# Roundtable News

## Education for Democracy

*Opening Panel (right) Examines Education for Democracy*

Amidst one of the most tumultuous periods in recent memory in the nation's political life, many observers have wondered if the nation's schools are adequately preparing young Americans for the responsibilities of citizenship.

Cause for concern exists aplenty. Various studies indicate most Americans are ignorant of basic facts about how constitutional government is organized and supposed to function. A majority of Americans show authoritarian tendencies. The proportion of young Americans who think democracy is not a good way to run a country has increased to one in four.

Against that backdrop, the Roundtable organized a three-day meeting in San Francisco in October to examine the state of education for democracy in the United States. It began with some discouraging data. A panel on the opening evening explored several of the challenges. Keynote speaker Robert Graham, founder of the Bob Graham Center for Public Service at the University of of Florida and former governor and U.S. senator from the Sunshine State, acknowledged the challenges and then went on to insist that citizens have the ability to shape the nation's discourse. We own the manual on how to fix the U.S., said Graham.

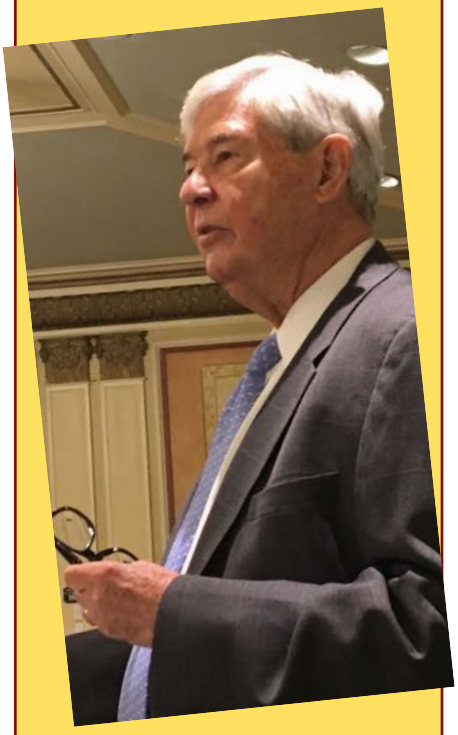
Drawing on historical parallels from Martin Luther in the 16th century and Hearst newspapers in the 19th, former Nashville mayor Bill Purcell encouraged educators to understand that our history has been one of overcoming challenges.

Analyst Nancy Kober of the Center for Education Policy and filmmaker Sarah Mondale reminded us of the historic importance of public schools to American democracy. And AFT vice president Adam Urbanski stated bluntly: "I was raised in a communist country. If public schools don't survive, it will be harder to hang on to democracy."

The sense emerging from a meeting that began with overtones of pessimism was that leaders must be optimists. Leaders may be discouraged by today's realities, but they must be optimistic about the possibilities for positive change. This newsletter hardly does justice to the rich discussion at the meeting, but it captures the main points.

### In This Issue:





*Former U.S. Senator Robert Graham of Florida calls for renewal of civic education*

# A CONVERSATION ABOUT EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY

The October meeting was launched by a conversation involving Nancy Kober, a consultant with the Center on Education Policy, Richard Kahlenberg of the Century Foundation, and Cliff Janey, former superintendent in Rochester, NY, Washington, DC, and Newark, NJ *(l to r below)*. They responded to questions posed by Roundtable director James Harvey.

**Democracy under strain**

We need to put democracy back into schools, argued Kahlenberg and Janey. Drawing on data from their November 2016 article in *Atlantic*, they concluded democracy is under strain and reported:

*Cliff Janey*

- two-thirds of Americans could not name all three branches of the federal government
- only one-third could identify a single Supreme Court justice or Joe Biden, at the time Vice President of the United States
- the percentage of young Americans who thought democracy was a "bad" or "very bad" way to run a country jumped from 16% in 1995 to 24% in 2011
- a quarter of millennials thought it unimportant for people in a democracy to "choose their leaders in free elections"
- one in six Americans believed it would be "fairly good" or "very good" for the army to rule; and
- Authoritarianism looms: 49% of Americans agree that "we need a leader who is willing to break some rules if that's what it takes to set things right."

The Center on Education Policy had been so concerned that it issued a report in 2012 to remind Americans that public education was essential to a functioning democratic system, said Kober.

**Schools should be a model**

More than 20 years ago, when he served as superintendent in Rochester, Janey laid out a vision in which schools themselves model democracy.. When students and the public see segregated schools, what kind of message does that send, he asked.

