CHAPTER ONE

# Failing at Smart

## Or What's an Education For?



A few years ago, I attended a conference entitled "Teaching for Intelligence." The conference had been an annual event for several years, bringing together leading educators interested in promoting and realizing a vision of education designed to bring out the best in all students' thinking. This particular year, the school superintendent from the host city addressed the conference. Unfortunately, as he spoke, it became clear that he was unfamiliar with his audience and hadn't given his opening comments much advance thought. He casually remarked that "Teaching for Intelligence" seemed like a rather vague title for a conference. "After all," he remarked, "what else would we be teaching for?" His remaining comments were unremarkable, but this question, and the rhetorical way it was framed, has stuck with me.

What else would we be teaching for if not intelligence? It is a question I find worthy of considerable attention. Is teaching for intelligence, that is, teaching with the goal of making students smarter, such a cornerstone of our educational systems that we can take it for granted? Is it a goal that parents, students, teachers, and the rest of the community readily recognize and embrace? Is making students

smarter a mission that directs our work in schools in a substantive way? Or is there more fuzziness around our goals for education? Do we, as educators and citizens concerned with education, even know what we are teaching for? What other competing goals are capturing our attention?

In this chapter, I take up these questions to lay a foundation for what is to come in the rest of this book. Before we can examine the idea of intellectual character and what it might mean for teachers and learners to embrace it, we first need clarity on where we currently are with regard to our educational goals. What is it that most schools and teachers are, in fact, teaching for? Why? To what effect? By understanding where we stand now and how we got there, we can then take up the issue of what it is we should be teaching for. What kinds of goals and ideals do we need to shape education and the future of our children? Only once we identify them will we be in a position to explore how we can go about making those goals a reality in our schools.

## WHERE ARE WE?

### A Look at the Current State of Teaching

Karen White (a pseudonym) begins the year with textbook perfection.[1] She is a model of organization and classroom management, conveying a strong sense of authority and confidence as she guides students through the rules and procedures of the classroom. Posters on the wall proclaim the expectations of the classroom—be polite, be prompt, be prepared, and be productive—and Karen enforces these rules immediately, dealing with interruptions and recording tardiness in her grade book as needed. With a minute-by-minute schedule on the board, Karen carefully walks the class through her rules and expectations.

This focus on rules, expectations, and procedures dominates the first week of class, and Karen lets students know that there is no ambiguity or wiggle room within the parameters she has set. In these first days, Karen wants students to know that it is their efforts that shape their success in her class, what she calls earned success. To get this message across, Karen provides constant feedback on students' work performance, posting students' percentage grades beside the front door of the classroom on a weekly basis. For one student, the importance of work is driven home on the fourth day of school when Karen

informs him that she is missing two of his assignments and that he has a zero in her grade book. When the student protests that he just joined the class and that this is only his second day, Karen cheerfully replies that she knows and that she just wanted to let him know so that he could complete the work and turn it in. The student seems unclear about why this missed work is significant or why he should have to make it up.

Throughout her instruction during these first days, Karen continually and quite effectively communicates the importance of students doing their work. Although this is a worthwhile message, at times it seems to eclipse any effort students might make to develop understanding. The result is a classroom in which students complete work rather than learn. Although Karen mentions understanding, thinking, reflection, and metacognition (thinking about thinking) as important, students never engage in these practices in a way that imbues them with any meaning. When Karen asks students to write reflections, the focus is on reviewing the day's activities or recording one's feelings about those activities. Reading students' journals, Karen has the opportunity to challenge students' thinking and gently nudge it in a more substantive direction. However, Karen tends to be drawn more to the affective issues that students write about than to the content of their thinking. It is also difficult for Karen to substantively comment on the journals given the time she allots: she reads thirty-five journals in just ten minutes. As a result, her comments mostly take the form of acknowledgments or encouragement: "Great," "Interesting," "Nice." Thus, she acknowledges the effort but only superficially addresses the substance of students' reflection.

Although her teaching may seem extreme, even a stereotype, Karen is a real teacher with real students. Her teaching represents a picture of teaching practice that many will recognize and already embrace. I daresay that the superintendent who addressed attendees of the conference entitled "Teaching for Intelligence" probably would be content to populate his schools with teachers like Karen, as would many administrators and parents. In fact, Karen's methods are deemed so worthy of emulation by her colleagues and supervisors that she leads her district's program for new teachers and is sought after by teachers in training as a student teacher supervisor. Karen may not be your typical teacher; however, she represents what for many is the ideal. Although her teaching is neither state of the art nor status quo, it is considered the standard that many would have us achieve.

If you're not convinced that Karen's practice represents a model to which most teaching is pushed, take a look at Doug Tucker's situation. Doug is a new teacher, full of enthusiasm and dedication. Like Karen, he's interested in promoting students' thinking, but he's also trying to learn and follow the norms of teaching that Karen has already mastered. Consequently, Doug feels pressure to spend a lot of his first days reviewing school rules and going over class expectations. This takes the form of reading to students directly from the school handbook. This early emphasis on rules and discipline is a major focus for all teachers in the school, because the principal expects this consistency. In one class, a student even comments, "We've been doing this all day. We get it already." At times, the days spent going over these rules feel oppressive to me as an observer. What do students make of this preoccupation with discipline? Does this emphasis make them feel that they cannot be trusted? That they are among classmates who can't be trusted? That obeying the rules is the major thrust of school and more important than learning?

