

*a good little*  
**school**

**carole g. basile**  
*foreword by john i. goodlad*



# **A GOOD LITTLE SCHOOL**

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CAROLE G. BASILE  
FOREWORD BY JOHN I. GOODLAD

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## Foreword

This book presents part of the story of a good little school. The dimension of littleness takes on significance when one realizes that enrollment of from six hundred to seven hundred students is the total for the elementary, middle, and senior high schools, not just one of these. We are beginning to realize that “big” is not “better,” that “small” makes it more likely that children and youths will not be just names on the enrollment registers.

I choose the word *good* rather than *excellent* deliberately. We tend to use the word *excellent* when we have some specific attribute in mind, such as prowess in athletics or test scores. In admiration of Tommy, we tend not to say, “Tommy is an excellent boy.” We make such a statement to infer that Tommy is excellent in, say, swimming or playing the piano. We probably would not have moral character in mind. We might even be referring to Tommy’s being excellent in school and be thinking of his academic excellence but probably not his overall character.

But when we say that Tommy is a good boy, we usually have in mind much more than swimming, getting high marks in school subjects, or any other single trait or attribute. Tommy is good all over: dependable, trustworthy, caring, thoughtful, even helpful to the very young, old, and disabled. He might be struggling in school and of ordinary skill in sports. There is something decent and moral that we attach to the word *good*.

And so it is with good schools. They care, they share, they invite participation, they are open to ideas and even criticism, they plan, they discuss, they act, they evaluate, they are morally grounded. I write as though schools are people. But that is precisely what they are—students, teachers, parents, administrators, aides, volunteers. Take away the people, and all we have is a building. It takes all of these people, working together and guided by common mission, to make and keep a school good. The principal and even the principal and teachers together cannot do it alone.

Over a long career in education, I have been in and around good schools very much like Jefferson County Open School. Indeed, I have been closely associated with several. They were different in interesting ways, but they all shared the characteristics enumerated above. All were morally grounded in beliefs and behaviors having to do with individual and collective democratic character—how, ideally, we must relate to one another, humankind, and our habitat if life on earth is to survive. Schools must provide the necessary apprenticeship.

The good schools I have known share a characteristic that has contributed to their decline. I refer to an eduvirus—the eduvirus of doubt. Good schools are commonly out of sync with the dominant educational fashions of their time. It is not easy to shrug off the thought that what is fashionable may be right, especially when something in the local school goes wrong, as it almost inevitably will. The eduvirus of doubt more readily gains access to parents and even some teachers when the drumbeat of so-called school reform is persistent and strong.

Politically driven school reform, in particular, mounts a strong case for what is wrong and what will remedy it. The reform strategy is rarely to effect local diagnosis but to impose predetermined prescription. The probability that one size does not fit all is brushed aside. Good schools are to change their ways to fit the norm; many succumb. I frequently meet school people who still talk about those good old days a decade or so ago before the eduvirus of doubt eroded all those changes they had worked so hard to make.

Good schools are able to shake off the flashes of doubt that understandably occur when something specific goes wrong. And I have not yet encountered a good school that does not have its detractors. The blight that destroys is ubiquitous. The 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*, declared our schools to be something an enemy nation might have imposed upon us. Subsequently, we were subjected to horror stories of schools gone wrong. Self-proclaimed education governors cited a

litany of failing schools in the expectation that the later rhetoric of improvement on their watch would be believable. Governors come and governors go, but the message hangs on: We have a malfunctioning system of schooling.

There is a formidable irony here. Recent results of an annual Gallup poll taken over three decades show the highest levels ever of public satisfaction with *local* schools. But the public view of *schooling*—that is, those non-local schools across the country—is quite different: They are not very good.

Of course, every school is local. And, according to the poll, most of these are good. Consequently, we have a good system of schools but a bad system of schooling! My, we have been carefully taught, haven't we? I am reminded of the words in the musical *South Pacific*—about being taught to love and to hate, to hate all the people our relatives hate. Polls do not just assess public opinion, they create it. They and the media have taught us to abhor those schools we know little to nothing about. Whose interests are being served by this sleight of mind?

