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A COMMUNITY MODEL FOR DEVELOPING  
REPRESENTATIVE EDUCATIONAL INTENT

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## **ABSTRACT**

Why is education offered, what is its goal, and whom does it serve? I address these questions by examining “educational intent,” a phrase I coined to mean the reasons for which education has been provided. Part I of this thesis examines the educational intent of several education systems in early American history, illustrating (1) that educational intents can be designed in controlling and self-serving ways, and (2) what negative effects can result from such educational intents. Part II of this thesis offers a model for developing better educational intent that is both appropriate for and representative of its local community.

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## **Part I: Who Benefits? Educational Intents throughout Early American History**

### **Introduction**

Whenever education is made available to others, there is always an underlying reason for it. This is the idea of educational intent, a phrase I coined for this thesis. While educational intent technically includes individual teachers and administrators (as they do literally provide education), it refers more specifically to the theories and philosophies that lead governing bodies to creating educational systems. Educational intent is more involved than simple statements like “students should know how to read,” or “students should master these proficiencies at this specific level.” At the very least, educational intent also includes the reason why these goals exist – “students should know how to read such that they can absorb the lessons of the Bible,” or “students should master these proficiencies at this specific level in order to succeed in the modern workplace.”

Many educational intents in the past and present have been genuine and good-natured, usually resembling something like, “education is meant to teach individuals the skills necessary to achieve their personal, educational, and career goals!”<sup>1</sup> To suggest anything otherwise would seem jaded and cynical. Yet throughout American history, there are many instances of those in

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<sup>1</sup> The efficacy of this aim warrants another discussion.

power designing educational intents not to represent individuals or communities, but to further a social or political ideology, usually one of obedience and conformity to the state.<sup>2</sup>

This may seem unbelievable or outrageous, but it is not unexpected. To quote an often-cited adage known as Campbell's Law, "The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor" (Campbell, 1979, p. 85). In the educational world, Campbell's Law is frequently used to describe why high-stakes testing leads students and teachers to cheat and/or find loopholes in the system. But it also helps us to understand why governing bodies would want educational intents that are inherently controlling: education is an opportunity to simultaneously influence the minds of many citizens, so from the perspective of those in power, it is a tool of the utmost importance. Campbell's Law also states that if any tool or process becomes vitally important, it will naturally be subject to corruption, harming that which it was intended to monitor or provide. Worded more simply, education is such an important tool that people will inevitably want to use it for controlling or self-serving purposes.

I believe that education is meant to service the needs of local communities throughout America.<sup>3</sup> (And that isn't just a moral standpoint – education is literally a public service since it is financed by tax dollars.) In America's complex, heterogeneous society, the input of local

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<sup>2</sup> While these ideas apply of course to higher education, this thesis focuses on exclusively on educational intent in the context of public primary and secondary education.

<sup>3</sup> I think it's worth noting that I'm not some policy wonk who wants to impose my will unjustly on all educators – I am going to be a teacher in the fall! I just want to think critically about how we make education better represent those it is supposed to serve.

communities should be an essential component in the design of educational intent. They inherently understand their community, its needs, its obstacles, its resources, and its goals. It's difficult to imagine a centralized organization distributing an educational intent that perfectly addresses the needs of local communities. And as this thesis explains, the educational intents proposed by governing bodies often don't address local needs – they prioritize their own.

Part I of this thesis examines the educational intent of many primary education systems throughout early American history, illustrating (1) that educational intents can be designed in controlling and self-serving ways, and (2) what negative effects can result from such educational intents. But before beginning this thesis, I want to highlight one passage from educational researcher Alfie Kohn (1993) about the usage of controlling mechanisms in firmly-rooted practices such as education:

Cui bono — Who benefits? — is always a useful question to ask about a deeply entrenched and widely accepted practice. In this case, it is not merely the [controlling organization] who comes out ahead; it is the institution, the social practice, the status quo that is preserved by the control of people's behavior (p. 29).

In our attempt to understand why educational intents may not always be a good fit for communities, let us now ask of their development: who benefits?

