



## Why School?

*Mike Rose*

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In the tradition of Jonathan Kozol, this little book is driven by big questions. What does it mean to be educated? What is intelligence? How should we think about intelligence, education, and opportunity in an open society? Why is a commitment to the public sphere central to the way we answer these questions?

Drawing on forty years of teaching and research, from primary school to adult education and workplace training, award-winning author Mike Rose reflects on these and other questions related to public schooling in America. He answers them in beautifully written chapters that are both rich in detail—a first-grader conducting a science experiment, a carpenter solving a problem on the fly, a college student’s encounter with a story by James Joyce—and informed by a deep and powerful understanding of history, the psychology of learning, and the politics of education.

Rose decries the narrow focus of educational policy in our time: the drumbeat of test scores and economic competition. *Why School?* will be embraced by parents and teachers alike, and readers everywhere will be captivated by Rose’s eloquent call for a bountiful democratic vision of the purpose of schooling.

## Why School? Details

Date : Published September 1st 2009 by The New Press (first published 2009)

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Author : Mike Rose

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## From Reader Review Why School? for online ebook

### James says

As other reviewers have stated this is a little book that does ask big questions and they are not easily answered. What Rose does well, and with gusto, is to humanize these questions by providing us with not just statistics which are often used, but with people - complex examples that humanize the need for a response to these questions. Whether he is recalling his own experience in education as a student misplaced in the tracking system or recalling Josie or Anthony to illustrate the role education plays in diverse and complicated lives, Rose never loses sight of the fact that education may be backed by psychology, economy, science, or some other fields at different times in history - but that it is always a human experience. The root of education is based on our innate, deep, and meaningful views of humanity.

The book is well served to many types of readers - educators will nod along in agreement with some of the struggles, but people in other fields will realize that the innate struggle of education is one of human value and thus is a struggle worth having. Rose has created a work that would benefit all politicians or social crusaders wishing to discuss or impact education because the statistics are not enough - statistics do not replace all elements in any human endeavor.

To close the review I will say this, I thought enough about the work to make it part of a course I teach on "Education and the American Culture" - and anytime I am willing to teach from a book, one can take that as a sign of high recommendation.

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### ayanami says

This book is comprised of many short chapters, each tackling an issue related to American education. It covers some great topics, all quite relevant to the current educational landscape but the chapters are so short that the author isn't able to go into very much detail. Many of the chapters feel like introductions to much longer essays, but before you can get to the meat of the issue, the chapter ends, and you're confronted with the next topic. This isn't so much a book as it is a collection of short introductions to education-related concerns. I think it's adequate as a starting point to think about how we conceive of and approach school and learning, but I would have liked to read about some of the topics in more detail.

I did enjoy the chapter concerning intelligence-- Rose brings up a very good point about how we tend to categorize people, their work and their intelligence in terms of dichotomies-- industrial work (hand) vs. creative work (brain), manual labour vs. intellectual work, university education(theoretical/academic) vs. vocational education (practical), etc. Just because someone does industrial work doesn't mean they are any less intelligent than a white-collar employee. A factory worker, to use his example, needs a rich knowledge of the materials and tools used in his work, needs problem solving skills, be efficient, etc.

