

Foreword

It is an honor and a privilege to be asked to write the foreword to a book authored by a living legend of educational thought; one who is still writing prolifically in his eighties. Seymour Sarason is undoubtedly one of the world's leading thinkers and writers on the culture of the school and its relationship to educational change. The large number of books Seymour Sarason has written over his professional lifetime—the most important of them since his fiftieth year—encompass subjects as diverse and interconnected as school culture, teacher education, the role of the arts in teaching and learning, educational handicap and deficiency (as it was once known), counseling, careers and aging, and educational change and reform.

As a psychologist, historian, and public intellectual, Sarason's contribution as an analyst and activist in the world of educational change and reform has been persistent and profound. Environmentalist Henry David Thoreau once remarked that "reformers are the greatest bores of all." Sarason brings to this world of reform and reformers a critical yet accessible perspective that urges them to understand the peculiar culture of the school and its people; that admonishes them for having no sense of or willingness to learn from history; and that appeals to them to acknowledge the capacity of people (learners and teachers alike) to change and improve themselves if they are provided with the right conditions and encouragement.

Seymour Sarason has written that teaching is in some ways like performance art. It is therefore fitting, perhaps, that in this book, he should distill his ideas and engage them with the present reform environment through the dramatic device of a set of "letters" to the President of the United States at the beginning of the 21st century. This "dialogue," or Sarason's side of it, is preceded by one of the most cogent and articulate critiques of the No Child Left Behind legislation that has yet been published.

As I write this, I am in the midst of a speaking tour of the United Kingdom. In that country, politicians have been obsessed with their own reform agenda, subjecting schools to the necessity of meeting short-term achievement targets in literacy and math, and imposing prescribed programs of mandated and micromanaged instruction in these subjects for one hour each per day. After apparent early successes, these reform efforts (from which the United States has borrowed heavily) have turned out to be not only disappointing but severely damaging as a consequence. After just a few short years, the seeming improvements in results reached a plateau when the system began to run out of quick-fix tricks. Large-scale research studies indicated that the improvements were deceptive, many of them resulting from the test items being made progressively easier over the years. And the latest research by the government's own inspection agency, OFSTED, shows that competence in writing and children's basic pleasure in reading, is being sacrificed on the altar of ever-rising scores in just the measured technical skills of reading literacy.

No Child Left Behind, Sarason contends, only engages with measured achievement and testing and does not have even the most rudimentary grasp of children's learning. It calls for and insists on having more highly qualified teachers but does not get to grips with what quality teaching truly requires. It is an act full of answers that has no way of prompting classrooms to become places where inquisitive children can ask more intelligent questions. The proponents of No Child Left Behind, Sarason argues, are impervious to criticism, immune to involvement of the profession, unwilling to evaluate their own efforts, and destined to experience only disappointment and failure.

While the ensuing letters are addressed to a hypothetical President of the United States, Sarason's introduction to them berates a real one—"the first president of the twenty-first century"—as someone who was "never in doubt that he had all the answers." Sarason's letters instead engage Socratically with a putative "learning President," a President who needs to act but also wants to learn and to know, a President who has as many questions as answers, a President whose White House is the nation's first and best classroom—disciplined and authoritative, but also concerned to treat *all* its people with care and justice, in a way that seeks their involvement, respects

their contributions, and expects the very best of them, never presuming that the presidential teacher is the omniscient possessor of all the solutions.

The letters themselves have messages that seem radical in the current context, yet epitomize the essence of common sense—let children ask more questions; teach writing as well as reading; connect learning and literacy to the words that children actually want to learn; put children’s learning before curriculum content; understand that there are limits to what schools can accomplish and that they cannot change society all by themselves; avoid mandating pedagogy; recapture the great social visions of post–World War II history; and don’t become overly fixated on the results of standardized tests.

Seymour Sarason has repeatedly argued that schooling and educational reform cannot be understood without addressing power relationships. The current reform environment is preoccupied with exerting power over teachers in cultures of fear, rather than building power with them in cultures of hope. This position is not only morally reprehensible and organizationally ineffective, but at a time when the boomer generation of teachers is retiring in great numbers and teaching needs to be seen as an attractive profession again that will attract the very best applicants to it, the present oppressive reform environment is a demographic disaster of qualified teacher shortages just waiting to happen.

Letters to a Serious Education President, Second Edition, speaks instead to a thoughtful presidency, a learning presidency and a hopeful presidency that understands its people, expects them to improve, and makes them partners in the effort to do so. This is a presidency that wants the very best educationally for all its people, not just a set of test results that are merely good enough for the poorest of them. And it is a presidency that does not assume but really wants to learn the best ways to get there.

In this book as in his others, Seymour Sarason leaves a valuable legacy. He bears witness to the arrogant folly of most reform efforts, he provides succor to those who must endure or seek to subvert them, and he reactivates memories and images of more humanistic, inclusive, and democratic forms of educational being that represent the best of what we can achieve as educators. When urging us in these directions, Seymour Sarason sometimes feels he is talking to a wall. We live in a world of too many walls. If we can be inspired by the



x Letters to a Serious Education President

courage and tenacity of this enlightened octagenarian, let us hope that instead of talking to the wall that separates educational policy from its people, we can now begin to break it down. Sarason's letters help us make a start.

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