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Boyle, Phil & Burns, Del. (2012) *Preserving the public in public schools: Visions, values, conflicts and choices.* NY: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

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Reviewed by Barbara Slater Stern
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In 1967, the Teacher's Guide for the Public Issues Series/Harvard Social Studies project, *Cases and Controversy*, provided a framework for assisting students to "analyze and discuss persisting human dilemmas related to public issues" (Oliver, D.W., Newmann, F.N., and Bane, M.J., p. 3). The idea underlying this guide is that, in a democracy, there are multiple, legitimate, conflicting opinions/positions amongst the stakeholders involved in any public issue. This almost obsolescent practical guide could serve as an excellent companion piece to the concerns voiced in Phil Boyle and Del Burns's (2012) plea for understanding and strengthening the *public* in public

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education. The audience for the highly readable, albeit somewhat repetitive, text is anyone with a stake in public schools. Additionally, the book serves as a blueprint for aspiring school board and/or administrative members who wish to create community consensus on issues of import in their school districts with the *caveat* that the underlying goal of public education is the furtherance of the common good, rather than the bailiwick of any of a myriad of special interests who wish schools to further their personal vision of what education should be.

Less vitriolic and partisan than Henry Giroux's *Education and the Crisis of Public Values* (2012) and more focused on consensus building among disparate belief systems than the recent work of Diane Ravitch (see for example, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* or David Denby's review of Ravitch's concerns, 2012), *Preserving the **public** in public schools: Visions, values, conflicts and choices reads* more like a primer in how to achieve compromise at the local school board level for a host of current issues including: redistricting, taxes, parental choice, school scheduling and many more. Boyle and Burns believe, and this author concurs, that at heart, these are essentially philosophical questions that spill into the realm of the political pubic issues are concerned. Starting with the idea that all stakeholders (e.g. parents, teachers, politicians, religious leaders, businesses, etc). desire the "best" education for the nation's children, the initial crucial understanding is that

> [T]he most important purpose of public education is to preserve and perpetuate our democratic republic (p. 2).

However, problems arise because of competing visions as to how goals under the "preserve and protect" umbrella are prioritized and funded. Boyle and Burn condense these competing visions into a conceptual democratic framework of four *public* values: liberty, equality, community and prosperity. The American belief in these values is accepted *a priori* and the issues are clarified by illustrating how these four values come into conflict when schools seek to enact policy. As the authors [paraphrasing Stone] state: "One great truth about our political beliefs is that the aspirations of the American Creed

and American Dream unite us, but our interpretations of those aspirations and how best to achieve them divide us (p. 23).

After defining the four concepts of liberty, equality, community and prosperity, as well as the subordinate concepts each contains, the authors use a fictional school district, Crestwich, and a school board meeting about student assignment to district schools as an opening example. With an influx of immigrants and concerns that some of the district schools are heavily minority and poor while others are homogenous and middle to upper middle class, a discussion about student assignment to schools to achieve more diversity (equality and community) and increasing learning opportunity for lower socio-economic students (future prosperity) the school board wants to redraw school assignment zones, but to some parents, this conflicts with freedom of choice and individual rights (liberty). What is essential to understand is that these are conflicting values and priorities; there is no castigation or determination by the authors that one value supersedes another as long as the intention of the stakeholders is the furtherance of democratic education for the common good of the nation. Thus, like the aforementioned Harvard *Public Issues Series*, the goal of this book is to assist reader in viewing school issues through a conceptual lens of legitimate, conflicting public values where all the stakeholders are approaching the issues with the best of intentions.

The problem, of course, is that "what is best for my child is best for everyone" (liberty with its subordinate concepts of rights, individualism and personal freedom) is not necessarily what is best for the common good. This is a common theme in United States history and government classroom discussions. Who is more important, the individual or the group? If a majority, or even better, most, most individuals are pursuing their own interests, won't the society as a whole be improved? Isn't concern about the group too "socialistic" for an individualistic society like the United States? The authors cite, among others, Jefferson and De Tocqueville and Myrdal in the introductory chapter "The Public in Public Schools" (pp. 1-25) as they explicate their stance. But, the strength of the book is that it focuses on real issues: prayer in school, fund raising, censorship and book banning, critical

thinking, zero-tolerance policies, teacher evaluation and student test scores, to force the reader back repeatedly to the conceptual framework. They authors do this by illustrating exactly where the four concepts conflict for each issue they outline.

This is accomplished in the four sections (Parts II-V) that follow the introductory section (Part I). Part II, "Visions and Values of Public Education in Our Democratic Republic" contains four chapters, each focusing on issues surrounding one of the big four concepts; Liberty, Community, Equality and Prosperity. Part III, examines Policy Goals and Values is Crestwich schools including chapters on leveling the playing field (Who Gets Equal Opportunity), assigning students (Who Goes Where, With Whom and Why?), Funding (Who Pays for What, Why and for Whom?). Part IV examines "Leading and Governing Public Schools" and includes a discussion of the difference between governance and management/administration making the case that governing is "political, collective, horizontal, democratic and uncertain" (p. 155). In some cases these lines are blurred and this confounds the problems. This discussion includes a summary of the different ideas currently under consideration as replacements for local, elective school boards including, privatization; complete state governance; mayoral control with appointed school boards; decentralized, parent controlled schools; and the separation of policy (governance) from administration/management. This section closes with a discussion on why the authors support elected school boards as most democratic. Further, the authors believe, that in the end, the leadership function of governing is more important than the organizational structure under use. That leadership would include education of the school board membership and the community on the issues. In other words, less shouting and righteousness; more listening and compromising. Part V contains a conclusion and an epilogue both of which reinforce the conceptual framework of liberty, equality, community and prosperity as the means for preserving the *public* in public education with a vision of how "Crestwich" can move forward in negotiating schools which ensure a future for democracy in the United States.

Thus, the book ends on a somewhat hopeful note that through understanding conflicting, legitimate values and

educating not only the school board, but also the community, compromises will be reached that will leave the stakeholders satisfied not only that they have been heard, but also that the decisions reached are always with the furtherance of the "common good" in mind. The timing of this "handbook" for understanding and solving issues facing our schools couldn't be better. I hope that *Preserving the **public** in public schools: Visions, values, conflicts and choices* gets the audience it deserves, one far beyond the walls of academia.

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