

Lois Brown Easton

# Democracy in Schools: Truly a Matter of Voice

Lois Brown Easton describes an alternative high school where democracy is truly enacted. The students' personal voices are valued, which helps them develop power, responsibility, and authority over their education.

**D**ear Policymakers:  
*We are students from a unique school in Colorado. At one point in our lives, we did not expect to graduate from high school. We had dropped out, been expelled, or had never gone to high school in the first place. Some of us came from some pretty bad backgrounds; we were abused, abandoned, or neglected, for example. Some of us did and dealt drugs. Some of us became alcoholics, joined gangs, ran away, or did petty crime. We did not fit or feel welcome in today's schools. We're like the students you'd find in any high school in America.*

*We are young people who cannot be "thrown away" or "lost to the system." We're not "at risk" or "the drop-out problem." We are real people with talents and skills, intellectual ability and curiosity, people the country needs now and in the future.*

In these two paragraphs, high school students from Eagle Rock School and Professional Development Center introduced the topics they wanted policymakers to consider from their point of view: standards, assessment, testing, accountability, dropping out, graduating with a diploma that means something. In Eagle Rock's democratic setting, where voice is valued—and not just in English classes—these students exercised both a right and a responsibility by writing to policymakers.

Eagle Rock was designed to "enact democracy," as Linda Darling-Hammond put it (47). Eagle Rock is both an independent, full-scholarship, year-round, residential school for high school-age students and a learning center for adults. It is fully funded by the

American Honda Education Corporation. The school is dedicated to developing innovative ways to educate students who have not found success in traditional settings. Among the eight themes, five expectations, and ten commitments (known as "8 + 5 = 10") that drive the school are the following:

- > Democratic governance (a theme)
- > Service to others (a theme)
- > Participating as a global citizen (an expectation)
- > Leadership for justice (an expectation)
- > Live in respectful harmony with others (a commitment)
- > Become a steward of the planet (a commitment)
- > Practice citizenship and democratic living (a commitment)
- > Devise an enduring moral and ethical code (a commitment)

Taken together, the principles expressed as 8 + 5 = 10 shape a democratic school culture and validate not only voice but also action to enhance democratic living. These values do not reside merely on a plaque but are known and used by students and staff from the time they enter Eagle Rock. New students know them by heart on arrival and take a class (ER 101) with the head of the school to understand them well enough to live them. Staff members design curriculum with 8 + 5 = 10 in mind. Student infractions occur when students forget the ten commitments they made when they entered Eagle Rock

and are dealt with according to the student's history at Eagle Rock and how the student has handled the transgression. Students and staff use the language of  $8 + 5 = 10$  to create the hospitable learning community that is Eagle Rock. They sometimes express the values of  $8 + 5 = 10$  through pithy sayings such as "You have no right to have no opinion," and "Leave this place better than you found it," or "Find a need and fill it." (For more information about Eagle Rock, visit <http://www.eaglerockschool.org>.)

### League of Small Democratic Schools

It was natural, then, that Eagle Rock align itself with the principles of John I. Goodlad. Eagle Rock is one of the founding schools in the League of Small Democratic Schools started in 2003. Goodlad describes his "Agenda for Education in a Democracy" as including a mission, a set of conditions, and a strategy. The mission of the Agenda consists of four components:

1. "[E]nculturating the young into a social and political democracy";
2. Introducing the young to the human conversation ("[p]roviding access to knowledge for all children and youths");
3. "[P]racticing pedagogical nurturing"; and
4. "[E]nsuring responsible stewardship" of our educational institutions. (Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, and Goodlad 28–32)

Goodlad envisioned the actualization of these components simultaneously in schools and schools of education through partnerships between higher education and K–12 education. To help both K–12 and college and university educators make his vision a reality, he formed the Institute for Educational Inquiry and the Center for Educational Renewal at the University of Washington; the National Network for Educational Renewal, which has member partnerships in twenty states; and the League. The League assists schools that are "preparing their students for the complex role of citizenry required of a democratic society" (Clark). League schools help each other make the reality of their environments match the vision of a democratic school. Richard W. Clark, officially known as a "chief worrier and consultant" at the Institute for Educational Inquiry, works with