## **Educational Intent in the Massachusetts Bay Colony**

The vast majority of educational efforts in the American Colonies were initially motivated by the desire for literacy. But it was not literacy for literacy's sake, it was literacy for the sake of being able to read the Bible. Religion was incredibly important to most colonists, and the freedom to practice whichever religion they pleased was the main reason they came to America. American educator and historian Edward Patterson Cubberley stated the dominant school of thought at the time: "each child, girls as well as boys, should be taught to read so that they might become acquainted with the commandments of God and learn what was demanded of them" (1919, p. 13). Accordingly, many local communities decided that the ability to read the Bible was a necessary skill – they set up their own forms of instruction, often led by the family, community members, or local clergymen (Cremin, 1970, p. 129). This is a simple example of an appropriate and representative educational intent because the colonists' local educational systems were designed by and for themselves. They agreed about what they wanted their community to learn and were able to provide it for them in the manner they saw fit.

While some colonies like Pennsylvania and New York housed many ethnic and religious groups across diverse geographic landscapes, Massachusetts did not. There, ethnically homogeneous Puritans lived in closeby village communities, affording them "ample opportunity for social intercourse among the members of different families and for joint sponsorship of readily accessible churches and schools" (Cremin, p. 135). This ethnic, religious, and geographic homogeneity allowed Puritans to form a governing body and create state education laws that could align with communities' interests. In colonies like Pennsylvania and New York however, the educational intent of each community differed from the next – there was so much diversity that forming one singular, state-sponsored vision of educational intent would have been

impossible. As Massachusetts was the opposite of Pennsylvania and New York, we should expect any education laws promoted by the Massachusetts Puritan government to share the same educational intent held by the Massachusetts Puritan communities.

For a brief while, no education laws were passed because the community was able to educate itself through volunteer efforts. But the Puritan government quickly realized that the voluntary educational efforts simply weren't enough – many community educators neglected their duties because their focus was on surviving the harsh, colonial life (Cubberley, p. 17). This resulted in the passing of the General School Law of 1642, described well by Cubberley:

The famous Massachusetts Law of 1642, which directed the officials of each town to ascertain, from time to time, if parents and masters were attending to their educational duties; if all children were being trained "in learning and labor and other employments profitable to the Commonwealth"; and if the children were being taught "to read and understand the principles of religion and the capital laws of the country." The officers were empowered to impose fines on those who failed to give proper instruction, or to report to the officer when required (p. 17).

This law did not establish schools or employ teachers – in fact, it didn't even guarantee that children would receive an education. It merely proposed check-ups and fines if instruction wasn't occurring. Regardless, this law was the first instance in the English-speaking world where a state body proposed measures to ensure that children were receiving an education, and it is effectively the first centralized educational intent in America as well. Already we can see some

of the influences of the state in the wording of the law: children were to be learning that which was “profitable to the Commonwealth” and understand “the capital laws of the country.”

While the educational intent of the law was indeed to provide children with literacy such that they could read the Bible, educational historian Lawrence Cremin (1970) notes that there was another, more state-oriented educational intent:

The statute was more than an affirmation of the value of education per se; it came as part of a vigorous legislative effort to increase the political and economic self-sufficiency of the colony. And, significantly, the responsibility for encouraging and overseeing familial education, which had been held by the clergy...was now vested in the statesmen (p. 125).

The educational intent wasn't just to provide citizens with an education (which it didn't even do), it was also supposed to increase the importance and power of the state. It also implied that the responsibility of education should no longer fall to communities like it had before, but rather to the state. This was another way of consolidating control over the Massachusetts residents. Just five years later, another Massachusetts state education law was passed. Perhaps learning from their previous law, this version explicitly required them to set up schools:

It is therefore ordered that every township in this jurisdiction, after the Lord hath increased them to fifty households shall forthwith appoint one within their town to teach all such children as shall resort to him to write and read...And it is further ordered, that when any town shall increase to the number of one hundred families or householders,

they shall set up a grammar school, the master thereof being able to instruct youth so far as they may be fitted for the university (as cited in Altenbaugh, 1999).