## WHAT ARE WE TEACHING FOR?

Given that this is the vision many policymakers, parents, and teachers have of good teaching, what does such a model say about what we are teaching for? If Karen represents some kind of prototype of instructional efficiency, what is the aim of that efficiency? To be sure, Karen's and Doug's instruction provides their students with a lot. Their caring, cheerfulness, and good humor provide students with an approachable teacher who will support and nurture them in any adversity. Their consistency provides a smooth-running classroom in which students who want to participate can. And their textbook instruction provides students with the basic skills, a foundation, and often the confidence to continue in their studies. However, when we look behind this instruction to the messages it conveys to students about learning, another picture emerges. These types of teaching actions tell students that school and learning are basically dreary tasks that they must approach in a workmanlike manner. The overriding message is this: do the work, get the grade, and move on. Furthermore, students are told that teachers do not trust them to engage in the work of learning on their own, so they will carefully monitor the students' actions. This is teaching for complacency, for orderliness, for dependence, and for superficiality.

None of the classroom practices of teachers like Doug or Karen precludes the development of students' intelligence. Indeed, Doug does much to engage students in thinking, as we will see later. However, like the superintendent at the beginning of this chapter, these teachers might well assume that schooling naturally develops students' intelligence, that it makes them smarter. But does it? If we take what we might call smartness to be more than knowledge acquisition, to be about who we are as problem solvers and decision makers responding to novel situations, then the outlook for students getting smarter doesn't look good. These kinds of beginning-of-the-year teaching practices and the ones that follow from them do not contribute in any significant way to making students smarter. The emphasis these practices place on work, rather than developing understanding and engaging in thinking, makes it difficult for students to develop their intellectual skills, let alone any sense of inclination and motivation toward thinking and learning. Furthermore, teachers' spoon-feeding of discrete bits of knowledge impedes the development of students' awareness of opportunities for thinking. Without rich opportunities to develop one's ability, to sharpen awareness, and to enhance an inclination and motivation for thinking, it is difficult to get smarter.

The fact is that most schools today do not try to teach for intelligence. Rather than working to change who students are as thinkers and learners, schools for the most part work merely to fill them up with knowledge. Although some may see intelligence as a natural byproduct of schooling, in reality the curriculum, instruction, and structure of schools do little to promote intelligence and may even impede it in some cases. When one considers the current emphasis on high-stakes testing and accountability, a more apt description of the mission of schools might be this: to promote the short-term retention of discrete and arcane bits of knowledge and skills. If you think this is too pessimistic a view, take a look at a current high school history, geography, science, or math exam. Chances are that most adults couldn't pass these tests without a refresher course. Those of us with a fair amount of education may recognize the questions as covering familiar terrain but still not know many of the answers offhand—can you still do a geometric proof? And yet, passing these kinds of exams within a few months of being presented with the material is taken as an indicator of mastery of the material, of meeting the standards. However, the only standards being met concern one's ability to do the memory work of school. These standards do not begin to capture who

students are becoming as thinkers and learners as a result of their schooling.

## WHAT SHOULD WE BE TEACHING FOR?

If we were to ask Karen and Doug, or any teacher for that matter, what it is they are teaching for, we might very well be greeted by a puzzled expression and a response like this one: "What do you mean what am I teaching for? I'm teaching so that my students will do well on the state test in the spring. I'm teaching to my district's proficiencies and standards. I'm trying to make sure kids are prepared for next year. I'm also working to get through the textbook. Is that what you mean by what I'm teaching for?"

Well, no. That's not what I mean, and this confusion around the question of what "teaching for" means is part of the problem. In educational circles, we've come to mistake curriculums, textbooks, standards, objectives, and tests as ends in themselves rather than as means to an end. Where are these standards and objectives taking us? What is the vision they are pointing toward? What purpose do they serve?

By way of analogy, consider what is involved in taking a long car trip. We know that to get to our destination we have to drive a certain number of miles. Furthermore, we know that our driving has to meet certain standards of speed and safety as we progress on our way. However, when we get in the car, our excitement isn't for the road or the driving regulations, it is for our destination. In fact, it is usually only by keeping our sights on our destination that we stay motivated to drive the many miles and maintain the imposed standards. If truth be told, in our excitement to reach our destination, we may even flaunt the standards a bit from time to time, taking some liberty with the speed limit perhaps. Saying that standards, textbooks, and tests are what we are teaching for is like saying the point of our driving is to cover miles of road safely within the posted speed limit. It is a trip without a destination; it is teaching without a reason. Both are ultimately empty and unsatisfying for the driver and the passengers alike.