Now, what does this strange paradox of people liking the schools they know most about but not the schools they know least about have to do with this good little school in Colorado and those other good schools I know or have known well? The answer is twofold. First, the people who have a stake in the local school being good (who doesn't?) must know enough about what makes it healthy to be suspicious of diagnoses of and prescriptions for its need to reform coming from afar. Second, they must care enough for the school's culture for it to be strong enough to shake off the eduvirus of doubt inevitably engendered by the endless litany of schools somewhere gone wrong. Of course, we have some malfunctioning schools—indeed, a good many. But, as with good schools, the engendering of doubt is not healthful.

Even people connected with good schools sometimes get the blues. My colleagues and I have long endorsed the role of what we refer to as the different or alternative drummer—someone from outside who supports, participates in, and injects ideas into the demanding processes of deliberative democracy that necessarily characterize the good schools of our society. Clearly, Jefferson County Open School has enjoyed the contributions of such critical friends. Several of these key players are identified in the Preface by Bonnie Walters. It becomes clear from what she writes and in the reading of this story that nobody is ready to step forward to say, "I did it." Even

the principal and teachers collectively are not ready or willing to say that—because they know that this would be a damaging partial truth about their school and all other good schools. Good schools simply defy the model of a designated leader leading the troops to victory even though we know that, with the wrong principal, we would not be reading the story that follows.

The characteristics that speak to the goodness of schools, characteristics of wisdom, hard work, candid communication, involvement of parents, leadership, critical friends, and much more have been well documented not only in the scholarly literature of educational change but in the practice-oriented publications of those agencies that seek to serve the designated stewards of schools. This body of helpful material supports an assumption that I have perhaps belabored: schools are local entities of a nationwide cottage industry that lends itself poorly to corporate culture. School reform is largely politically driven and commerce-oriented. Consequently, the culture of individuality and uniqueness that marks the members of this cottage industry and the culture of conformity that guides politically driven school reform mix like oil and water. An unhappy consequence is that school reform becomes a series of frustrated projects, and the cottage industry that is their target then experiences an endangered existence.

School reform borrows from corporate culture some of the techniques for rallying the troops that often serve to distract them from thoughts of it being a misguided venture. It commonly features benign slogans such as “All children can learn” or “Leave no child behind.” Stewards of good schools eschew these, largely because they simply do not connect or help with the complexity of making schools good and renewing them to keep them good. The cottage industry of which they are a part has a weak infrastructure, however, for fostering a strength-giving sense of common purpose and community. A frequent result is that the people in and around good schools sometimes feel alone and isolated. Then, with an onslaught of the blues when something appears to be wrong or not working, the eduvirus of doubt does its work. The temptation to be less unique and more conforming opens doors that admit practices once abandoned.

Fortunately, but not accidentally, Jefferson County Open School belongs to a larger support system that begins with the district. As Bonnie Walters points out, many school districts and several institutions of higher education in the state are joined in the school-university partnerships constituting the Colorado Partnership for Educational Renewal, which, in turn, is part of the National Network for Educational Renewal.

The Open School enjoys a close association with this infrastructure in its role as a partner school charged with being not only a renewing school but also an exemplary site for the education and induction of novice teachers. Jefferson County Open School is not immune to infection by the eduvirus of self-doubt, but it certainly is not a hospitable place for its entry.

There is much more to this support system than the easing of loneliness and the supporting of legitimacy for exploring new possibilities. Research shows that the absence of clear mission is a major source of uncertainty in schools in regard to which of several alternative paths to improvement they should pursue. Consequently, they are readily caught up in the changing currents of school reform eras, especially when financial rewards beckon or discipline for nonconformance threatens. The varied expectations of parents confuse the schools' stewards and contribute to many schools not developing a sense of who and what they are. Much more than slogans is necessary to their gaining clear purpose and identity.