Goodlad on secondary school renewal.<sup>1</sup> Clark devised a set of school-based indicators for the four components of the Agenda to help schools evaluate their application of the mission. Here, for example, are ten of the twenty-five indicators for the first component, "Enculturating the young into a social and political democracy":

1. The school develops students' commitment to the values of liberty, government by consent of the governed, representational government, and one's responsibility for the welfare of all.
2. Students learn to act in a manner that reveals an understanding of the interrelationships among complex organizations and agencies in a modern society.
3. The curriculum includes a strong emphasis on developing students' analytical and reasoning skills.
4. The curriculum emphasizes students' developing their communications skills.
5. The curriculum includes developing students' ability to function effectively in various size decision-making groups.
6. The curriculum develops students' ability to engage in theory-based practice in conflict resolution.
7. The curriculum includes development of students' understanding of the importance of free and open inquiry.
8. Educators skillfully practice collaborative decision making.
9. The school serves as a model that guides students in practicing democratic ideals in the school.
10. Students are encouraged to exercise the democratic right to dissent in accordance with personal conscience. (Clark)

### How Eagle Rock Is Democratic

As a League member, Eagle Rock demonstrates its commitment to the Agenda in a variety of ways, with particular emphasis on the development of voice in writing and speaking—something we English teachers know is important. We exult when we encounter a student's unique and powerful voice in an essay. I remember Khalid's essay of explanation,

“Cars in the ‘Hood.” Although needing much more work in sentence structure and mechanics, his paper was written as only Khalid could have written it:

There may be many nice rides in the ‘hood but there are some cars that have problems, big problems. Like so, whoa, what a hoopty [junker]! Get in the backseat to get into the front. Open only one door. Oh, definitely, don’t play the radio and drive at the same time; your car might overheat from using too many things at once. Literally don’t turn on the heater or the air conditioner because it might either burn or freeze the engine to death. Rain? Get a long stick with a squeegee on it, cause you’ll be driving and squeegeeing at the same time. Want to stop? Pull the emergency brake and, oh, yeah, put it in park or you might go downhill.

Voice is so important at Eagle Rock that students who helped to create a rubric for essays insisted on this descriptor: “The writer does not come across as anonymous.” Khalid’s writing is hardly anonymous. (See the sidebar for the other characteristics of good writing that students incorporated into a rubric for an essay of explanation.)

Voice is essential to a democracy. At Eagle Rock, voice represents much more than an antidote

to anonymity. It represents power to students who have felt powerless in other educational settings. It represents responsibility to students who have not felt responsible for their education (or the education of others). It represents authority for what has previously felt out of students’ control: their education.

By design, Eagle Rock provides several ways that students and staff members can have voice.

*Through choice-making.* As is the case with some of the schools in the new League, students choose to come to Eagle Rock and choose to stay. They choose when to graduate (Eagle Rock’s system is not time-based). Students choose courses that help them graduate (much as they would if in college). They choose how to learn and how to document their learning in these classes.

*Through mechanisms that create a democratic culture.* Again, like other schools in the League, Eagle Rock operates on a proposal system. Anyone may write and present a proposal. The whole community (students and staff) debates and works on making proposals acceptable to all. Regular all-community meetings (morning Gatherings, for example) bring everyone together daily. Staff create agendas for staff meetings. There are no grade levels, such as sophomore or senior, that create a hierarchy among students.

*Through leadership expectations.* Students meet in Peer Council to determine consequences of many minor infractions, have a say in consequences related to major infractions, and run a Peace Mediation process. Similar processes can be found in elementary and secondary schools elsewhere in the League. Eagle Rock students also attend staff meetings, where they have a voice in how the school is run. They run most of the activities on campus by serving as House (Dormitory) Leaders or KP Leaders or by participating on an Intramural or Morning Exercise Committee, for example. They participate in the hiring process for staff members. They engage with prospective students as mentors and make recommendations about prospective students’ readiness to come to Eagle Rock. They also help with decisions related to Second Chance, whereby a student who has left Eagle Rock petitions to return.

Students are expected to participate in the activities of the Professional Development Center. They teach the adults who come to the Center by



Photograph by Dan Condon, Associate Director of Professional Development, Eagle Rock School.

