

Our *Changing* Town, Our *Changing* School: Is Common Ground About “Good” Classroom Practices Possible?

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A Readers Theater Presentation

The Setting

This drama takes place in Grover’s Corners¹ revisited, an old New England town in a state of flux—a town peopled by old time residents and recent newcomers. While differences in race and ethnicity are minimal, differences based on length of residence in Grover’s Corners and on class are evident. Since the mid-1980s “people from away” have increasingly taken up residence in town. Living in new developments carved out of the rich farmland with magnificent vistas of rolling hillsides, these new people have brought new values and demands to the town.

The high school is also in flux. In the midst of a major building project, the school has been in the process of change since the early 1980’s. Teachers have been struggling to redefine a “good secondary school” and to gain consensus within the professional community. They have only recently begun to struggle with the problem of bringing parents into the debate.

During the past four years two curriculum changes have raised the eyebrows of many of Grover’s Corners parents. Two math teachers developed a new math course of study which called for the integration of the distinct math courses (Algebra I, Geometry, etc.) into courses called Math 1 and Math 2. In addition, the program called for heterogeneous grouping, cooperative groupwork and an emphasis on problem-solving rather than on rote memorization.

Following close on their heels, three social studies teachers developed and introduced a required two year social studies course which raised the

standard for passing from 65% to 85% and which required each student to do public presentations at the end of each year's work.

While there was opposition to the changed classroom practices in both cases, opposition to the math changes were more vociferous and resulted in a refinement of the program. Opposition to the practices in the Social Studies program did not result in any program adaptations. While there are many reasons for this, one contributing factor is that those parents who opposed the math changes were primarily representative of the town's elite, while those who opposed the social studies changes were not.

Playwright's Notes

I conducted this study in the fall of 1994 in order to fulfill the requirements of my doctoral dissertation. Elliot Eisner's (1991; 1993; 1995) notions about using art as a metaphor for research instead of science and Robert Donmoyer and June Yennie-Donmoyer's use of Readers Theater influenced my approach to this study. As I listened to the transcripts of my interviews with the parents and educators of Grover's Corners I was taken by the passion with which they spoke. How could I capture that passion and be true to their emotion as well as to their words? I considered creating small dialogue pieces to try to capture it. It wasn't until I met Robert Donmoyer and June Yennie-Donmoyer at Elliot Eisner's AERA sponsored "Arts-based Educational Research Institute" and participated in their Readers Theater presentation *In Their Own Words*, (1994) that I considered theater as my medium.

Once I began working with what I had collected, like most qualitative researchers, I found myself buried in data. Where should I begin? How should I begin? As I began to organize and reorganize my data I began to realize that I had dug myself a very large hole. Not only had I committed myself to making sense out of this data in a way that would be credible in the research community, but I had also committed myself to do it in an aesthetically pleasing way. While I was a novice researcher, I soon discovered, I was even more of a novice when it came to writing Readers Theater scripts.

I had none of the craft of script writing available to me. I have to admit to a very naive view of the craft. I thought that all I had to do was piece together dialogue from the parent transcripts, which had been coded and analyzed using traditional qualitative research approaches, and *voila* a script would emerge! How wrong I was! The response to my first attempts were sobering. While I might have been true to the data from a researcher's point of view, from an artistic point of view, I had not created a piece which was aesthetically pleasing. While parent and educator voices were in many cases passionate, transcript segments taken out of context lacked the

passion. In addition, conversational language lacks the aesthetic quality of language that is thoughtfully created. When I reflect back to the Donmoyers' piece I realize that there were significant differences between the material they used and the material I used. Their script was a montage of written pieces produced by students crafted with care. Mine was pieced together from conversations. I had almost 1000 pages of transcripts to analyze and interpret. Their script was composed from a much smaller set of essays. My task was much more complex. And even they had questioned whether text which was not crafted with aesthetic considerations would work as well as text which was crafted aesthetically (Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995).

