

“Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America” by Lisabeth Schorr, Anchor Books Doubleday, New York, New York, 1997

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Lisabeth Schorr's Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America is a comprehensive evaluation of disparities in the United States and especially effective collaborative programs that have tackled these social issues. Although the book is a decade old, the depth of Schorr's analysis is most applicable to our current milieu where the challenges facing educators are as timely today as they were when Schorr first wrote the book.

Lisabeth Schorr has applied a systems approach to the investigation of domestic social problems in her book Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America. Drawing heavily on program evaluation research techniques, Schorr reviews social problems that disproportionately impact economically disadvantaged individuals, often in urban areas, and asserts that these distressing phenomena will not disappear without strategic and pointed intervention programs. Schorr also makes the point that while certain individuals (e.g. those who live in underserved areas) often bear the *direct* consequences of disparities in education, income, and health, social disparities between groups ultimately have implications for *all* Americans.

The major theme of Common Purpose is that disparities between social groups (e.g. racial groups, members of different social class categories, etc.) persist in the United States. Despite the recognition of social disparities, Schorr incorporates a hopeful and optimistic tone into her analysis of successful social reforms. Specifically, Schorr asserts that effective social programs must take into account the *specific* needs of distinct families and individual communities, and must place autonomy in the communities' hands, while simultaneously utilizing the support of local schools and the federal government.

Common Purpose is divided into three major sections: 1) Spreading and Sustaining Success, 2) Reforming Systems, and 3) Rebuilding Communities, which are further divided into nine chapters. These three sections are preceded by an introduction and followed by an epilogue. The introduction outlines some of the major ideas of Schorr's analysis including her declaration that there is a 'trust deficit' in this country characterized by widespread distrust of public institutions. Despite this 'major threat in our nation's ability to combat social problems,' Schorr asserts that the prevailing distrust of the government and public institutions does not have to be a permanent condition. Schorr also attempts to dispel other popular myths. For example, she claims that past reform *did not* fail more often than succeed and that systematic domestic social reform *is* possible. Schorr also combats the misconception that most people are in the inner city because of some sort of individual failing or internal attribute such as laziness. Instead, Schorr outlines how historically deliberate barriers to social mobility were put in place by powerholders that have had direct (and causal) implications for individuals who are currently described as the 'have-nots.' Schorr ends the introduction on a hopeful, yet realistic note that becomes a theme throughout the book: social reform is possible, but it is not easy, it must be comprehensive, and it must fully consider system-level and bureaucratic barriers to change.

Schorr outlines many criteria for various aspects of effective social change. For example, Schorr claims that to make public education 'work' in the United States, we must:

1. Acknowledge the importance of the earliest years and must ensure that all children will arrive at school ready for school learning.
2. Put together what we know about effective school reform by creating the internal and external conditions for schools to succeed.
3. Create stronger community supports for school success.
4. Bridge the void between school and work. (pg. 233)

Related, Schorr critically examines why public education reform has been so difficult. First, she asserts that “our schools are not organized to counteract the forces of inequality (pg. 247).” Schorr continues her analysis by claiming that:

1. The supports from family and community for learning and high achievement have crumbled.
2. Profound changes in bureaucratic institutions are hard to make because when change occurs, it is usually in one school at a time, thus it is hard to influence outcomes for children on a large scale.
3. The general American public does not trust the reformers. (pg. 248-250)

This critique of public education is followed by a discussion of both internal and external characteristics that make schools successful. Internal characteristics include: 1) a focus on academic learning as the central purpose of schooling, 2) ambitious professional development for teachers, 3) enough autonomy to support their mission (including autonomy over critical decisions including staffing, leadership, budgets, scheduling, curriculum, and pedagogy), and 4) the specific goal of being an intentional community for teachers, administrators, staff, students, and parents. (pg. 251-260) External characteristics that make schools succeed include: 1) accountability based on standards for student achievement, 2) choice for parents, teachers, and students which allows the school to become an intentional community, 3) assistance in selecting and implementing proven interventions, and finally 4) collaborative efforts with other institutions. (pg. 260-276)

Schorr also suggests ways to strengthen community supports for school success. She suggests improvising and linking to available health and social services, putting school buildings at the disposal of the neighborhood, allowing schools to become partners in community efforts, and using the help of intermediaries. Interestingly, Schorr also asserts that society should limit demands placed directly on schools, for while schools must be *part of* the solution, they should not be required to be *the* solution. (pg. 290)

One of the most notable contributions of the book is Schorr’s outline of the seven attributes that characterize highly effective reform programs. Specifically, Schorr states that successful programs:

1. Are comprehensive, flexible, responsive, and persevering.
2. See children in the context of their families.
3. Deal with families as parts of neighborhoods and communities.
4. Have a long-term, preventive orientation, a clear mission, and continue to evolve over time.
5. Are well-managed by competent and committed individuals with clearly identifiable skills.
6. Have staffs that are trained and supported to provide high-quality, responsive services.
7. Operate in settings that encourage practitioners to build strong relationships based on mutual trust and respect. (pg. 5-10)

Schorr fleshes out the criteria for successful social reform through vivid case studies of communities that have been successful at prompting social change. From community building in Baltimore to venture capitalism in the South Bronx and shifting power to the community in Boston, Schorr’s case studies provide real life examples of how collaborative interventions and federal support can result in reform ‘that works.’

In summary, Schorr has documented the pervasiveness of social problems in the United States and through program evaluation and case study methodology has suggested ways to respect the complexity of social disparities, to work collaboratively with families, students, community members and the government, and to utilize the strengths of all stakeholders as a way to foster the collaborative synergy needed to achieve our ‘common purpose.’