This was groundbreaking: it was the first American law to require local communities to provide schoolmasters to educate their citizens, thereby creating de facto schools. Children still were not required to attend these schools as the law only stipulated that education be provided. Attendance was also not compulsory. Still, this law represented a stronger centralized shift in the attitude of the Puritan government. Whereas the 1642 law merely implied that the state should assume the duties of educating its citizens, the 1647 version was an “assertion of the right of the State to require communities to establish and maintain schools, under penalty of a fine if they refused to do so” (Cubberley, p. 18).

The critical question to ask upon reviewing this law is the core of this thesis: what was the educational intent? Just like the 1642 law, it undoubtedly had aims to educate their citizenry, an objective local communities would endorse. But also like the 1642 law, there was a more self-serving educational intent. The historian of the Massachusetts public school system, Geo Martin, noted this when explaining the fundamental principles of this legislation:

The idea underlying all this legislation was neither paternalistic nor socialistic. The child is to be educated, not to advance his personal interests, but because the State will suffer if he is not educated. The State does not provide schools to relieve the parent, nor because it can educate better than the parent can, but because it can thereby better enforce the obligation which it imposes (1894, p. 19).

The educational intent of this Massachusetts law was to educate its citizens so that the state would not suffer. This public system didn't care about the students or parents, and the education provided might be of a lower quality than that which students could receive from their community. While we cannot discern precisely what the Massachusetts community desired at the time, it is hard to believe that they wanted a system of education where the only thing that mattered was the state. Martin's analysis illustrates the ways in which educational intent can be controlling, self-serving, and ultimately not representative of a community's interests. And keep in mind that the only reason broader, state-oriented educational laws were able to be passed at all in Massachusetts was because the population was very ethnically, religiously, and geographically homogeneous. It's only natural to assume that the educational intent drafted by a homogeneous government would be desired by the community. But the influence of the state on the governing Puritans led them to create an educational intent which was not representative of their communities' best interests.

Now obviously one could argue that perhaps the educational intent doesn't matter, and that any education with a selfish intent is better than no education whatsoever. In some instances I might agree with that. But there are two points I think are worth mentioning: First, many colonists did already receive an education from their family and/or community members without needing state intervention. And second, who would want to give up control of educating their children to a system that wasn't designed to care about them or their children? I don't blame the state for setting up education in the way that it did because they ultimately want to be politically and economically effective as a state. But it's quite obvious to see why colonists may not have been excited or pleased with these new schooling initiatives. This misrepresentative educational intent may partially explain why during the decade after the Massachusetts Law of 1647 was

passed, only 1/3 of the qualifying towns had complied with all the requirements. And in the decade after that, many new towns which breached those population thresholds set up neither of the two schools (Cremin, p. 182).

Before I continue with this thesis, I want to point out that I am not an enemy of government-sponsored public education. Education is a right,<sup>4</sup> and the government often plays a necessary role in distributing that right.<sup>5</sup> I just believe that there are better and more appropriate ways of constructing educational intent such that they are representative of what communities want and need. In the next chapter, I examine two other historical descriptions of educational intent as proposed by the founding fathers. One is very agreeable and sensible, placing the rights and wellbeing of individual citizens and communities above those of the government. The other is the exact opposite.

### **Educational Intent among the Founding Fathers**

After the Revolutionary War, the idea that central governments should provide education for its citizens had become increasingly popular among the founding fathers. In his 1796 farewell address, President George Washington noted that an objective of primary importance was to promote “institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge” (Washington, Hamilton, & Madison). However, the biggest champion of this idea was Thomas Jefferson, who advocated repeatedly for a more expansive and structured system of public education. Interestingly, his proposed educational intent for government-

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<sup>4</sup> Even if the Supreme Court disagrees

<sup>5</sup> This is especially true for districts that are not able to provide a quality education for their community on their own, which could be the result of physical isolation, insufficient funds, discriminatory policies, or some combination of the three.

sponsored education differed greatly from what we saw of local Puritan governments' in the previous chapter. In the preamble to Jefferson's 1779 legislation, "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge," he explains that citizens need to be educated to fight the tyranny of government:

Whereas it appeareth that however certain forms of government are better calculated than others to protect individuals in the free exercise of their natural rights...experience hath shewn, that even under the best forms, those entrusted with power have, in time, and by slow operations, perverted it into tyranny; and it is believed that the most effectual means of preventing this would be, to illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large (Jefferson, 1779).