I went through several stages in my script construction process—from naive cutting and pasting of verbatim transcript segments to carefully considered arranging of edited transcript segments and segments written by me. As time went on, I became bolder in my willingness to tamper with the verbatim transcripts. My transparent voice in the script became more and more pronounced. As I did this, I became more and more disturbed by the seemingly contradictory directions my work was taking. On the one hand, as a researcher, I wanted to be as true as possible to the people who gave me their words, but yet as a "playwright/artist" I wanted to craft a piece that would work aesthetically and would also represent my interpretation of the parent's and educator's voices. To do this, I became more and more willing to play with their words. In my mind the changes and the additions I made clarified and made coherent the many voices.

At one point I began to wonder if I might be able to be more true to the voices of those I interviewed if, instead of using the transcripts, I created my own dialogue based on the ideas and emotions embedded in the transcripts. However, for this piece I did not move too far beyond the words of those I interviewed. The script that follows attempts to stay true to the meanings of those who spoke with me. In order to assure that this is so, I sent drafts of the script to all of the parents and educators whose voices I used and asked them to review them to make sure I represented their views as they would have liked them to be represented. They assured me that they felt comfortable with the way their voices are presented.

I offer this Readers Theater script as a vehicle for opening up dialogue between parents and educators about what teaching and learning practices go on in "good" secondary schools and what teaching and learning practices should go on in their particular school. Through a series of workshops I propose to begin the process of uncovering "mental models"² that contribute to different understandings of what goes on in "good" secondary schools. The workshops involve the staging of either this Readers Theater script or a second script originally published in the *School Community*

Journal, Volume 6, Number 2, depending upon the needs of the particular school. That original script examines the different mental models that parents in a community hold about “good” classroom practices, and the one republished here illuminates the differences between educator mental models and parent mental models, as well as identifying the barriers that prevent parents and educators from talking with each other about their differences. Using the staging of the scripts as a catalyst for dialogue, participants will be led through a process that uncovers differing mental models, identifies barriers to communication in their school community, and then works through the barriers towards rebuilding common mental models. My goal is to create an environment conducive to continued and on-going dialogue between parents and educators as they work towards a common vision of “good” teaching and learning practices for

their school.

Our *Changing* Town, Our *Changing* School: Is Common Ground Possible Between Parents and Educators?

Voices

[illegible]

Parents From Away
From Town and Surrounding Towns
From State, But Not Surrounding Towns

Scholars Linda Darling-Hammond
Michael Fullan
Paul Hill
Seymour Sarason
Peter Senge
Thomas Sergiovanni

Scholars appear throughout this script at different times. Ensemble members take turns reading the scholar quotes. A podium is placed upstage left. A mortarboard and name signs are placed on the podium. As each 'scholar' speaks, the ensemble

member dons the mortarboard and places the appropriate name sign on the podium and speaks. After they speak they take off mortar board, remove name sign, and return to their place as ensemble members.

Sergiovanni: The bonding together of people in special ways and the binding of them to shared values and ideas are the defining characteristics of schools as communities. Communities are defined by their centers of values, sentiments, and beliefs that provide the needed conditions for creating a sense of “we” from “I” (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. 4).

Stage Manager: *(To Audience)* It sounds so idyllic, community, but creating community among educators within a school (especially high schools) has proven to be a very slow and difficult process. And even in those cases where community has coalesced among educators, the attempt to then include parents has proven to be even more difficult. What about the parents? Why is it so hard to include parents in the school community? One reason may be the raised voice of teachers in schooling decisions. One scholar, Linda Darling-Hammond, while advocating for the professionalization of teaching, recognizes that this may alter the power balance in schools. Could this be one contributing factor to the difficulty of including parents in the school community?

Linda Darling-Hammond: Why should we seek to create a professional culture within schools? This question is the first order of business for those who would reform education through a new construction of teaching. The answer, though not mysterious, is not altogether straightforward. Establishing a professional culture within schools may produce teaching that is more knowledgeable and responsive to student needs; it will also disturb the delicate balance between state, community, and parental interests as they are currently configured and deployed in defining schooling (Darling-Hammond, 1988, p. 55).

