

Preparing the Next Generation of Educators for Democracy

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In the keynote address of the 42nd annual meeting of the Southeastern Regional Educators Association (SRATE), ATE President Karen Embry-Jenlink examines the critical role of teacher educators in preparing the next generation of citizens and leaders to sustain democracy. Drawing from historic and current events and personal experience, Embry-Jenlink issues a call to action for teacher educators to envision a new social order premised upon the democratic ideal of education as a public good that will support a 21st century national system of public education, which successfully prepares all of its students for living and working within a democratic and global society.

These are perilous and uncertain times in our nation and in our profession. Increasingly, teacher education is being governed by external forces which seek to dismantle university based educator preparation with intensive field experience and supervised clinical practice and replace it with corporate models of educator preparation that prepare teachers for short term careers in schools and swap tenure track positions at universities for clinical instructors who are paid by the semester.

These changes are highly undemocratic, driven through market forces supported with decades of legislated deregulation. The changes do not serve our society in fulfilling the purposes of education within a democracy nor will they allow us to sustain our position as an economically strong nation within a global workforce.

But, looking back, from the establishment of schools and a national educational system in the 19th century, change in teacher education policy and practice has always occurred within a context of social conflict and change. Social change drives the necessity to reform educational policy and practice. In other words, social change foments in educational reform.

Figure 1. Photo of the Little Rock Nine



Figure 1. Photo of U.S. troops escorting the "Little Rock Nine" to classes at Central High School in Little Rock, AR. The "Little Rock Nine" refers to nine black teens who sought to attend Central High School in Little Rock, AR, in the fall of 1957, three years after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. Open source photo retrieved from https://www.google.com/search?q=photos+of+little+rock+central+high+school&tbo=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiFlsyIv5vXAhUk4YMKHch_BmgQ7AkIQQ&biw=1357&biih=750

Consider the social times during which the Southeastern Regional Association of Teacher Educators (SRATE) organized. This was the decade of Brown vs Board of Education (1954) and the Little Rock Nine (2017), a time of social, political, and cultural upheaval in our nation. SRATE was established during this time of civil unrest to bring together a greater exchange of ideas on teacher development and supervision of preservice teachers within newly integrated schools.

Earlier in the 20th century, Dewey (1902) defined schools as the social centers of our communities. Drawing upon lessons

from the Hull House settlement for immigrant mothers and children in Chicago, Dewey (1902) extended an inclusive vision for a changing America. He expanded this vision in *Democracy and Education* (1916) stating, “The conception of education as a social process and function has no definite meaning until we define the kind of society we have in mind” (p. 97).

In educator preparation, our role as teacher educators is a much larger one as we prepare the teachers and educational leaders. They are the front line for preparing the next generation of citizens and leaders to sustain our democracy. While education was not guaranteed as a basic right in our Constitution, Diane Ravitch (2013) called us to recognize the responsibility of public education to prepare future citizens for democracy. As Ravitch stated,

Communities and states established a public education as a public responsibility in the nineteenth century to educate future citizens and to sustain our democracy. The essential purpose of the public schools, the reason they receive public funding is to teach young people the rights and responsibilities of citizens.

(Ravitch, 2013, p. 237)

Thus, I argue that every child who is educated in the American educational system must be prepared to participate in a self-governing democracy.

In the brief time we share together today, I will focus on examples that illustrate ways democracy has and is being practiced with positive results for society and education. By focusing on examples where we are getting it right, I hope to affect a shift in the dystopian narrative that we are subjected to from the media, a narrative which projects an image that American education is broken and instead reclaim and redirect the conversation toward an

illuminating narrative that showcases educators in a democracy preparing the next generation with success.

Last week, the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE) planning committee traveled to Las Vegas for our final site visit in anticipation of the 2018 annual meeting. I never dreamed that a week later this city would become memorialized in history as the worst act of singular gun violence in America. Our colleagues at University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) and their students are in shock; they have experienced a nightmare that they will live with the rest of their lives.

But instead of focusing on the horrors of this one incidence, I want to share with you one of the highlights of this visit, a trip to Fremont Middle School, a school which serves as the social center of the local community. Fremont, a high needs middle school, is our selection for the 2018 *Give Back Program*. It is in the heart of Las Vegas, just off the section of the old strip.

The school, built in 1955, is today surrounded by a high chain-link fence designed to keep the homeless population from living on school grounds. Fremont is a remarkable school, a beacon of teaching and learning that emulates a 20-year partnership with UNLV. At Fremont, teacher longevity is remarkable. Most of the teachers who are hired there never leave. The principal has served ten years there. The librarian for 20 years.

Last year, a lone city council member proposed closing Fremont in order to consolidate the students at a larger middle school in a different part of the city. The teachers and principal, Ann Schiller, recognized what this would do to the neighborhood and the families in this area, and they stood against remarkable odds gaining support to defeat the proposed shut down.

Instead of closing, Fremont was granted permission to reorganize as a K-8 campus with a new facility to be built in 2019 that will replace the old school. Instead of breaking apart the neighborhood, children with their families will be able to attend school together and remain together for afterschool programs. Teachers and parents committed to working together with a vision for their community resulted in a remarkable achievement through civic participation and not backing down.