Whereas the educational intent of the Puritan government in Massachusetts was to advance the interests of the state, Jefferson's was to enable citizens to oppose the state should those in power abuse their privilege. Despite Jefferson himself being a highly influential figure in a new republic founded on democracy and representation, he acknowledged that even the best forms of government will eventually be corrupted by those in it.<sup>6</sup>

Jefferson's educational intent also expressed the idea that education should enable its citizens to lead happier lives and participate more effectively in democracy:

Whence it becomes expedient for promoting the publick happiness that those persons, whom nature hath endowed with genius and virtue, should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens (1779).

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<sup>6</sup> Exactly 200 years later, Campbell's Law stated essentially the same concept.

The pursuit of happiness through education, let alone the consideration of individuals' emotions at all, is such a stark contrast from the educational intents seen in the American Colonies. To describe the educational intent in the colonies, I had earlier used a quote from American historian Edward Patterson Cubberley: "each child, girls as well as boys, should be taught to read so that they might become acquainted with the commandments of God and learn what was demanded of them" (1919, p. 13). In the colonies, children were literally demanded to learn commandments. Their emotions, especially happiness, were not considered at all. And this occurred before the Massachusetts state laws, when communities were still largely in control of their own educational intents.

Furthermore, Jefferson's educational intent was also meant to help citizens participate in and promote democracy. His bill explicitly says that the education citizens receive should enable them to guard "the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens." Jefferson's educational intent promoted the citizen, not the government, encouraging them to defend their unalienable rights in any context. His bill even asked for education to be granted to everyone, regardless of wealth, gender, class, race, or any other "accidental condition or circumstance" (1779).

Though this bill was drafted by wealthy and powerful politicians, it clearly is more representative of the citizens and local communities than it is of governments: its educational intent is to enable citizens to lead happy lives, regardless of their standing or circumstance in life. It also encourages citizens to defend their democracy and their rights, explicitly saying that education will help citizens resist the inevitable tyranny of government. While education systems created by a centralized, governing body will never be able to perfectly address the specific needs of heterogeneous communities, the educational intent of Jefferson's bill sounds about as close as we can get.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that Jefferson's bill is not 100% altruistic – it would, of course, also pursue the government's aims to an extent: citizens who engage in democracy and resist tyranny will naturally prevent the government from becoming tyrannical, maintaining its current form and systems. But these "self-serving" factors pale in comparison to the others we have examined thus far and will continue to examine.

While many founding fathers shared Jefferson's desire for a broad, government-sponsored system of public education, they didn't all agree with his proposed educational intent. Benjamin Rush, a civic leader in Philadelphia and founder of Dickinson College, wanted to use education as a tool to create obedient subjects to the state:

We prepare our youth for the subordination of laws and thereby qualify them for becoming good citizens of the republic. I am satisfied that the most useful citizens have been formed from those youth who have never known or felt their own wills till they were one and twenty years of age, and I have often thought that society owes a great deal of its order and happiness to...those habits of obedience and subordination which are contracted at schools (Rush, 1786, p. 24-25).

Benjamin Rush's educational intent isn't even thinly veiled here: he believes the purpose of education is to create mindless, subordinate citizens and nothing more. He claims that the most useful citizens are those who haven't even experienced free will until they were twenty one years old. He also believes that children are essentially public property with no purpose whatsoever except to benefit the state:

Our country includes family, friends, and property, and should be preferred to them all. Let our pupil be taught that he does not belong to himself, but that he is public property. Let him be taught to love his family, but let him be taught at the same time that he must forsake and even forget them when the welfare of his country requires it (p. 20-21).

Rush sounds more like the architect of a totalitarian regime than one of America's founding fathers. His ideas are so clearly articulated—and so phenomenally outrageous—that they barely warrant any additional analysis: his educational intent was one of control and submission to the state, and he did not care about the needs of individuals or communities. While Rush's particular ideology may have been

extreme, the themes of control and submission are unfortunately common in educational intents proposed by politicians and philosophers throughout the late 18th century (Herbst, 2002, p. 321). Jefferson's ideas were in the minority.