Stage Manager: *(To Linda)* In 1988, Linda, you foreshadowed the growing tension that is inherent in the dual components of many reform agendas—teacher professionalism and parent participation, and you, perhaps unintentionally, uncovered one of the reasons why it is so hard to include parents in the school community—the privileging of professional knowledge in the conversations about schooling. *(To Audience)* Professionalizing teaching, on the one hand, while at the same time involving parents more substantially in the life of the school, on the other, sometimes creates conflict. What follows is an examination of the dilemmas facing parents and educators in one rural New England high school, as they continue to build a professional community AND begin to invite parents into the conversation about

what goes on in “good” secondary schools.

Cast assembles on stage: 8 actors (4 parents, 4 educators) forming 4 duos. Duos 1 and 2 stand with backs to their partner and arms crossed on chests, Duo 1 is stage left and Duo 2 is stage right. At center stage, each member of Duos 3 and 4 stand side-by-side, but with backs to the other duo, Duo 3 facing the audience and Duo 4 facing upstage. When Duos speak they face the audience, when finished Duos 1 and 2 resume back to back stance,. Duos 3 and 4 resume positions with backs to the other duo when finished speaking.

Duo 1

Educator 1: *(Speaking to audience and away from partner)* I teach in the high school and have been active from the beginning in efforts to change our schools. We joined professional networks that led us to believe that we could make curriculum decisions, that we could make decisions about our classrooms, that we could think about teaching. It was a major philosophical change in teaching from teacher as a behaviorist, a dispenser of information, an informer, to teacher as a learner, a constructor of knowledge. We began to gain a deeper understanding of how human beings learn and we began to totally and radically change the organization of our classrooms so that constructivist practices really were evident.

Parent 1: *(Speaking to audience and away from partner)* I attended school in Europe as a child. And I must tell you that the standards there were rigorous. I expect no less for my children. But I must tell you I have been sorely disappointed. Since the 60's they have been guilty of increasingly taking their eye off the drills and skills. I sat through some student presentations and I was absolutely appalled. Now I don't expect sophomores in high school to be professional presenters. I don't expect them to be practiced. I love the kids, I love their charm, I love their honesty. But I was appalled with their lack of education. You don't expect a sophomore to put up a poster which has five spelling mistakes on it – not even corrected spelling mistakes. Therefore I lose interest in the reasoning behind organizing the presentation. All I see is spelling mistakes that a kid of 15 makes – why doesn't this kid know how to spell? The response I get is “Oh well that's less important than what they're trying to say.” Not to me it isn't!

Duo 2

Educator 2: *(Speaking to audience and away from partner)* As an educator I possess professional knowledge which parents don't have access to.

The work we're doing on these new assessments has been challenging and stimulating for me personally and a real contribution to the education of our children. We had to tap a new framework. And the new framework was focusing on some real simple trans-level, trans-disciplinary demonstrations. And those demonstrations we call compulsory performances. Those are performances that you do in graduate school and you do in kindergarten—reading, writing, illustrating, data analysis, oral presentations, things you do to show that you know something. In addition to writing, we are now asking "Is data analysis, illustrating, diagramming also important for all students?" "Is that as important a performance as is writing?" If it is, it should be compulsory, it should be required of all students.

Parent 2: (*Speaking to audience and away from partner*) I grew up here in town, so did my husband. I did okay in school, but my husband barely got through. He still can't spell very well. I would like them to teach my son how to read and how to write and how to spell. He does not have any of those capabilities. I mean, he can write but he can't spell and his reading is probably on a fifth grade level.

Duo 3

Educator 3: (*Speaking to audience and to partner*) As an educator involved in this reform effort since the beginning, ten years ago, I understand that this change effort is a never-ending process. We keep learning, and as we learn, we change some more. In the future, I can envision a week long simulation of a model government going on in rooms like this all around the building with video cameras set up. Students will come into these rooms and enter into person to person negotiations, caucuses, and so forth. They'll be able to access digitized video to access those segments when they were in that room and pull out sections that they can annotate and say "Here's where I was demonstrating listening to points of view that I don't agree with." "Here's where I was demonstrating negotiation skills and compromise skills" and so forth. They can compile a video portfolio of their behavior during this week long exhibition.

