she evoked the Queen Mother. She was not part of our family, but I had known her my whole life. Her name was Miss Katherine J. Skelton. She was my dad's fourth grade teacher, and their story sits at the heart of this book.

My father attended public school during the Great Depression in a poor Philadelphia neighborhood. By all accounts, he was not much of a student in his early years. Unruly, inattentive, unproductive; a regular on the principal's bench. Not angry or mean, just not interested. At the end of the third grade, his teacher suggested that he was "slow." My grandparents vehemently rejected the idea, but they were ill equipped to respond. They had little education, and, like their neighbors, they were struggling just to survive. Little Jimmy Vollmer was on his own.

Then came fourth grade.

I have no idea how much the story has been embellished over the years. All I know for sure is that something happened. How many grown men have a picture of their fourth grade teacher on their desks? Miss Skelton saw something in my father that others had missed.

The third grade teacher had warned her, "Watch out for the squirmy redhead." And so she did. Miss Skelton watched out for my dad for the next nine years. She worked with him after school. She pressed him beyond the normal assignments. She exposed him to the world outside his poor neighborhood. She let him know that he had the potential to do anything he wanted. He could rise above his environment. He could go to college. He

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could be great. With her help, he became the school's best student and president of his senior class. He was awarded a full scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania. He earned both a bachelor's and a master's degree, served in the Navy during WWII, and married a beautiful Italian girl from Schenectady, NY. They had two boys and a girl. In 1956, he successfully defended his Ph.D. dissertation, and began his career.

Fifty years later, my father died surrounded by love and luxury. Accomplished, admired, and respected.

One might suppose that he had exceeded Miss Skelton's expectations. But, in delivering *her* eulogy in 1997, Dad declared that Katherine had seen it all long before he had any notion of the possibilities. "There were," he said with a slight tremor in his voice, "things on her list that I have yet to accomplish. In my life, Katherine Skelton was the difference."

The most extraordinary thing about this story is that it is not extraordinary. The magnitude of my father's success may be striking, but in America's *public* schools, the basics of this story are repeated every day. Millions of Ms, Mrs., and Mr. Skeltons encounter tens of millions of squirmy Jimmy Vollmers with all their problems and potential. These teachers see the possibilities and strive to help their students succeed, often in environments that test their sanity.

I emphasize public schools not because I have anything against private schools. They play an important role in America's education establishment. If nothing else, they prove that parental involvement, smaller classes, minimal red tape, motivated students, and, sometimes, more money result in higher student achievement. Many private school leaders and their staffs do excellent work, and I hope that they find much within this book that is useful. But public education is the miracle.

Public schools broke the link between accidents of birth and access to education that determined the social order for centu-

ries. Public schools unleashed the creative intelligence of tens of millions of children both privileged and disenfranchised. Public education made our democracy possible and powered our ascent to global preeminence. America is the first country on the planet to aggressively pursue publicly funded, equal educational opportunity for all, and the return on our investment has been glorious.

This book is unabashedly written in support of public education and its remarkable employees. It is not, however, a defense of the status quo. Our schools must change. They were designed to serve a society that no longer exists.

The industrial era has given way to the knowledge age and every aspect of American life is being transformed. The two-tiered world of work has all but disappeared, blurring the lines between jobs for the head and the hand. Initiative, creative thinking, and problem solving are now encouraged if not required at every level of employment. On the job and at home, success now rests on our ability to continually learn and apply what we have learned to a constantly changing array of problems. Americans, young and old, confront complex issues related to law, medicine, finance, ethics, privacy, and politics; everyone must have the skills to sort fact from fiction, truth from lies, reality from hype. For the first time in history, our security, prosperity, and the health of our nation depend upon our ability to unfold the full creative potential of every child. Not just the easy ones, not just the top twenty-five percent of the class.

America's schools were not designed to do this. They were built to *select and sort* students into two groups: a small handful of thinkers and a great mass of obedient doers. They were created, as Thomas Jefferson said in his *Notes on the State of Virginia, 1781–2*, “to rake the geniusses from the rubbish.” In the 220 years since the great man introduced his plan, armies of ardent reformers have strengthened, streamlined, and standardized his basic design. Their cumulative efforts have produced the schools we have

today—public *and* private. Schools in which we hold time constant, even though every teacher, administrator, and parent knows that some children take longer to learn than others. Schools in which we favor certain profiles of intelligence over those we deem less valuable. Schools where we sort the winners from losers not based on their capacity to learn, but on their ability to perform within the strictures of school. Schools where teachers and administrators are forced to become subversives in order to do their best work.

An argument can be made that the selecting process was practical in an age when the pace of change was slow, options were limited, and only a small handful of people were paid to think. But it was never moral. And today, it is neither moral nor practical. Our schools must change.

I want to be crystal clear. I am talking about a systems problem, not a people problem. Most teachers will admit that they can improve, and we must surround them with high quality programs of professional development. But the truth is that most of America's Pre-K-12 educators are smart, dedicated professionals doing everything they can to ensure that their students succeed in school and in life. They are not the primary problem.