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### Cathy says

Mike Rose has been one of my favorite education writers since I read his *Lives on the Boundary* back in the early '90s. A product of a working class school system who was turned on to literature by a high school English teacher and went on to achieve not only a college-degree but also a Ph.D, Rose has devoted his working life to helping under-prepared and marginalized students make it to and through college, focusing on developmental--often called "remedial" English classes. In short, he's devoted to students like mine. Here he argues for a revolution in American discourse about education--what it means and who it is for: "Public discourse, heard frequently enough and over time, affects the way we think, vote, and lead our lives. I worry that the dominant vocabulary about schooling limits our shared respect for the extraordinary nature of thinking and learning, and lessens our sense of social obligation. So it becomes possible for us to affirm that the most meaningful evidence of learning is a score on a standardized test, or to reframe the public good in favor of fierce and unequal competition for a particular kind of academic honor. Education is reduced to a cognitive horse race" (29). In contrast to this status quo, Rose uses his experience visiting schools and communities across the country to suggest how we might reframe our society's perspective on education and re-invigorate a notion of the common good that has been lost in many circles in recent decades. Part of this means recognizing the impact that poverty has on educational attainment: "Calculating, writing, solving a problem, or recalling information take place someplace with its economics and politics--which can have a profound effect on what goes on in a classroom. Poverty does not necessarily diminish the power of one's mind, but it certainly draws attention to the competing demands of safety and survival: the day-to-day assaults of the neighborhood, just the tense navigation from home to school. The threats to family stability: illness or job loss--tough for any family--can unmoor a poor household. . . . We need public talk that links education to a more decent, thoughtful, open society. Talk that raises in us as a people the appreciation for deliberation and reflection, or for taking intellectual risks and thinking widely--for the sheer power and pleasure of using our minds, alone or in concert with others" (28-9). Rose presents an unabashed, unapologetic liberal view that education is about more than only preparing for jobs, more than just success at narrow skills assessments; rather it is about expanding the mind and experience of all who would like to embark on the journey--and providing the available means for all to do so.

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### **Kara Poe Alexander says**

Excellent, quick, and insightful read on the purposes of schooling in America and how those purposes have shifted over time. Explores the cost of this shift to producing workers and questions some of our assumptions about opportunity, intelligence, and schooling. Excellent! My students enjoyed it as well.

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### **Jonathan Cassie says**

In less than 200 smallish pages (literally - the book could fit easily into a pretty tight front jeans pocket), Rose articulates the causes of many of the problems bedeviling American education in the early 21st century. The biggest of which is our movement away from an education philosophy which balanced preparation for work with preparation for citizenship and preparation for living a life well led. Our 21st century public values are corporatist, work fetishizing and imbalanced - Rose makes that case gently and well. Well worth reading.

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## **zakhro says**

'why school' by Mike Rose is a little book with big questions. must read for teachers, parents and those, who want tie up their lifes with education.

but first, i want to notice, that i imagined myself as a teacher when i read this book. it was really hard, but it worth it :)

when i started reading it i never expected it to be soooo good. one of the most honest books about educational policy and school system.

Rose humanized questions by providing us with not just statistics which are often used in other books about education, but with people - complex examples from his own life.

many of his examples perfectly illustrate the reasons why teachers left the profession and highlight few ambitions of teachers, because of which students stop struggling for their opinions and cool down to education.

i think, instead of useless statements about the education system in russia, we need to change our attitudes about few things.

we should know, that the most important thing of education is not the test score or piece of paper (certificate of secondary education, for example) but the character that was molded due to our knowledge, relationships and ideology, which we explained along the way.

P.S: also, we should always remember, that school is just the weird period, when students try to stay alive.

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## **Gregg says**

Having come out towards the tail end of the Obama administration and right before they geared up for the Every Student Succeeds Act, one would think the material here is dated. Not so. Mike Rose is a pedagogue in the best sense, and before the term “social justice warrior” was coined and hijacked by the right in the contemptuous sense that it wears today, Rose was quietly amassing a case against the school-as-business, standards-are-all, devil-take-the-hindmost mantra we’re all but swimming in these days. Among the many points worth revisiting: Rose wants to reclaim vocational education from the dichotomy it currently occupies with “academic curriculum” since manual labor requires no small amount of cognitive skills, and he thinks that there is much to reform in education, but until we acknowledge the “porous” walls of our public schools and address some extraneous factors as well, we’re not going to get the results we want. He echoes much in here that anyone who cares about education will doubtless be familiar with. I took some issue with his criticism of Professor X’s “In the Basement of the Ivory Tower” (Rose responded to the book in “a separate blog post”—X’s main grievance was how to prepare adult college students unready for college with the limited time, faculties and energy he had available after working a full day, while Rose’s response seems to be simply “Appeal to the student directly,” but then, Rose would probably find fault with many worthy teaching styles that adhere to a standard without acknowledging the student’s individualism. Hard to square that circle these days and stay employed, or at least well-evaluated. Rose always comes out in favor of the student. He cares. He makes you care more. He’s well worth reading.