Consider the following examples from our past and today, which demonstrate our strength as educators in effecting social change in education through democratic participation:

- The Civil Rights Act of 1964
- Title IX Educational Amendment of 1972
- Section 504 -The Rehabilitation Act of 1973
- Georgia Authorization of the State Government to Intervene in Local Failing Schools, Amendment One (2016)

The final one in the list above is a powerful example of democracy at the state level: the overturning of Amendment One in the state of Georgia. Governor Deal placed a constitutional amendment on the ballot that would allow the governor to take charge of failing schools by turning them over to charters or to be run by a state agency. Citizens across the state stood up for their individual rights as voters and the amendment failed with over 60% voting in opposition. They demonstrated their belief in “an inclusive concept of local community control... bridging urban and rural divides” (Stoltzfus, 2017, p. 2). Key to their victory were the elements of “local creativity, engagement with local cultures, local leadership, and power” (Stoltzfus, p. 2).

In closing, I would like to shift to a personal example that has offered me a close

glimpse into what it is like to be a high school teacher today and the challenges teachers face daily for enacting democracy within our current public educational system. Introduced by a university colleague, I began tutoring Jenny (pseudonym), a 15-year old, Mexican American female, during her sophomore year. Jenny is enrolled in the highest performing school district in my local county; she attends a high school campus with an early college high school.

During her freshman year, Jenny passed every subject and was promoted to sophomore English despite failing the STAAR Eng I exam three times. The STAAR exams are a series of required examinations in Texas public schools designed to assess students' academic readiness. Passing the STAAR exams is critical to attaining a Texas high school diploma.

The consequences of failing the STAAR exam are dire. At school, Jenny was removed from Span II so she could enroll in creative writing. She was also removed from ESL classes. Her parents were notified of these changes in a letter. The letter was written in English; her parents speak and read in Spanish. Her diploma plan was downgraded to a completion certificate that she would receive at age nineteen, if she stayed in high school. Jenny wanted to quit.

I began tutoring Jenny in weekly sessions during the fall semester of her sophomore year and continued in the spring, practicing three versions of previously released STAAR English I exams. In the spring, she tested a fourth time on the ENG I exam and according to the state examination schedule, the school tested her on the ENG II exam and on the following day. When she received her results nearly two months later, she learned she had passed both! Yet the school did not change her diploma.

Thus, over the summer, before beginning her junior year, Jenny, her mother, and I met with her principal and guidance

counselor, to discuss placing her on the distinguished diploma plan that would ensure a successful route to college admissions. The school officials agreed and worked out the necessary scheduling changes to include more mathematics, science, and foreign language.

A native-born US citizen with undocumented parents and a non-native speaker of English, Jenny is now a senior in high school with a part time job. She is on track for realizing her dream of going to college and becoming the first person in her family to earn a bachelor's degree. Her story is a positive one, but in reality, the educational system was designed for her not to succeed.

Jenny's educational opportunity was being determined solely by her performance on the STAAR exams. Her opportunity was constricted by state accountability measures and barriers that would place her in the lower tier of the workforce and would not prepare her to be an active, voting citizen, fully prepared to join into civic life in her adulthood. The system is flawed. Instead of building up an educated citizenry, we are perpetuating a highly uneducated workforce.

Today, I close my remarks as a call to action to each of you for preparing the next generation for living in a democracy. I wish to stir you to envision a new social order within schools, colleges, and universities. A social order premised upon the democratic ideals set forth in our Constitution. This new order must support a 21st century national system of public education that successfully prepares all of its students for living and working within a democratic and global society.

Teachers today must understand how to navigate the barriers for refugee and immigrant students of undocumented parents. They must be equipped to improve the conditions for immigrant and / or marginalized populations in school districts.

And they must develop their political voice and learn how to work with the local school board and professional associations in their state to influence your legislation that affects education. In order to do this, we, as teacher educators, must embed foundational principles of democracy and civic life within our curriculum.

We must engage with school partners in redesigning professional and clinical learning experiences that will prepare future teachers to know how to live through and support their students through events like Las Vegas and Sandy Hook. In essence, we must politicize the learning experiences in our programs so that every candidate we prepare fully understands and is empowered to prepare the next generation for democracy.

The events of last Sunday night's tragic shootings and gun violence leave us speechless and filled with sorrow for the Las Vegas community. Our hearts go out to the people of Las Vegas and our colleagues at UNLV in the wake of this senseless tragedy. But, in ATE, we look forward to returning to Las Vegas for the 98th Annual Meeting not with fear but eager to demonstrate our support of Fremont Middle School through our *Give Back Program*.

Figure 2. Fremont Middle School Mural

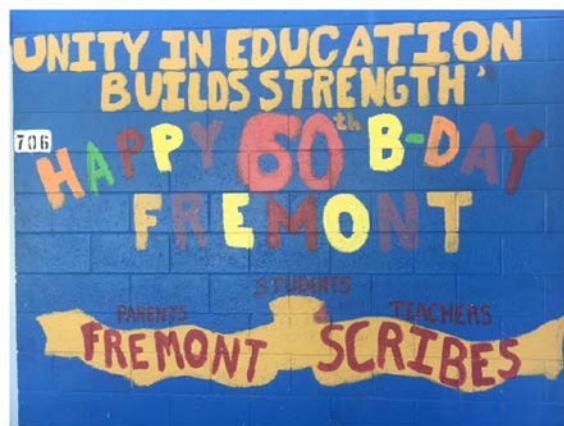


Figure 2. Photo of a mural painted on an outside wall at Fremont Middle School, Las Vegas, NV, taken by the author with permission.

This mural painted by students, parents, and teachers on the outside wall of Fremont Middle School in celebration of its

60th anniversary. Their faith in the power of unity in education to strengthen us inspires hope within us all for a better world.

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