I did not always believe this. Once, I strongly believed that the “insiders” were the obstacles to change. But in the twenty years since I stumbled into the education arena from the world of business, I have watched them work in scores of schools, and the experience has changed my views. America's teachers spend more hours per day in front of their classes than their peers anywhere in the industrialized world. They juggle their disparate tasks before audiences comprised of diverse, distracted, demanding children, many of whom are victims of a pop culture that overstimulates their physiologies, fractures their attention spans, and promotes a bizarre sense of entitlement. Principals are asked to be both efficient branch managers and brilliant instructional

leaders; they have become the shock absorbers of the system—squeezed by directives from above and demands from below. Superintendents and their administrative teams spend their days (and nights) attempting to stretch insufficient resources to meet rising expectations. They struggle to balance competing public and private interests while being denounced for earning salaries that no private sector CEO managing a comparable organization would even consider. And everyone who works in our schools labors to respond to the consequences of “mandate creep”: the ever-expanding list of academic, social, medical, psychological, and nutritional responsibilities that has been crammed into an academic calendar that has not grown by a single minute in decades.

A forty-hour workweek for these people is nothing. Fifty hours, sixty hours, is routine. But every teacher and administrator could work a hundred hours and we would still not produce the graduates we need. No matter how hard they work, no matter how often they are threatened, they cannot teach all children to high levels in a system designed to teach only some. The problem is not the people. It's the system. Confusing the two is a terrible mistake that politicians, business leaders, academics, bureaucrats, media pundits, and even educators have made for decades. Misidentifying the core problem has cost America's taxpayers billions of dollars and America's educators untold hours of wasted effort. Most troubling, it has cost millions of America's young people the opportunity to succeed.

Public education must be aggressively supported if America is to remain great, but the system must be changed.

It cannot, however, change in isolation. You cannot touch a school without touching the culture of the surrounding town. Everything that goes on inside our schools is fused, in some transcendental way, to local attitudes, opinions, values, and beliefs. This is the one true thing I have learned in the twenty years of pressing for change. And I learned it the hard way.

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Again and again, I watched communities reject reforms not because they were irrational, but because they offended local sensibilities. I saw smart, progressive superintendents and their boards mount valiant campaigns to improve student success only to be rebuked and sometimes fired because their plans conflicted with the community's notions of "real school." Over time, I was forced to accept an undeniable, albeit daunting fact: schools are shaped by the mores of their communities. If, therefore, we are to meet the challenges of the knowledge age, if we are to unfold the full creative potential of every child, we must do more than change our schools, we must change America, one community at a time. The question was, how?

I searched for an answer in the field. I visited hundreds of schools. I spoke to thousands of educators and community members who were attempting to effect substantive change. I witnessed false starts and bloody battles. And with each new experience, I saw more clearly the enormity of the task.

I also became sensitive to the damage caused by the unrelenting stream of negativity directed at our schools. I am not talking about honest criticism. Public education is huge and bureaucratic with deep cultural roots. It needs outside pressure to improve. I refer to the practice of bashing public schools as a blood sport: a dangerous game in which self-serving politicians portray public schools as dismal failures that they alone can fix, and media pundits blame schools for social ills over which they have no control; a game where false comparisons are made between past and present, public and private, and us versus them; where headlines broadcast half-truths, statistics are used out of context, and test results are reported in the worst possible light.

Faced with the combination of viral negativity and public resistance, I confess there were moments when I doubted the system could be changed. I experienced these moments of misgiving even though everything I saw in the global economy confirmed,

beyond a reasonable doubt, that we had no choice but to succeed. It was only after years of watching reform initiatives die in the planning that I perceived a path to progress.

I realized that something was missing in the standard approach to reform. It wasn't a lack of effort or conviction, standards or accountability. There was no shortage of research or proven programs. It was deeper. There was something missing in the community, specifically in the school/community relationship. Even in the best districts, there was a dearth of four intangible but essential resources: understanding, trust, permission, and support. I labeled these resources the Prerequisites of Progress, and, on reflection, it became obvious that these four had to be developed *before* systemic transformation could occur.

It was a great relief to identify the problem. But it was an even greater relief to realize that the Prerequisites of Progress could be obtained through a single course of action. Something practical that required no new money. Something that could be easily implemented with existing personnel. Something that promised enough tangible benefits to entice everyone on staff and all their allies in the community to participate.

I call it The Great Conversation. It's a strategically coherent, tactically sound, community-wide enterprise that any district can initiate and maintain with existing resources and personnel. By adding this piece to their ongoing efforts to increase student success, school districts across the country can secure community understanding, trust, permission, and support, and, at the same time, inoculate the people of their communities against the ravages of viral negativity. I believe everyone can and should play a part in The Great Conversation, and the time to act is now.

A great opportunity lies before us. I know it can be hard to see from the trenches, where the challenges seem to multiply by the hour, but this is public education's most hopeful time. Public schools have never been more important. Every path to indi-

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vidual, community, and national success now runs through those classroom doors. For the first time in history, we must educate all children to high levels. Finally, social and economic conditions are right for all of us to come together and create public schools where all students can unfold their full creative potential and every member of the staff can fulfill his or her professional dreams.

A basic understanding of The Great Conversation can speed our progress toward the realization of these cherished goals. With the story of my dad and Miss Skelton as my inspiration, after years of working and learning in districts across the country, and with the certain knowledge that our schools cannot do it alone, I am pleased to describe The Great Conversation and its immense benefits within the pages of this book.