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View, Jenice; Laitsch, Daniel & Earley, Penelope. (2013). *Why Public Schools?: Voices from the United States and Canada*.
Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

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Reviewed by Rachel Knoepfle
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What is the purpose of public schooling? Editors Jenice L. View and Penelope M. Earley from George Mason University and Daniel A. Laitsch from Simon Fraser University tackle this question in their book *Why Public Schools? Voices from the United States and Canada*. The editors have compiled a volume of essays representing public education stakeholders: teachers both current and retired, parents, students, business people, policy makers, and teacher education professors. The editors approached their topic with a unique strategy: all authors were asked to write about what he or she believed “to be the purpose of taxpayer supported schools in the 21st century” (p. xiii).

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The result is a blend of perspectives from a varied and articulate group of writers. These voices from the field open a conversation that explores public school from various positions within the system, while offering representation from the many perspectives of those involved.

The twenty-four individual essays are compiled into ten chapters loosely based on the authors' respective backgrounds while the eleventh and final chapter consists of the editors' final thoughts as they summarize the finding and work of the text. There is often an impulse to discuss change when talking about public education, and that is certainly the case for many writers within the text, but for others, writing about public school is more personal than offering suggestions or ideas: it is an introspective journey illustrating how public school experiences can shape a person.

While it seems reasonable that a book about public education would involve those in the classroom, this book moves beyond schools, including professionals who work outside of education. Beginning in the classroom, student perspectives are shared through the use of student work samples, which lends credence and weight to the author's thoughts and suggestions, while current teachers and a parent look specifically at what teachers do in the classroom and what teachers want to see done in the classroom. All three of the authors convey a passionate desire to see teachers connect with their students personally, beyond simply teaching the required curriculum.

Moving just outside of the school itself, former public school students and teachers reflect on their experiences. Indigenous persons notice a cultural disconnect between their education at school and education at home, and emphasize the importance of representing different cultures equally and fairly. The women in a rehabilitation program who, serving as interview subjects, shared ways in which they felt failed by the system, such as ongoing bullying problems and teachers who were not invested—as well as the successes they experienced, including distance learning classes that led to diplomas. And three retired teachers share their experiences in the classroom as both public school students and public school teachers,

providing insight into the motivation that can come from watching teachers discourage or inspire their students.

As the authors' professional backgrounds become more removed from the public school classroom, new opinions and ideas are brought forth. Public education policymakers are part of the education system, but removed enough from the classroom for their perspectives to be different from that of classroom teachers. For example, policymakers place the need for change in public education within a more global context, such as international rankings of test scores and wanting to develop workers who are able to compete within a global economy. Towards the outer rim of involvement in public education are the researchers and university professors. Teacher education professors writing their essays specifically address public education in the 21st century, particularly in light of the rapid technological and social change that has marked this century thus far.

Authors who are completely removed from education provide some of the most interesting insights, as they balance their own experiences with suggestions for change. Business people present their perspectives on the current state of the public education systems in both the United States and Canada, and the contrasts between the business world and public education, particularly with regards to the idea of a return on investment, are stark and thought provoking. Representing a very different field, two individuals from the arts share personal experiences of being shaped by the public school system, and individuals from varied and unrelated backgrounds offer their own public school memories.

Due to the varied nature of the authors' backgrounds, this book is highly relatable to large group of readers. Nearly every stakeholder in the education system is represented, supplying a diverse set of motivations for potential readers. Parents, teachers, and students all are given authorial voice within this text, as are taxpaying citizens who have an interest in how public education benefits students. School administrators and teacher education professors and researchers could benefit from hearing what students need and expect from their education, as well as what teachers are seeing and doing in the classroom.

One weakness, however, is the lack of input from school and/or school district administrators and non-faculty members of public schools. Although teachers are representatives of the public school system, being a public school leader in the 21st century presents its own challenges and successes, and hearing from that quarter could round out the book in a way that would increase its use. But overall, this is a book that is rich with the authors' respective passions for the subject.

The volume is a relevant piece of work as it addresses educational concerns at a time when many issues surrounding public education are in focus. Teacher advocacy groups, teacher's unions, parents, the parent-teachers associations, researchers at the college and university level, social media, and the mainstream media all contribute to a constant stream of criticisms and suggestions for public education. Into this fray enters a book that elegantly and articulately offers insights into the purpose of public education from the people who help fund it, work within and contribute to it, and experience it directly. More accessible than a scholarly journal, and more formal than a Facebook link or a news banner, this book is a perfect venue and for reaching a broad audience. The book presents a strong, well-crafted picture of how people perceive public education in its current state, why it is an important practice that should continue, and what can be changed to better meet the needs of the 21st century. It could easily be used as a whole or pieced out by chapter as insight for classroom practitioners and for teacher education programs, particularly the essays from the student perspective. Hearing the ways in which public schools both failed and helped students can be a powerful tool for change.

As a public school teacher I am invested in the success of the public school system, and interested in how others view public schooling. In my own experience public schools have often been criticized for not meeting student needs, particularly with regards to incorporating technology into the classroom and meeting international performance standards. However, these criticisms come from a desire to see more and better from the public school system, which is a desire I share. This book does an excellent job of sharing honestly the places in which the public school systems both fails and succeeds, and the tone

is positive and encouraging. *Why Public Schools?* not only asks an important question, but seeks the answer from the people who are best quipped to answer: the public.

About the Reviewer

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