Parent 3: (*Speaking to audience and to partner*) I went to school in a neighboring state. It was a fairly traditional school, but I had one teacher who really inspired me. She was very progressive, she taught a seminar where we had to do research on any topic that interested us. She was demanding, but she really inspired me to find what interested me and to pursue it. I think it was her approach which inspired me to propose an interdisciplinary course to the school—one where the kids produce a

community newspaper. They can participate in a variety of ways — as a writer, an editor, a cartoonist — they can be sports writers, salespeople, write advertising copy. Community volunteers with special skills will mentor the kids. It will be self-supporting through advertising sales. I'm all hyped up about it. I just have to convince the school committee.

Duo 3 each turn away from their partner and walk behind Duo 4 and face upstage. Duo 4 face in towards each other and walk forward facing audience.

Duo 4

Educator 4: *(Speaking to audience and to partner)* As a teacher, I'm probably in the minority in the school. I'm a conservative and I really question many of the changes that are being touted here. I firmly believe that the educational establishment is socially more liberal than the public at large. And when you walk in and you use words like "change," "self esteem," and "group cohesiveness," and you do all those things that are for lack of a better term called "touchy feely," I think you immediately turn off two groups of people. One, the more moderate to conservative parents, and two, the moderate to conservative teachers — like me.

Parent 4: *(Speaking to audience and to partner)* I grew up and went to school in a nearby town. I didn't go to college. I didn't do particularly well in school so I went into the service. And now I own a small business. I listen to the radio a lot while I work — listen to the talk shows. I have heard recently of a new history curriculum being written by extreme liberals, which leaves out certain parts of history, gives it a slant that shouldn't necessarily be there — you know, like saying that Christopher Columbus didn't discover America. I would be very up front and want to be very involved to make sure that at least it's an objective curriculum. That it doesn't necessarily lean towards liberalism or conservatism, or leave something out that we grew up with that should be in there.

Stage Manager: *(Entering stage left and moving to center stage)* Welcome back to Grover's Corners, to the *New* Grover's Corners to be exact. What you're about to see is a Readers Theater presentation about change — our changing high school and our changing town. As you can imagine, things have changed some since 1913. For the most part, however, like all New England towns, we held on to our cherished traditions and ways of doing things throughout the century while we gradually changed and became more modern. However, about 15

years ago things really began to change in our town and in our schools. That's when *new* people began to move in and that's when we got a *new* superintendent of schools. Our new superintendent encouraged our teachers to begin thinking of themselves as professionals—to become involved in decisions about curriculum and teaching practices. They took her up on it all right, and things haven't been the same since. They changed the schedule at the high school, and they introduced new math and social studies courses. Caused quite a stir, too, yes they did. There were disagreements amongst faculty members. And there were disagreements amongst parents. Some liked the changes, some didn't. Even though we know research has shown that kids do better when parents, teachers, students, and administrators agree about what goes on in a "good" high school, even though we know that, we wonder if we will ever be able to come to consensus about the kind of school we want. Scholars like Michael Fullan urge schools to find a way to come to common understandings. He said:

Michael Fullan: The problem of meaning is one of how those involved in change can come to understand what it is that should change and how it can be best accomplished....Solutions must come through the development of *shared meaning* (Fullan with Steigelbauer, 1991, p. 5).

Stage Manager: Yes, ideally people in schools should have shared meanings, but Michael, coming to consensus within the faculty has not been easy and we're not there yet. A faculty meeting is getting under way. Let's listen in.

To the count of 12 and parents chanting "Drills and Skills" and teachers chanting "Compulsory performances", ensemble forms two groups. Center stage, 2 teachers seated in chairs, facing audience, and two teachers seated on stools behind first two teachers. 2 parents on either side of the four teachers standing behind chairs heads down.

Educator 2: Those exhibitions, no matter how a student writes, no matter what kinds of knowledge they come with, are always above where they can be. What we ask them to aim for requires strenuous work of any student and for some of our students requires more work to get there than they have ever put in. We say:

Educator 3: (*Standing when speaking*) "You've got to get to the standard. And if you don't get to the standard the first time you have to come back afterwards, work with us and have us help you get there. You eventually have to get there."

Educator 2: It's going to require much hard work from them and from me. It's going to require my sitting down with them three or four times over the course of the paper, one on one, in a tutorial session saying:

Educator 3: (*Standing when speaking*) “Let’s look at your sentences, let’s look at your section. Have you used evidence?”