We need more than isolated civics courses divorced from the real world, he insisted. Elementary reading texts and other source materials should carry the message. "We need to bring democracy into the classroom. We need democratic governance of the schools that respect the views of teachers. And we need to bring the classroom into the community," he said.

**Producing good citizens**

Values such as respect for the Constitution, loyalty to the nation and to the rule of law, and a commitment to equal opportunity and to the rights of the minority, are not self-evident, noted Kahlenberg.

*Richard Kahlenberg*

They need to be renewed anew in each generation. One is a citizen at birth, he noted, but becomes a real American by (*to conversation p. 7)*

# AMERICA: THE OWNER'S MANUAL

"It's hard," acknowledged Robert Graham, former U.S. Senator and Governor from Florida, "to be happy and joyful" in light of the state of public knowledge.

People are "bowling alone" in the words of author Robert Putnam, with sense of community eroding. A recent *Economist* survey found trust in public institutions in the U.S. at historic lows. Only 19% of Americans trust government to do the right thing.

**The death of democracy?**

That's the corrosive situation today, summed up Graham, who insisted it's important to deal with these challenges since, as the philosopher and former president of the University of Chicago Robert Maynard Hutchins once put it, "The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment."

Many worry, said Graham, that the U.S. is headed for a new civil war. Not a pitched 19th-century battle, but more like 1,000 Charlottesvilles on the same weekend. Four months before Charlottesville, only about a third of experts worried about such a possibility; now a significant majority think it could happen within the next ten years, he reported.

The place to start, argued Graham, is in the schools. Historically, according to Putnam, civics in the curriculum ranked at about 8 on a ten-point scale. Civics has fallen by the wayside as testing in reading and mathematics eroded the rest of the school day. Today, says Putnam, civics rates a 2 in terms of its importance in the curriculum.

**The purpose of education**

As Graham argues in his book, *America: The Owner's Manual*, Jefferson understood education as a means to give every citizen the information needed to understand the needs of neighbors and the nation. "Students," said Graham, "seem to think civics is dull." Graham's book and the courses he teaches are designed to "attack the psychology that there is nothing we can do to influence government. I want to challenge the idea that the role of the citizen is to be a spectator. The true role is to get out of the stands and on to the playing field."

*Sen. Graham signs copies of "America: The Owner's Manual" for Roundtable Members*

**Guide to Effective Citizenship**

Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) could serve as a model for active citizenship, reported Graham. They were ahead of the curve, but the organization essentially implemented the ground rules recommended by the United Teachers of Dade County, starting with defining the problem accurately, doing their homework through learning as they went and addressing national topics at the local level. (See sidebar p. 7)

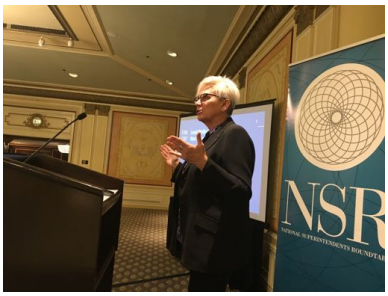
Civics doesn't happen in a vacuum, insisted Graham. In his courses he asks students to model democracy by working in groups of three to select a problem and suggest a solution that "moves the needle." One-third of students' grades rest on making something happen.

Seventy-five years after the Constitution was written, concluded Graham, we were in the early stages of the Civil War. Lincoln responded by creating great land-grant universities. In another 75 years we find the U.S. emerging from World War II. The G.I. Bill put America back to work. Here we are another 75 years later. How are educators and policymakers going to come together to make America great again?

*Sen. Graham chats with Timothy Grieves (Southwest Area Education Agency, Iowa)*

## WHAT DID THE FOUNDERS THINK?

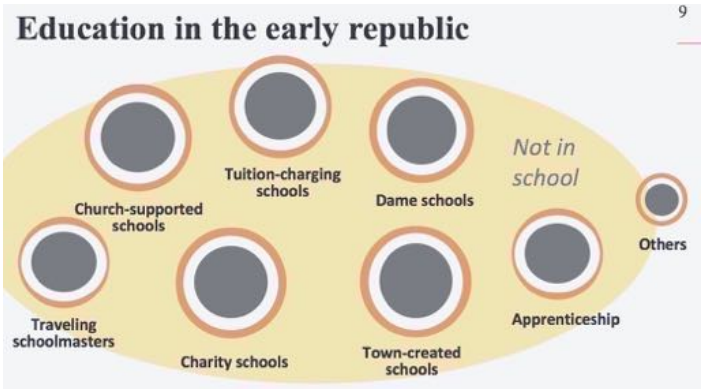
"You may have heard that the federal role in education started with LBJ and the War on Poverty," said Nancy Kober, long time Capitol Hill aide and a consultant to the Center on Education Policy. "That's not so," she corrected. "The federal role began in 1785 and 1787 with land statutes."