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### **Tori Hook says**

An interesting read, if a little dry at times. Rose brilliantly lays out the problems inherent in the U.S. educational system from the language we use (reminiscent of business and economy) to the ways we measure it (the pros and cons of standardization). Throughout, Rose fights for the inherent good of education and the ability of each person to learn. I found it very important to read as an educator.

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### **Kirk Bower says**

Good book study type book. Opens up dialogue on American education. Written as if a series of essays. I found it thought provoking.

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### **Pete says**

There were some nice passages and chapters that went into some really important issues in education, including the high stakes testing regime and what a "healthy" school-business relationship might look like. But ultimately these were treated in small vignette-like form, and I thus often found the analysis lacking the depth I was looking for.

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### **Paul says**

A superb writer, taking the responsibility society has towards education seriously and suggesting a different vocabulary to use in dialogue about it. Here is a sample from page 151 -  
"... I also heard talk of safety and respect. Commitment to create a safe environment and a respectful regard for the backgrounds and capabilities of the people in it. I saw the effect of high expectations: teachers taking students seriously as intellectual and social beings. I saw what happens when teachers distribute responsibility through a classroom, create opportunities for students to venture opinion, follow a hunch, make something new. I saw the power of bringing students together around common problems and projects - the intellectual and social energy that results, generating vital public space."

I am glad we have thinkers like Mike Rose promoting education, for an ignorant populace will not be able to stand up against the unhealthy social and political policies that will drive us towards fascism.

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### **David says**

I love Mike Rose, but this is not his finest work. He outlines his philosophy in what feels like a series of paper abstracts, punctuated with occasional anecdotes but little in the way of detailed evidence. Compared to POSSIBLE LIVES, the Rose book that inspired me long ago to get into teaching, WHY SCHOOL seems like a quick dip in the pond as opposed to a serious exploration of philosophy and policy. The ideas it raises,

by Rose's own admission, deserve public attention and debate. I agree with nearly everything he says about the need to examine what we feel the purpose of school should be, what definitions of intelligence will we embrace, how will we reform schools from a holistic, class-conscious point of view not addressed in the narrow language of accountability and testing...but if Rose isn't going to give full due to these ideas himself, how can he expect the rest of us to? A good "get them thinking" book for Edschool students, perhaps. Stick with Jonathan Kozol or Alfie Cohn or Paulo Freire if you want these same ideas handled in more depth.

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### **Doni says**

This book wasn't about what I thought. I thought it would be an argument either for or against educating through the institution of schools. It would maybe be aptly titled *How School?* It discusses the value of thought in working class labor and the damage that the trend towards standards and assessment have caused. For a work as short as it is, it is surprisingly rambling.

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### **Jed says**

Essential big-picture thinking for anyone interested in education.

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### **Ogreart says**

I love Rose's writing style. It is deceptively simple and extremely honest. In a baker's dozen essays he lays out the framework for a new type of conversation about education in America. Instead of shouting slogans, we need to discuss what we consider education to be, what outcomes (besides higher test scores) we really want, how we really want our children to be taught and to learn.

Instead of the YOYO (your on your own) paradigm his philosophy falls more along WITT-y (we're all in this together) principles. He reminds us that for a long time in America education was used as a means to help insure equality. Is this a principle to be relegated to the past or is it a principle we still need to strive for? If education is not used as a means to help all Americans reach some level of equality, what is it to be used for?

I hope that people in high places (Duncan? Obama?) read this book and start asking these kinds of questions. Even more, I hope they start questioning whether or not the policies they are perpetuating and extending are the way we want to change education in this country.

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