Educator 4: I think that one of the things that the Social Studies program did was to up the ante. But what I questioned then and still think about now is, what are we raising the ante for and what assumptions are causing us to do that? Is it that we want everyone to go to college? Does every person in a democratic society always stand up in a meeting and present a public position or does someone do the research and someone else do the presentation? Does the President write all of his speeches?

All Educators: (*Standing when speaking*) I don’t think so.

Educator 1: Does he do all of his own research?

All Educators: (*Standing when speaking*) I don’t think so.

Educator 4: So I ask, “Well, what does it mean in terms of what I have learned and know about pedagogy?” I’m not sure that it meets the needs of all the kids.

Educator 3: I had mixed emotions about heterogeneous groupings. In certain cases I think sometimes it doesn’t make sense.

Educator 1: I feel good about heterogeneous grouping. The students who used to be in the standard track are doing a lot more work now. They’re not being dismissed as they used to be when the message we gave them was:

Educator 2: (*Standing when speaking*) “You don’t really have to do this because you’re not very bright anyway.”

Educator 1: I think people who are college bound or honors are now sitting in classrooms with some kids who have some pretty profound thoughts and who feel comfortable about voicing them. Some of these “so-called” smart kids are suddenly looking at these other kids differently and saying:

Educator 2: (*Standing when speaking*) “Where did that come from?”

Educator 1: I think it’s good. I think it’s a good experience.

Educator 4: I know there is concern, for instance, about untracking classes. Concern for me and of course, concern for many parents. I think it is a legitimate concern.

Educator 3: Freshman Math was designed by the math teachers getting together and saying:

Educator 1: (*Standing when speaking*) “If a student took only one math course in their whole high school career, this is what they should know and be able to do.”

Educator 3: So the feeling is all students should take and pass Freshman Math before they graduate. The focus of the course is not just the algebra and the geometry and the statistics. It’s the team work, group problem solving skills, individual problem solving skills, the thinking

processes that take place when you do algebra or solve problems or work in a group.

Educator 4: One of my colleagues told me that the motto for all teachers was:

All Educators: (*Standing when speaking*) "This too shall pass."

Educator 4: When inclusion was introduced a couple years ago, it was the big deal. And it was sold as though we're doing away with grouping and we're going to have these kids in all the classes – it didn't work. We've had kids who can't pass Freshman Math no matter how many times you sit them through it. So you come down to two choices. Either you fail them forever or you pass them when they didn't really learn. The better alternative in my view was to put together a good basic consumer literacy or business math course that has some meaning to it. When somebody's 16 and can't do his multiplication tables – give him a calculator. Let's teach him what to do when he goes to the store, what to do when they get a loan. I think they'll have to go back to that.

Stage Manager: Our staff has been at the process of trying to come to common understandings about what defines good schools for over ten years now and they're still not there yet. While many of them are still ambivalent about including parents in the planning process, they have recently come to recognize the importance of including them. Lots of things get in our way of developing *shared meanings* with parents. Take, for example, professional knowledge. Our teachers are involved in discussions about education with their colleagues which parents aren't privy to. And as a result, they develop an understanding of "good schools" and a language to describe them which differs from parents. A meeting with parents and educators is in session, let's listen.

To the count of 12 and parents chanting "We want basics," and educators chanting "Metacognition and rubrics," ensemble forms two groups, one of educators and one of parents. They rearrange themselves on stage, educators sitting on stools, parents on chairs.

Parent 1: Non-teaching parents are hard put to maintain their enthusiasm within an atmosphere of "educator-speak" and I have found this to be true in my case. Parent involvement in the reform effort has dropped down to an alarming amount. Professional jargon should be a device to speed communication only within members of that profession. It has no use within a mixed group where non-teaching parents are reluctant to admit ignorance on so many of the terms used by educators. These professional power words are very, *very* uncomfortable when parents

are involved in the process. Lots of people have a huge problem with them. They don't want to put up their hand and say

Parent 2: (*Standing when speaking*) "I don't know what you said."

