

Portrait of an Educator

Sheldon Berman

Sheldon Berman is superintendent of the Eugene, Oregon Public Schools. Prior to that he was superintendent of the Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, Kentucky and earlier the public schools of Hudson, Massachusetts. The Louisville system has 98,000 students and 6,000 teachers. Just after Berman arrived in Louisville in 2007, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the way the district assigned students to schools to ensure racial integration was unconstitutional, and Berman had only a few months to design a new system while ensuring that Louisville did not return to a racially segregated system.

Prior to his move to Louisville, Berman was superintendent of schools in the small Massachusetts town of Hudson, an old mill town in the middle of the state. Before taking on leadership positions for public school systems, Berman was one of the founders and the president of an organization called Educators for Social Responsibility, which not only advocated for more just and democratic approaches to schools but also encouraged teachers to be leaders in such advocacy. In the course of his career, Berman has emerged as one of the leading advocates of a more democratic approach to education and to the organization of schools and their curricula.

Jefferson County's goals are to "strengthen school culture, advance character development, and promote the social and emotional growth of students by creating inclusive, caring school communities that nurture respectful, supportive relationships among students, educators, support staff and parents." This sounds like standard school-talk until one looks at Berman's track record during his years in Hudson, where he has made school an experience in democracy—for students, teachers, and parents. In 2003, he wrote,

In an environment of standards, testing, and accountability, we often forget that public education serves a larger purpose. That larger mission is to help young people develop the convictions and skills to shape a safe and sustainable and just world. Preserving and promoting a democratic society was the founding precept of our public education system and, if we are to continue to preserve our democracy, this mission must remain central to our efforts.

Serving as a longtime superintendent in Massachusetts, one of the states with the strongest accountability systems, Berman was in no position to ignore "standards, testing, and accountability." But he was also determined to do more and to ensure that his concern with "promoting a democratic society" not be mere rhetoric.

As he reflected on his experience in Hudson, Berman remembered that soon after he arrived, a number of elementary teachers asked him to tighten the discipline procedures because of the disruptive behavior of young children. Rather than adopt the often-popular "get tough" approach, Berman formed a committee to develop a more inclusive approach. Elementary schools in Hudson began to focus some of their instruction on teaching young children conflict-resolution skills and anger management. But they also moved beyond that to be sure that the classrooms were small learning communities that modeled what was being taught. The structure of elementary classrooms was changed fundamentally so that children could solve problems through collaborative class meetings, engage in service learning, and "develop an ethic of care and service through direct experiences of helping others and the community."

As successful as the elementary experience was, Berman knew that adolescents needed something different. "We have been developing a high school program to create a sense of community that embodies the concepts of respect and responsibility. It began with the integration of service-learning into many of our high school courses as a way to help young people develop an ethic of care and service." Many studies have shown that high school students respond well when asked to serve, and Berman put service at the core of the culture he was developing for his high school. He then turned to the academic curriculum, developing four-person teaching teams that would work with a group of ninth-grade students so that all students entering the high school were part of a small learning community with teachers who knew their names and cared for them. Finally, the high school teachers, with Berman's leadership, developed a curriculum that included "an ethics-based English and Social Studies course for all students focused on civic judgment and civic engagements." At the core of this course was the question "What is a just society and an individual's responsibility for creating such a just society?" In addition, the high school created a participatory governance structure in which

each student and faculty member had one vote. The new governance addressed issues as diverse as the menu in the school cafeteria to the way the school responded to new international students who arrived in Hudson. At the same time, the system of school governance taught students a great deal about the workings of democracy, the need for compromise and consensus, and deep civic engagement.

Sources: "Jefferson County (Kentucky) Public Schools 2009–2010 District Goals and Strategies," retrieved from <http://www.jefferson.k12.ky.us/AboutUs/Mission.html>; Ben Adkins, "Sheldon Berman Helps Implement Change in First Year at JCPS," *Business First of Louisville*, September 4, 2008, retrieved from <http://louisville.bizjournals.com/louisville/stories/2008/09/01/story17.html>; Sheldon H. Berman, "Respect and Responsibility: Building a Caring High School Community," *Perspectives: The Journal of the Massachusetts Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development* (January 2003).

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As you read in the textbook, Berman has consistently developed school environments that incorporate social responsibility and democratic decision making to model an inclusive approach to community development.

Thinking about Sheldon Berman:

- Berman wrote, "In an environment of standards, testing, and accountability, we often forget that public education serves a larger purpose." This sounds a lot like what Deborah Meier says (see Chapter 9 in *Teach*). Can you find at least one point of agreement and one point of disagreement between the two?
- If you were teaching in an elementary school and worried about discipline, what would you think about Berman's effort to create an inclusive approach? Are there times when a "get tough" approach is better?
- At the high school level, Berman sought to use civic engagement to teach lessons in democracy. Can you think of an example of how this might work? Can you think of an example of how this might fail?

You can learn more about Berman's life and work by exploring the following Web links and publications.

The Educator's Life:

[Berman Biography](#)

Berman's brief speaker biography on Harvard's Web site.

http://www.law.harvard.edu/conferences/nuremberg_legacyes/bermanbio.php

Selected Publications:

Berman, Sheldon. *Promising Practices in Teaching Social Responsibility*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.

Berman, Sheldon. *Children's Social Consciousness and the Development of Social Responsibility*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997.