*Nancy Kober*

The 1785 enactment set up individual townships of 36 square miles of territory, each divided into one-square mile sections. Section 16 in each township was set aside for a public school. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 held that "Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall be forever be encouraged." The point was that good government and the development of good citizens depended on education.

"Why this commitment?" asked Kober, pulling up a graphic outlining schooling options the early Republic inherited from the colonies. "Look at what preceded the land-grant schools," she said, quipping that, "this hodgepodge looks like the current U.S. Department of Education blueprint." Kober cited John Adams' dictum: "The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people and be willing to bear the expenses of it. There should not be a district of one mile square without a school in it . . . maintained at the public expense of the people themselves."




The founders' ideas about public schools were grounded, she said, in the understanding that the emerging nation was fragile. They wanted schools that would help build and fortify the nation by preparing people for citizenship, promoting cultural unity, equalizing opportunity, improving social conditions, and educating children from different backgrounds in the same schools.

Many were left out of that attractive vision, acknowledged Kober. Women couldn't vote so there was not a lot of concern about educating girls. African-Americans weren't human in the eyes of the founders, much less citizens, so they were not part of the original social compact. But as rights were expanded in the United States, whether by law, civil war, or constitutional amendment, the original compact was broad and encompassed enough to correct these shortcomings.

## WE'VE BEEN HERE BEFORE

Bill Purcell, now in private legal practice and former mayor of Nashville and director of the Institute of Politics at Harvard's John F. Kennedy Center, opened his remarks about the state of social media by wondering if there had ever been such a time of constant bad news. "I fear not," he answered his own question. Cable news is on 24/7 with a daily barrage of calamity, even the Weather Channel is a never-ending catalogue of catastrophe.

But, switching to the historic lens employed earlier by Senator Graham, Purcell reminded the Roundtable that criticism of the press and communications has long been a staple of American political life. He brought attendees even deeper into history and the nature of public communications. When the news was carrying disturbing stories of the growth of neo-Nazis in the United States earlier in the year, Purcell was in Nashville's sister city, Magdeburg, Germany, marking the 500th anniversary of the birth of Magdeburg's most famous son, Martin Luther.


*Bill Purcell*

The core of Luther's Reformation message, said Purcell, was that people were getting bad information from the powers-that-be. He was able to get that message out because the printing press was revolutionizing communications. Gutenberg's press permitted people to read the bible in the vernacular, not Latin. Luther said, according the Purcell: "Here's the bible. Read it. It's the truth. Everything else is nonsense."

Or, urged Purcell, take Thomas Jefferson, (*to p. 5*)

the man who philosophically believed he'd prefer newspapers without government to government without newspapers. Yet once in office and under assault by the press, Jefferson found newspapers to be "rarely worth reading." William Randolph Hearst bought the *New York Journal* so that he could promulgate his views, He liked to take credit for editorially launching the Spanish-American War of 1898 through the pages of his newspaper.

*Intense small-group discussions*

Also controversial in their time: FDR's fireside chats, Fr. Coughlin's pro-fascist radio broadcasts, Billy Graham's crusades, and the televangelism of people like Swaggart and Bakker.

There's no doubt we have challenges with new technologies, thought Purcell. Twitter and the *Wall Street Journal* admit they've overstated readership and usage. Twitter, in particular, said it would cut out the Russian trolls, leading one of the trolls to respond: "That's funny, since before the election Twitter was coming to us saying 'Advertise before the election since it will be harder after.' "

Polls reveal that our citizens are the most polarized they have been in the last 50 years, observed Purcell. The solution was presented to the Roundtable at its 2011 meeting in Chicago by Will Friedman of Public Agenda. Friedman reported that 60% of Americans fear for the future, 70% believe officials have little interest in people like me; 66% believe policy favors the wealthy. But, said Purcell, "Our history shows we have always overcome challenges."