**RUBRIC FOR NONFICTION ESSAY**

Students at Eagle Rock know what to do to graduate—that is, demonstrate mastery of Eagle Rock's requirements, based on the Colorado State Model Content Standards. They also know what mastery looks like because students and staff develop rubrics for each of the performances or documentations. Khalid and fellow students in a writing workshop developed these criteria for a four-point rubric for nonfiction, based on reading a set of published essays. They used the rubric to revise, edit, and proof-read their essays. They and their instructors used the rubric to determine if the essays met criteria for mastery.

1. The essay has a point or purpose; the author has something important to say, something honest and authentic, reality as the author knows it.
2. The essay has an internal logic or order that makes it easy for the reader to follow (chronology, sequence, flow).
3. The essay builds bridges from the author's mind to the reader's mind; the author does not assume the reader knows everything he or she is writing about.
4. The essay has strong detail, support, facts, elaboration (fresh, not repetitive). Explanations are clear, direct, straightforward.
5. The essay draws the reader in and invites the reader to think; it is thought-provoking, provides insight; it is unique.
6. The essay has a strong introduction (a gripping first sentence) and a powerful conclusion summarizing the points and clinching the meaning. The title is also strong.
7. The author's voice is strong and personable; the essay does not seem to be written by "anonymous."
8. The essay is organized into paragraphs, with transitions from paragraph to paragraph.
9. There are few or no errors in spelling, usage, punctuation, capitalization. These errors do not impede understanding.

having the adults shadow them to classes and activities, convening with them in panel discussions and seminars, and by speaking informally to them about what works (and doesn't) at Eagle Rock and in previous settings. They regularly help to make presentations at conferences.

*Through program (curriculum, instruction, and assessment).* Everyone at Eagle Rock is a learner (which is why Eagle Rock is both a school and a professional development center for adults; Easton, *Powerful*). Everyone is also a teacher (which is why students suggest classes and co-teach with instructors). Eagle Rock is a purposefully diverse community, enriched by the wide variety of experiences, skills, and intellect that students and staff bring to the mountains of Colorado. Students are encouraged to discover and build on their learning styles. They document their learning through creative, individually designed exhibitions and demonstrations; three times per year and when they graduate, they create public presentations of learning that attest to their academic and personal growth (Easton, *Other*).

Students know how to graduate from Eagle Rock. They know the curriculum requirements (standards or competencies) and how to demonstrate them through engaging classes that are, in fact, just vehicles for learning, not Eagle Rock's unit of credit. They know what "mastery" looks like (through rubrics) and have some say in creating rubrics. They know that they are expected to find their own meaning in curriculum. They also know that there is no failure (they simply are not ready—yet—to demonstrate mastery), no "markers" such as GPA or class rank that stay with them forever, because there are no grades. They understand that they are in charge of their learning but also know they have great support and wonderful flexibility in deciding how to learn and demonstrate learning.

**Letter to Policymakers (cont.)**

*You can ignore us and keep your policies as they are in terms of standards, assessment and accountability, graduation requirements, size, time, curriculum, sorting students according to numbers, etc. Or you can recognize that we are like many high school students. Some drop-out or act-out and get expelled. Many stay in school, however, sitting in the back of the classroom, doing just enough to get by. We wonder what they'll be like as they get older. Will they contribute to making this country great?*

*What's worse is that many students graduate from high school without really engaging themselves as learners. They figure out the system and look good on paper, but they have not really learned how to think, analyze, interpret,*

*use logic and problem-solve. They have not learned how to learn. They are not curious, just canny, and may not become lifetime learners. Will they contribute to making this country great?*

Sincerely,  
Eagle Rock Students

#### Note

1. Readers may contact Richard W. Clark at elenwp@u.washington.edu.

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## *EJ* 60 Years Ago

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### Call for Justice, Not Revenge

Nothing is more significant or more pregnant with hope for the future than this plea by a conscientious minority, many of them Jewish boys and girls, for mercy and moderation. We must set a heartening example to the rest of the world by seeing that justice is done. If we are fighting for democracy, we cannot logically demand that *all* the Nazi leaders be lined up against the wall and shot. "Is that democracy? Many people don't seem to realize that you don't have democracy if you have it for yourself alone and not for the other fellow. If not, the whole thing is a farce." This is the leaven of justice working in the minds of those who have not yet lost their reason.

Charles I. Glicksberg. "Education for Hate." *EJ* 34.1 (1945): 19–26.