Parent 1: And if you're not careful you can get behind in that understanding. And after a few meetings they say

Parent 2: (*Standing when speaking*) "I don't really know what's going on."

Parent 1: And so the parents drop out.

Educator 1: Sometimes, parents don't understand the professional part of it. Parents aren't involved in the national standards in math and the National Council of Math Teachers. These professional groups want students to do real world math problems instead of just learning the times tables. And parents hadn't been part of that conversation, that's why they were so opposed to it. Their biggest comment was:

All Parents: "When I went to school I did it this way."

Stage Manager: That's what Peter Senge calls "mental models."

Peter Senge: "What we carry in our heads are images, assumptions, and stories....*Mental models* [are] deeply held internal images of how the world works, images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting....Our mental models determine not only how we make sense of the world, but how we take action" (Senge, 1990, p.174).

Stage Manager: Teachers and parents in Grover's Corners have different experiences with schooling, and therefore have different "mental models" of what goes on in "good" secondary schools. One way of creating shared meanings and common mental models is by involving parents and teachers in joint planning activities so that they can learn together, but Grover's Corners educators are ambivalent about involving parents in conversations about what goes on in good schools.

Educator 2: Parental involvement, defining it. That is tough. Does somebody get to go in there and be the veto power? What happens when they are opposed? Do they just stop everything or is their role just to present their concerns? My feeling is that concerns need to get on the table and that the people who are best equipped to address the concerns—the teachers and administrators— get to do that. We wouldn't have changed the schedule if we were trying to work with the consensus model. We asked "What are the concerns of teachers, students, parents?" Then we made modifications and said "This is how we're going to address those concerns."

Educator 4: That's been one of my frustrations all along with some of the curriculum changes that have come down. That there's been no opportunity to debate in front of the public. The administration in education, not only here but everywhere, talks a good game about

wanting a variety of opinions—this and that. But they really don't. What's funny is if you had a debate out in the community about educational change, if you will, I think the majority of the teachers would side with change probably philosophically. But the majority of the public wouldn't. See, I consider myself in a majority.

Educator 3: Parent involvement in the beginning? It was minimal. It was minimal. So we ended up being the snake oil salesman again trying to go out and say, "Here, this is what we have done." When we were writing our student outcomes, we invited them in, and we had them clustered in the rooms and shared our ideas with them, but we didn't have any real vehicle for two-way communication. So knowing what we know now, I would definitely have had the parents go over the outcomes in tandem with the staff and have them more involved in developing them.

Educator 1: It would be fairly rare in modern medicine for doctors to bring their patients together and ask them which kind of technique or chemicals would best help the healing process. Now it may be worthwhile to bring patients together about service issues and fee issues and how comfortable they feel with the doctor—that might be important—but the technical aspects are left to the doctors. Why is education different? Because most people in our society have a high school education, there's an assumption that most people are educational experts even though that isn't the case. And so there's a level at which there's some kind of automatic democratization of the profession. Overall, I think that's good. But I think one of the questions that we don't ask is "In what ways are parents most effectively involved in the educational process?"

Educator 2: I share the opinion that parents should trust educators to make the right decisions because they are the professionals. I'll give you some examples. The math program probably would not be in place if we had to go through a consensus model with parents involved. If we had to get parents involved they would have been adamantly against it.

Educator 3: I don't give a tinker's damn what parents think! That's the problem with asking parents for their input. They think that we will use it all—when they're just thinking about what's good for their kid. We have to think about what's good for all kids.

Educator 2: Let me tell you about reforms we have implemented at the high school. One is the math program and one is the social studies program. Now these are major, MAJOR fundamental thrusts forward in American education. If we had yielded to the immediate reaction of the most vocal part of the community, we would have put water on a spark that may be one of the most powerful fires, if you will, in

education reform. As difficult as it would be for me to say this directly to parents (I guess I would because it would be a lack of integrity for me not to) there is a need for educators who have thought carefully about these ideas to put them into practice and then to get feedback from parents. Schools are democratic—but only democratic up to a point.

Stage Manager: Some parents remember their joint planning experiences with school people in a positive way...