The members of the Colorado Partnership and the National Network for Educational Renewal enter into much more than institutional partnerships and agreements on joining. They take on an educational mission that transcends the individual expectations we all have for our schools to embrace a collective one—the education of our young in the full range of sensitivities and sensibilities necessary to the stewardship of democracy and the well-being of its people and natural habitat. This unique infrastructure of people and institutions is held together not by slogans of noble intent but by a daunting agenda of educational mission, necessary conditions, and collaborative strategies—the Agenda for Education in a Democracy.

To a degree, the Agenda hearkens back to an earlier time when the local school was regarded as a family staple, like bread and butter. And a little of it went a long way. People expected eight to twelve years of schooling to provide, with the home and religious institutions, the necessary grounding of the young in civility, civic participation, and academics necessary to responsible citizenship, employment, and a satisfying life. Although the school was to take care of the academics, it was held accountable for contributing to the whole—the personal, social, vocational, as well as the academic. The times have changed, but studies show that we still want all of these purposes for our schools. Indeed, with women now crossing the bridge from home to work in numbers comparable to those of men, the burden on schools for purposes beyond the academic has increased dramatically.

Addressing all of them is what good schools such as Jefferson County Open do.

The Agenda for Education in a Democracy updates these public expectations for schooling in a national and world context that has changed rapidly and significantly. Instead of narrowing the school's responsibilities, as high-stakes accountability for academic test scores suggests, today's circumstances call not only for a comprehensive educational role but also for extending daycare to a much longer span of years than was customary not long ago. And the schools are inescapably buffeted by all the issues of race, gender, diversity, equity, poverty, violence, and now terrorism of our exceedingly complex, changing world.

It is not easy in this context for our schools to be places of joy, learning, and integrity to moral purpose, but this is what good schools are. This is why they the support and caring not only of their immediate communities but also of a larger infrastructure that legitimates and authorizes the mission and importance of what they strive to do. It is difficult to conceive of a more important mission than that of educating the young in the array of personal, social, vocational, and academic attributes required for their own and our democracy's well-being.

John I. Goodlad  
June 2002

# Preface

Jefferson County Open School is a compelling place to live and work for students and staff alike. It is like no other school I've tended. I say live because for a good number of the staff members it is where they began their careers and where they will end them. It is a way of life. There is a saying here that no one "ever really leaves." Students finish, go away for a while, but reappear at the most unexpected moments. Some have returned to teach—to begin another generation of passionate education. Staff retire but return to help an advisee finish a passage, consult on another student's passage, to celebrate great finishes and sometimes just to celebrate.

I came to Jefferson County Open School to be its principal in the summer of 1998. I would like to believe that I made a conscious choice to be here. At the time I applied for the position I was Associate Director of the Colorado Partnership for Educational Renewal (CoPER) and quite settled in that position. CoPER is one of nineteen settings in John Goodlad's National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER). My work focused largely on helping to establish school/university partnerships within the Colorado Partnership consortium, which meant establishing partner schools; thirty-six of which were funded and formed during my five-year tenure. Within this framework there was other work on teacher leadership, gender equity, curriculum, and for me, the most compelling, democratic schooling.

One wonderful benefit of being associated with the NNER was the opportunity to study with John Goodlad and his colleagues at the Institute for Educational Inquiry in Seattle. I was selected to become a Leadership Associate and spent a year reading, writing, and inquiring into the notion of education in a democracy. What did that mean? I, with my colleague, Dr. Robert Hoffert, Associate Dean for the College of Arts and Sciences at Colorado State University, decided our inquiry project (a requirement of all leadership associates) would be to embark on a search for democratic schools. Though limited in scope, our search was quite disappointing. It was clear, fairly soon into our study, that major tenets were missing in schools. There was not a clear understanding of what democratic schooling even meant. We polled our colleagues on what they believed defined democracy and found some major discrepancies even in its definition. What was even more startling was to realize that university students were far more focused on the concepts and vocabulary that defined the rights of the individual than on any that related more distinctly to the common good—the crux of what makes democracy so messy and so hard.