**When the American people become fed up, they will say "Enough!"**

*— Bill Purcell*

There's more information readily available to everyone seeking it than ever before in our history, noted Purcell. "The hardest part of government and the hardest part of being a superintendent is the need to talk to ALL of the people ALL of the time. But the power of these new tools is extraordinary if we can learn to use them properly."

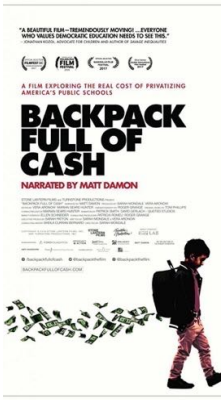
"I share all of this with you," he said, "to remind you that we have been through a lot together. We can get through our current difficulties, too. When the American people become fed up, they will say 'Enough!'"

## BACKPACK FULL OF CASH

A screening of the film *Backpack Full of Cash*, narrated by Academy-award winning actor Matt Damon, transfixed Roundtable members during the meeting. The movie, introduced by director and co-producer Sarah Mondale, points to the growing movement to privatize and de-regulate public schools. It takes its title from the demeaning manner in which charter and voucher advocates think of children.

**Public schools not only serve the public, they create the public.**

*— Sarah Mondale*




Introducing the film, Mondale pointed out that she came from a family of educators and had been a teacher herself. After seeing the pro-charter film *Waiting for Superman*, she concluded it was a one-sided propaganda piece designed to show that charters had been a positive force in the lives of some children. Conceding that there was some truth to that, she worried about children left out of charter lotteries and about the effects of charters on children remaining in public schools.

*Sarah Mondale*

Filmed in several cities, the movie takes viewers through the 2013-14 school year, exposing the world of education "reform" in which public education, starved (*to Backpack 7*)

# CIVIC EDUCATION

Weary attendees gathered on Sunday for what turned out to be another highlight of the meeting: a final panel examining what is happening in terms of civic education locally. Moderated by Cliff Janey, former superintendent in the cities of Rochester, Washington, and Newark, it featured Adam Urbanski, vice president of the American Federation of Teachers and leader of the Rochester AFT affiliate; Frank Hewins, superintendent of Franklin Pierce schools in Washington; and Talisa Dixon, superintendent of Ohio's Cleveland Heights-University Heights schools (l to r below). It explored the challenge of renewing civic education in the nation's schools.

Urbanski, a long-time colleague of Janey's, challenged the concept of renewal. "My perspective," he said, "is shaped by growing up in a communist state. Those who give up on democracy give too easily.

"What is happening in our country is troubling. We need to create democracy anew. It's not a matter of going back to some better time in civic education in the schools. We've never had it. We need to create it."

*Frank Hewins*

"In my 40 years in education," observed Hewins, "we have always been under assault. But this is an especially pernicious time. And what I hear is too many people pushing the false narrative of privatization that we saw in Sarah Mondale's film."

Talisa Dixon noted that her parents grew up in segregated schools in the South. "If we don't fight, we'll lose.

"Schools can't fix huge social challenges such as poverty and homelessness alone. Education is something the entire community has to wrap itself around."

**What makes us think that the losers in the housing and jobs markets will suddenly become winners in the school market?**

*— Becky Berg, Superintendent Marysville, Washington*

Savvy strategies can have a big impact. Cleveland Heights-University Heights hoped a magnificent new high school would attract back mid-

*Talisa Dixon*

dle- and upper-middle income families, said Dixon. "Our community is 55% white, but enrollment is 75% African-American." But the district found it had to put an equity goal in it's five-year plan: "I told the board that you can't expect me, as an African-American superintendent, to solve all the equity issues in our district."

Franklin Pierce schools, with a large low-income, minority population had not passed a bond issue in 20 years. Taking advantage of turnout in a presidential year, Franklin Pierce passed a bond with 60% support, including an effort to register thousands of new voters.

Sometimes, said Janey, "We're our own worst enemy. We think we have

*(to civic education, p. 7)*

## A CONVERSATION (CONT'D)

accepting a common set of values and beliefs.

The schools' role in this process is two-fold he suggested: providing students with the critical thinking skills required to make sound judgments in elections, and instilling in them an appreciation for liberal democracy that helps guard against demagogues intent on undermining democratic principles.

**How would the Founders react?**

Asked what the nation's Founders would think if they could see today's schools, Kober offered a three-part response:

Fairly traditional classrooms would seem quite familiar.

The founders would be surprised by the ethnic diversity in today's classrooms — and the extension of the common school through Grade 12.