When I ask, What is it that we are teaching for?, I'm trying to uncover the destination we are aiming toward and the goals we are striving for. What ideals guide us as we teach? This notion of ideals is at the very crux of the matter. Without ideals, we have nothing to aim for as teachers. We have no destination. Donald Arnstine (1995, pp. 22–23) captures well the importance of ideals to education: "Ideals

keep us going when the world seems oppressive and unrewarding. They embody our values, our hopes, our deepest beliefs. Specific enough to aim at, ideals are broad enough to allow some freedom of action. While often personal, ideals can be shared with others because their breadth has room for disagreement about the actions they imply. In this way ideals unite people in common efforts without dictating what their behavior must be. The openendedness of ideals makes it possible to share them, and thus makes possible distinctively human communities."

Unlike standards, ideals can't be tested. We can't check them off or set a threshold of performance that must be met. However, ideals can do something that standards cannot: they can motivate, inspire, and direct our work. It is the difference between watching the road beneath our feet and keeping our sights on the mountain growing ever closer before us.

So what ideals are worth setting our sights on when it comes to education? What kinds of strivings are deserving of our time and energy? To answer that, we need to look at what an education can reasonably accomplish. When all is said and done, when the last test is taken, what will stay with a student from his or her education? Memories, certainly. Treasured experiences, positive relationships, meaningful interactions, yes. But what about the knowledge and skills teachers have worked so hard to impart? Surprisingly, we don't have much evidence that these have a very long shelf life (Arnstine, 1995; Semb & Ellis, 1994). So what sticks? What kind of learning lasts beyond a given year that we can grab hold of to guide our vision? I contend that what stays with us from our education are patterns: patterns of behavior, patterns of thinking, patterns of interaction. These patterns make up our character, specifically our intellectual character. Through our patterns of behavior, thinking, and interaction, we show what we are made of as thinkers and learners. Schools can do much to shape and influence these patterns. This is the kind of long-term vision we need for education: to be shapers of students' intellectual character.

## MOVING FORWARD

So why are we failing at smart? Why aren't schools doing a better job not of imparting knowledge and helping students attain the standards but of helping students become better thinkers? First, we need

to recognize that it isn't merely a problem of not having the right materials or methods in place. We aren't just doing things the wrong way, which is not to say that new methods aren't needed. Indeed, much of this book is about exploring the successful methods and practices that teachers can use to nurture students' intellectual character. But new methods alone won't suffice. The root of the problem is that we are teaching the wrong thing. We don't have our sights set on providing students with an education that develops their intelligence. We've misplaced precisely the kind of ideal that can lead and motivate us. This book is about that ideal: the ideal of intellectual character.

What does it mean to teach for intellectual character? What does it look like in practice? How can we get started on the process, particularly given all the other demands placed on educators? These are the questions that have been at the heart of my work for the past seven years. They are also at the heart of this book. I've struggled with these questions as conceptual and theoretical issues, looking at them from psychological, sociological, and philosophical perspectives. I share this theoretical grounding in the first part of this book by way of defining just what I mean by intellectual character, what I think it includes, and how I think it develops. I've also explored these questions from a practical perspective by spending time in classrooms where teachers are, in fact, teaching for intellectual character. This research forms the bulk of this book, and for most readers, I suspect these pictures of actual classroom practice will be among the most engaging and useful aspects of this work.

There are somewhere in the neighborhood of 3.5 million teachers in the United States, most of whom teach multiple classes of students, creating well over 10 million classrooms for possible study.[2] I chose to focus the research for this book on just six. Why? What can an examination of only six classrooms hope to tell us about the development of intellectual character? Although large-scale educational surveys can be useful in spotting broad trends and identifying variables that appear to affect educational outcomes, more in-depth, close-to-the-classroom investigations serve to illuminate the specifics of teaching and learning. Rather than identifying a set of practices associated with a specific outcome, an inquiry based on the close study and description of a few specific cases helps us to better understand the nature of a particular phenomenon. As Eudora Welty (1979, p. 129)

has said and other authors have echoed, "One place comprehended can make us understand other places better."

That is precisely the kind of understanding that I am after in this book: an understanding that can be useful in informing the practice of individual teachers, in helping policymakers consider the importance of intellectual character as an ideal, and in guiding future inquiry by other researchers. Unlike large-scale surveys or experimental research, case studies do not identify causal links or provide convincing evidence for choosing one approach, method, or program over another. Those readers interested in such hard numbers will have to look elsewhere. Case studies in general, and the particular research I present here, might be better compared to a geographic expedition. Such expeditions begin to map the terrain, pointing out both the obstacles and the wonders to help us better apprehend the landscape. The end result is not a set of directions that take you from point A to point B. The outcome is more akin to a topological map that identifies the most salient features of the terrain and highlights the routes others have taken. Consequently, the journeys undertaken using such a map will each be unique, reflecting as much the traveler's interests and desires as the landscape's features. As you begin your personal exploration of what it means to teach for intellectual character, I wish you an engaging and fruitful journey.