

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 word we capture the historic, unfulfilled promise of the United States. And we name the irresistible human impulse in all of us — 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.

To fulfill that promise, we the people have the five freedoms of the First Amendment — religion, speech, press, assembly and petition. More than any other part of our Constitution or Bill of Rights, the First Amendment's five freedoms are our most valuable tools in a democracy, and the chief means by which we make ourselves seen and heard in a marketplace of diverse, competing ideas.

Alongside the need to use our core freedoms, there is an equally pressing desire in all of us — for structure, safety and a sense of order to the world.

These two fundamental human 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 basic desires 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 to strike the right balance between freedom and structure. In fact, research confirms that when school leaders do so, they create the conditions that best support student learning, motivation and civic engagement.

Our country needs a system of 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 implement democratic practices that extend beyond the school's walls, and help adults unite behind the shared belief that children should 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 educators achieve this important goal. Part I, *Foundations*, provides a greater context for the challenges we face in public schools today by examining the historical origins of public education, individual freedom, and student rights. Part II, *Leadership*, outlines an actionable five-part framework for leadership, grounded in democratic principles (“principles for principals”), and identifies essential skills school leaders must cultivate, in themselves and in others, to create the conditions that best support free and orderly school cultures. Part III, *Case Studies*, shares the stories of three different school communities that have, over several years, tried to strike the right balance between the two.

Kate Quarfordt, a theater teacher at Bronx Prep Charter School in New York City, knows what this delicate balance feels like. Asked to reflect on her school's ongoing work to value individual freedoms *and* create an orderly environment that improves student learning, Quarfordt observed: “Some of us have learned that — despite what intuition might suggest — structure actually creates freedom. Through experiences implementing First Amendment 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 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.