Parent 3: I absolutely felt that I was listened to and respected. And it was not just as a token either. At first I thought, "well they just need a parent and I'm willing to do it, so I'm elected." But actually I've made suggestions at different times and they've been implemented. I've also learned a great deal. I went in with some preconceived notions—things that I thought were wrong. For instance, I was concerned about exhibitions because I thought it was going to be something teachers hide behind. Then at one meeting they had the rubrics, that was a key thing to me that built my confidence back up because the rubric spells out everything the child needs to do so the teacher, the child, and the parents can see exactly what the child can and cannot do. I like that.

Stage Manager: But other parents' memories cast a negative light on the experience—increasing the mistrust parents feel towards educators.

Parent 2: I got more involved with some of the changes in the high school when the high school started some radical reorganization changes. They'd send home memos inviting parents to attend these public meetings. I'd read the memo and it was quite clear what the intent was and how this thing was going to work. Then you'd go to one of the public hearings and it was almost like, wait a minute, we're not even on the same topic. It was obvious from the responses to the questions that they had presented it in a particular light to sell the concept. And then when you'd get into a group of parents and other teachers and open the thing up and start discussing it, it was obvious that a lot of the information that should have been presented had been deliberately omitted to try to skew things in a particular direction.

Parent 3: I think they invite us to meetings with the attitude "We're going to do it..."

Parent 4: (*Standing when speaking*) ...whatever new thing they're proposing this time...

Parent 3: ...we've just got to make sure we sell the concept in the public discussion. That way when the parents leave, they're all nodding their heads saying

All Parents: "Well, that's a good idea."

Parent 3: I think they put a lot of effort into doing that, and I'm not really

sure that's wrong to do things that way. But I think it is if you're presenting it as a public discussion and soliciting input, it really is under false pretense.

Parent 4: The junior high had been having some meetings. That's why I called. I got a notice the junior high was going to meet and I said, "Well when the high school starts having meetings I'd like to be called" and I never heard anything. I wanted to be in on the high school planning team, no matter what happened, so when I called about it, he said

Educator 1: (*Standing when speaking*) "I'll take your name"

Parent 4: ...and I never heard any more. I asked and somebody said

Educator 1: (*Standing when speaking*) "Well, they have enough people."

Parent 4: So I just let it go.

Parent 3: There's another interesting little piece. Sometimes, it seems that if you volunteer to be on a committee, if they think it will be to their benefit to have you there, they will invite you. If they, for whatever reason, don't want to deal with you on a committee, they won't invite you...you don't know when the meetings happened and you don't know what happened.

Parent 2: I think there definitely has been a gap developing between the groups, the townspeople and the school people. I think they really need to start including parents in the planning from the ground up and ask

All Educators: "Would you like to be on a study committee?"

Parent 2: And really let some of the townspeople start on the ground level rather than having the thing already outlined in a ten page document with a predetermined outcome.

Parent 1: Well, I've been on a planning team from the ground up. Let me tell you about it. Last week I was at the planning meeting. There were 23 of us around the table. I was the only non-teacher parent present. Generally there are no more than three or four of us, maximum. Now you also have to understand that if 20 of them are teachers in the Grover's Corners system and you've got the superintendent of education there, the high school principal there, all of these people....you do not have 20 independent minds. These are all employees and if a teacher feels strongly against an idea he or she has got to be fairly confident before they put up a hand and say

Educator 2: (*Standing when speaking*) "Wait a minute, wait a second here, I don't think this works because..."

Parent 1: So, there is a "group think" going on. You know, it's the way you all wind up going to a restaurant you'd rather not go to because nobody stood up and said "I don't want to go out to a restaurant." Either there's so much agreement between themselves that debate isn't

necessary or else they are reluctant as a group to debate the issues. I mean the group I'm involved with, very well intended, hard-working conscientious people, are reluctant to say "I think this stinks." I certainly wouldn't couch it in those words, and yet progress would be made if a few involved, if a few of the teachers based on 25 years experience of teaching would say

All Educators: (*Standing when speaking*) "I think this stinks."

Parent 1: There's nothing wrong with that.

Stage Manager: Time is also a barrier. Parents and educators both lament the time school planning takes.