Attacks on freedom of the press and on education as a pillar of national life would be viewed as potential threats to democratic government.

## CIVIC EDUCATION (CONT)

to stay in our lane, but we should be confronting the brutal facts of life for many of our children."

Urbanski ended on a powerful and ultimately positive note: "Let's leave here understanding that if public schools don't survive it will be much tougher to hang on to democracy."

He said: "We need to understand that not everyone in our society is rooting for democracy. But as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere.

"We must commit to excellence and equity. Excellence without equity is not excellence. It's privilege. Equity without excellence is not equity. It's tokenism."

Educational reform is "doomed," he said without housing reform, job training, and changes in the criminal justice system.

Urbanski warned: "If we don't have an agenda, theirs will do. We need a common agenda. All of us, teachers and administrators are in the same boat and it's leaking.

"There is no such thing as leadership that is pessimistic. We may be downcast about where we are today, but we must be optimistic about the possibility of change tomorrow."

*Adam Urbanski*

## BACKPACK (CONT'D)

of resources, hangs in the balance. One especially poignant scene filmed the "music room" of a Philadelphia high school without instruments or a music teacher.

*Backpack Full of Cash* argues that the rise of charter schools, vouchers, online programs, and other for-profit models has increased educational inequality and had a devastating impact on the poorest of the poor.

We shouldn't downplay the challenges public schools face, said Mondale. The issue, she thought, isn't that public schools are failing, it's that they are unequal. "We need to understand that public schools not only serve the public, they create the public."

**Ground Rules for Effective Citizen Activism**

- Define the problem
- Conduct research on the issue
- Be media savvy
- Get involved with local government
- Measure community opinion
- Identify the relevant decision makers
- Persuade the decision makers
- Build a coalition
- Engage the media
- Learn from success - and setbacks
- Address national topics at the local level

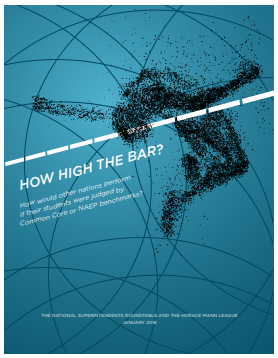
***Source**: UTD Teaching Foundation*

*(l to r) Paul Zinni (MA), Matt Montgomery (OH) and James Egan (WI) share a light moment*

## HERE AND THERE

***How High the Bar?***

*How High the Bar?* a report on NAEP and Common Core benchmarks developed by the National Superintendents Roundtable and the Horace Mann League, was released on January 17, 2018 at the National Press Club, Washington, DC.




The report asked how well would school systems in other nations do if their students were judged by the Common Core and NAEP benchmarks? The answer is most systems elsewhere don't match the performance of the U.S. system. Copies at: superintendentsforum.org

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We are deeply grateful for their assistance.

**Calendar and Contact**

**July 13-15 2018**
Summer Meeting, Chicago,IL
*30 Years of School Reform*

**October 26-28, 2018**
Fall Meeting, Washington, DC
*Elements of School Success*

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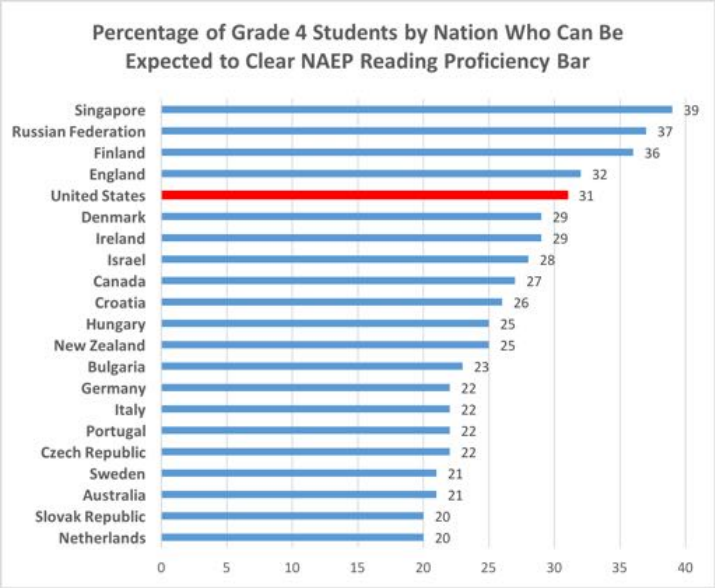


**Source**: *How High the Bar?*