

INTRODUCTION

Ask different people to define what it means to be an American in a single word, and you'll hear the same answer — FREEDOM.

In that one word we capture the historic, partly fulfilled promise of the United States. And we name an irresistible, universal human impulse — to be in control of our own destiny, to feel visible to others, and to have a say in determining the shape of the world around us.

Alongside the need for freedom, there is an equally pressing human desire — for structure, safety and a sense of order to the world.

These two universal needs — for freedom on one hand, and structure on the other — are particularly relevant to our nation's school leaders, who must strike the right balance between the two in order to create healthy, high-functioning learning environments.

In my years as an educator, I have witnessed scores of schools that choose, consciously or unconsciously, to value one of these needs at the expense of the other. I

wrote this book to deliver a message to school leaders: *You do not need to choose*. It is possible — indeed, essential — to find the right organizational balance between individual freedom and group structure. In fact, research confirms that when school leaders do so, they create optimal conditions for student learning, motivation and engagement.

Now, more than ever, our country needs these sorts of schools. We need schools that provide young people with well-structured spaces in which to discover who they are and what they care deeply about. We need schools where adults work collaboratively to prepare students for active citizenship and the 21st century workplace. And we need schools to reinforce democratic practices that extend beyond the school's walls, helping adults unite behind the shared belief that all children deserve to be seen and heard.

Before that vision can become a reality, we must ensure that the central elements of our social covenant are also in place in our schools: a clear sense of structure and shared identity on one hand, and an unwavering commitment to individual freedom on the other.

Degrees of Freedom will help school leaders achieve this important goal. Part I, *Theory*, outlines an actionable five-part framework for leadership, grounded in democratic principles (“principles for principals”), and identifies the essential skills educators must cultivate

in themselves and in others to create the conditions that best support more equitable, engaging, relationship-driven learning environments. Part II, *Practice*, provides an opportunity for readers to apply what they learned in Part I by way of the stories of three school communities that have, over several years, tried to create model democratic learning communities — to differing degrees of success.

Fred Givens, the middle school principal of Bronx Prep Charter School in New York City, knows what it feels like when this delicate balance is achieved. Asked to reflect on his school's ongoing work to value individual freedoms and create an orderly environment that improves student learning, Givens observed: “Some of us have learned that—despite what intuition might suggest—structure actually creates freedom. Through experiences implementing democratic principles in the classroom and in the process of co-creating our shared culture, it has become clear that the potential for looseness, play, free thought and creativity is generated when the structures are so tight and elegantly constructed that they become nearly invisible. This has been a fundamental revelation.”

All of us — whether we are students, parents, supporters, teachers or administrators — must become more attuned to these “degrees of freedom,” and to the individual and group needs of the people around us. When we do so, we create the types of schools that

4 American Schools

confer not just academic diplomas, but also “degrees” of individual freedom, of civic responsibility, and of shared respect for the power and uniqueness of each person’s voice.

I hope you enjoy the book.