Educator 3: The change that I guess I disagree with is that the teachers have less student contact. I think we've had more meetings that were supposedly making us better professionals, and in some cases they do. More committees, more proposals—all those things take us away from the kids. And although some of those do some wonderful things, we've got a lot out of them, we've got to look at what our mission is in the long run. It's hard to balance. There just isn't enough time.

Parent 4: If they were to come to me and ask me my opinion, as you did, I would be very willing to do that. I would be very willing to give it. But because of time constraints and my activities surrounding my son outside of school, I'm not sure how much more I could do.

Parent 1: In common with most civic work in committee, progress is painfully slow and each participant is careful to grant respect and courtesy to another member's position or opinion. This tends to lead to extreme hair splitting within discussions on any aspect.

Educator 2: I think we could have done more of sending out something to parents. I think our communication tended to come after the fact to inform them of these changes rather than involve them in these changes. I don't know how it would have worked that other way but in looking back it may have slowed us down even more. And I think we felt it was time we had to move. We had to act.

Stage Manager: (*To audience*) Time seems to be one of those major barriers which keeps getting in the way of both parents and educators. Scholars such as Paul Hill tell us that:

Paul Hill: Schools [must] have the chance to develop a sense of common purpose and reciprocal obligation among students, faculty, administration and parents (Hill, 1990, p.76).

Stage Manager: (*To Audience*) ...but they don't tell us how. (*To Paul*) Considering all of the obstacles, Paul, how will schools develop a "common purpose"? Will educators be willing to take the time to redefine professionalism to mean learning with parents? Will parents and educators be willing to take the time to uncover their different mental models, to debate alternative ones, and to recreate common

ones? Will parents and educators be willing to rethink the roles that parents should play in the planning process? Can a foundation of trust and mutual respect be established, because, after all, without trust and respect for each other, none of this can happen.

Educator 1: I think teachers basically are frightened to contact parents because I think it holds them accountable. Also, I think that we hear stories about certain parents at times, and it puts us on the defensive. It's tough to deal with sometimes. I also think parents are frightened to come in to talk to teachers.

Educator 2: It is often suspected that for some reason teachers have ulterior motives for wanting to make changes. The public has a hard time believing that we are looking out for the best interest of their children.

Educator 4: I think that parents felt they weren't being listened to, that's all. I think lots of people thought that the decision was made even before they were asked for their input.

Educator 3: An ideal relationship between parents and teachers has to be based on some mutual respect, mutual trust – that we understand their point of view, they understand ours. Not that being skeptical is bad, but there's got to be that underlying trust that we're trying to do the best job we can do. It's when it appears that trust isn't there, from either side, or that we're not listening to them or we're not listening to their interest, that we have gotten into trouble with each other.

Stage Manager: That was exactly the point Seymour Sarason made – that without trust and respect, nothing can be accomplished. Isn't that right Seymour?

Seymour Sarason: Everything we know about school-community, professional-nonprofessional relationships (in the past and now) permits the prediction of problems, among which the absence of trust and respect is the most troublesome (Sarason, 1995, p. 66).

Stage Manager: What do you think? Do you agree with Seymour that there is an absence of trust and respect between parents and educators and that is the first thing that must be attended to in this process? How can we create a climate of mutual trust and respect? If we are successful in doing this will all the other barriers of professional prerogative, parental self-interest, time, differences in language and differences in knowledge-bases be more easily attended to? Is it possible for parents and educators to come together, to devote the time to rebuilding a foundation of trust and respect, to address the thorny problems inherent in changing schools, all of which are necessary to reach common ground? It's your turn now, what do you think? Please join us in a conversation about the issues raised in this presentation as well

as about this mode of data representation.

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Notes

¹Written with apologies to Thornton Wilder, author of *Our Town*, a play also set in a New England town (Wilder, 1938). The town in this study is rooted in memories of life in small town New England and is reminiscent of the Grover's Corners created by Wilder. It is for this reason that I, with much humility, use allusions from Wilder's play throughout this study.

² Mental models, according to Peter Senge (1990) are unarticulated images in the mind which influence attitudes and actions.

Author's note:

Since publication of this article in 1996, the readers theater script reprinted in this volume has been used with parents, teachers and preservice students in a variety of locations and in