In this work and certainly in working with all of the partner schools, I became restless to do the work. It was very frustrating to get a partner school started, to hold substantive conversations with school and university colleagues but then, because of my role, walk away, never getting to be a part of the deeper work. I also found myself missing the day-to-day workings of schooling—the constant interplay between and among students and staff. I also knew, having been a principal in three other settings (two high schools and one elementary), that I did not want to go back into a conventional setting where it was often difficult to tell if some staff members even liked their students. I did not want to be in a place where students are neither actively engaged in their own learning nor participants in the educational processes that determine curriculum, policies, and staffing. I also had a romantic notion that the “one-room” schoolhouse where students from preschool through high school had the opportunity to interact and be a part of one another’s lives on a daily basis would be ideal. It was pretty clear to me that I likely would stay with the Partnership and continue my work because my “ideal” school did not exist or was out of my reach.

Then out of the universe came the vacancy announcement for the principalship of Jefferson County Open School, a school I had followed and tried to emulate when I was principal of a rural high school in eastern Colorado. I had completely lost track of it over time. It was

not conventional in any way. Students were very much a part of their own educational experience. Students had choices and voice in all that happened in their community. And . . . it was a preschool through high school program of just over 625 students. The decision to apply was one of the easiest decisions I have ever made. Getting the job however, was not so certain.

I knew from the moment I made my first visit that this place was different. Imagine a school where adolescents actually engaged you first; where a teacher became teary-eyed when she described what her students and the program meant to her; where students and staff sat together to discuss individual work. The interview itself was amazing. At least twenty-five people, staff, students, and parents, were crowded around a table in the library awaiting my arrival. I was escorted in by a young woman named Megan, who was then in the intermediate area as a sixth grader. She was also the one who asked the first question. "Describe your ideal school. What does it look like, sound like and smell like?" I was inspired to respond thoughtfully, the gods smiled upon me and I was hired. I was hooked and remain so, although less idealistic but still in awe of what we do.

My search for democratic schooling is over. Jefferson County Open School is a hard place to be because it is so steeped in the deep roots of democracy. Democracy is hard work; making it work in a public school is even harder work because conventionality attempts to preclude our participatory model. Often it would be easier to use the conventional model and unilaterally make decisions, because decision making in a democracy takes time. District level administrators, though very supportive, often have difficulty understanding our decision-making process, our practice, and our curriculum. Internally there is a constant tension between the rights of the individual and the common good. Keeping a healthy balance between the two is a continuous struggle for all who participate in this school.

We are now a partner school with the University of Colorado at Denver. This was my other great hope when I came to the Open School. It was ripe for this opportunity; inquiry, professional development, teacher education, and exemplary practice are very much a part of our current work. We are finishing our third year. Our success as a partner school hinges on two key positions. First, a Site Coordinator; ours is Florence Olson, who from the outset saw the vision and has done an incredible job bringing all of us along. Her ability to work with teacher candidates and with the staff has been incredibly important to our success. The second position is that of the

Site Professor. This individual is a full-time faculty member at the University of Colorado at Denver and spends, at a minimum, one full day a week here at the school. As we embarked on the partner school journey, quite serendipitously our Site Professor, Dr. Carole Basile was dropped from the heavens into our arms. It was an immediate bond. She too recognized the Open School as a remarkable place and set out to learn as much as she could. Instead of one day a week, she was here four out of five days. She saw and heard the makings for an incredible story that needed to be told and encouraged the community to tell it. The following is an accounting of her hard work and that of countless others who have believed in this place since its inception thirty-two years ago.

We are not a perfect school, and we all recognize this reality. Students are very different than they were thirty-two years ago—even five years ago. Our challenge is and will continue to be in the way we hang onto what's sacred and yet respond to the needs of our students, their parents, and our community. The political environment is not friendly to those who march to a different drummer, but we know our cadence and we will survive.

Bonnie Walters  
July 2002

# Acknowledgments

This book is not the work of one individual but many. As a result, the book reflects the voices of teachers and administrators who make this school special, work very hard to preserve what is sacred, and participated in conversation, writing, and collecting student work and thoughts; parents who shared some of their most intimate feelings about their choices, their children, and their hopes and dreams; and students, past and present, who were gracious enough to write and talk about what the Open School has meant to them.

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C.B.