

# Why Schools Aren't Winning Hearts and Minds

By Robert Fuller

Both Vice-president Gore and Governor Bush made educational reform the centerpiece of their presidential campaigns. Yet who really believes that schools that implemented either of their plans would win students' hearts and minds? Even though education is arguably the most important activity in their young lives, many students, in private unfathomable calculations, begin resisting it. Understanding the reason for students' apathy and antagonism must guide any reform or, like reforms of past years, it too will disappoint.

When pursuing their self-interest, individuals bring an energy and commitment that dwarfs what can be commandeered-by the state, in the workplace, or in school. That many students do just enough to get by suggests a divergence between the purpose of school and students' goals for themselves.

Schools prepare the young to assume places in the social and institutional hierarchies within which they will spend their adult lives. But students are like the rest of us when it comes to status. Finding one's position in a hierarchy and protecting one's dignity from insult takes priority over all else. Not infrequently, there is little enthusiasm left for learning.

Before students can focus on their texts, they must master the subtext that governs their rank within the school. Whether we give ourselves to the educational enterprise or withhold ourselves from it, depends on where we stand in the school hierarchy. Even in our innocence, we know that the outcome of this struggle for status vis-à-vis our classmates foreshadows our status in adult life, so much is at stake.

There is nothing inherently wrong with rank if it's precisely defined and the power that goes with it is not misused. But, in practice, once rank order is established in a hierarchy, it's hard to change. Moreover, the associated power is often abused. The "stickiness" of rank is due to the fact that, by virtue of the power inherent in it, high rank confers immediate future advantages on those who acquire it. Low rank carries a stigma-you're seen as a nobody-and you become vulnerable to indignities by teachers and fellow students.

The situation faced by the low-ranking is functionally equivalent to that faced by blacks in American society before the civil rights movement. Blacks were stuck at the bottom of a social hierarchy with little recourse. Like low-ranking students, they were labeled "uppity," "lazy," or "stupid," and suffered the consequences. In retrospect, it's easy to see how being at the bottom of the social hierarchy deprived blacks of equal opportunity. Now it is rank itself that functions to keep those of low rank from moving up. Once assigned, rank becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of future rank. Parents pay premiums to elite universities hoping to assure their children's futures.

The moral is not to do away with rank, any more than it is to do away with race or gender. The moral is to do away with rank-based discrimination. America is a meritocracy in name only so long as any form of discrimination is sanctioned. But in disallowing rank-based discrimination we must be careful to distinguish it from rank itself. After all, it is a legitimate function of education to determine what we are good at and what we are not. It is essential that we discover a vocation commensurate with our talents. Seeing how individuals measure up against standards of excellence is a useful tool for guiding them toward specialization. It can't be said too strongly that there is nothing inherently abusive or discriminatory about a fair ranking process. The problem is that most ranking processes are replete with discrimination, subtle if not overt.

Discrimination rears its ugly head whenever race, or gender, or rank is taken as an excuse for indignities or prejudice. By analogy with racism, discrimination based on rank can be called "rankism." Once you have a name for it, you see it everywhere. Rankism renders any hierarchy dysfunctional, whether it be a family, a company, a government, a church, or a school. We have become alert to the negative consequences of racism and sexism, but we are still largely oblivious to the costs of rankism. The reason that schools fail to win the hearts and minds of so many can be traced to the prevalence of this undiagnosed malady. It exacts a toll at every level of education, from pre-school through graduate school. Hearts hardened against the indignities and inequities of rankism mean minds closed to learning. We have disallowed race and gender as grounds for abuse and discrimination, and we can likewise disallow rank. Until the process of education ceases to threaten students' dignity, no reforms, progressive or conservative, can deliver on their promise.

For students to assume partnership in their own education, we shall have to identify the rankism that infects schools and systematically root it out. First steps include drawing up a Student Bill of Rights and devising new models for the governance of educational institutions that afford learners an appropriate role.

All hierarchies are susceptible to rankism, and schools are no exception. Students and teachers both suffer the ill effects. Students find themselves resisting, not learning; teachers find themselves disciplining, not mentoring. As Vartan Gregorian says, "Dignity is non-negotiable." So long as the dignity of either students or teachers remains liable to insult, educational reforms, whether democrat or republican, will fail to engage hearts and minds.