At this point we have closely examined three educational intents in early American history. The Massachusetts Puritan government wanted to educate its citizens so that the state would remain powerful and influential. Thomas Jefferson wanted to educate citizens so that they could be happy, promote democracy, and resist a tyrannical government. And Benjamin Rush wanted nothing less than the total absorption of the individual by the state.

Today of course, we do have a government-sponsored form of public education. Naturally, this leads us to an important question which has thus far been neglected: how greatly, if at all, do the educational intents of our governments and policies today impact what happens at local levels of education? The next and last section of Part I addresses this question.

### **The Harmful Effects of Controlling Educational Intents**

Local school districts obviously have some freedom regarding how they choose to run their operations. The most basic proof of this is that neighboring school districts will differ considerably because they have degrees of autonomy from the state and exercise it. For these reasons, it might be tempting to claim that communities could simply ignore governments' educational intent and do as they please. Yet that simply isn't the reality of the situation. Local districts are heavily influenced by district, state, and federal policies. The extent of these influences are, of course, variable, but to claim that educational practices in local communities are not affected by broader policies is simply ludicrous.

In *Savage Inequalities*, Jonathan Kozol (1991) documents the shocking inequalities that exist in schools throughout America. The schools he visited were lacking good instructors, necessary teaching

tools, and environments that were conducive to learning or even safe for learning.<sup>8</sup> Yet these inequalities aren't the fault of the individual schools – they are the result of policies that withhold money from the district, money which could be used to address these horrendous conditions.

Kozol recalls a conversation he had with a high school teacher from Camden, New Jersey who describes how state policies impact what she can teach and do in her classroom:

“The high school proficiency exam,” another teacher says, “controls curriculum. It bores the children, but we have to do it or we get no money from the state. From September to May, she says, instruction is exclusively test preparation. “Then, if we are lucky, we have two months left in May and June to teach some subject matter. Eight months for tests. Two months, maybe, to enjoy some poetry or fiction (1991, p. 144).

State policies that tie money to proficiency exam scores have forced this teacher to essentially “sell out,” foregoing what she believes is in the children's best educational interest for money that the school and children so desperately need. The idea that state policies have forced her to devote 80% of her instructional year to test preparation is maddening. As this teacher continues to describe to Kozol the effects that teaching to the test has on students' learning, pay close attention to the language she uses:

The result of this regime is that the children who survive do slightly better on their tests, because that's all they study, while the failing kids give up and leave the school before they even make it to the eleventh grade...they have learned that education is a brittle, abstract ritual to ready them for an examination (p. 144).

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<sup>8</sup> In his book, Kozol describes schools where certain floors couldn't even be used for instruction because falling ceiling tiles presented a safety risk for students.

The result of this regime. A brittle, abstract ritual. This sounds like the language one would use to describe an oppressive government, not education in a local community. Yet instances like this are all too common because the educational intent of policies that tie school funding to test scores are inherently controlling. And it's clear that despite this being the educational intent of a government far removed from this local district, its effects are felt all too well.

Some argue that the educational intent of these policies isn't controlling, it's to promote equity across schools. But that simply doesn't make sense. If a school underperforms, it loses money. Without money it isn't able to afford good teachers, or textbooks, or maintain a safe physical environment for learning. This leads to them doing worse on the next state test, which leads to them losing more money again. The educational intent of high-stakes testing policies like those in Camden are inherently controlling, and the fact that they were developed by governing bodies doesn't reduce their impact on local communities.

It's worth noting that educational intents utilizing testing policies don't need to be inherently controlling like the ones in Camden, New Jersey. In the same article where David Campbell proposed Campbell's Law, he also had this to say about testing policies:

Achievement tests may well be valuable indicators of general school achievement under conditions of normal teaching aimed at general competence. But when test scores become the goal of the teaching process, they both lose their value as indicators of educational status and distort the educational process in undesirable ways (1979, p. 85).

Under normal conditions, tests are incredibly useful tools for identifying what teachers and students currently understand. But when test scores become the ultimate goal of education, when they're used as controlling measures that dictate whether or not schools will receive critical funding, the potential for serious harm emerges. As we saw in Camden, this forced one teacher to focus 80% of her yearly

instructional time on subjects she didn't believe would benefit the students. And the students learn that education is nothing more than a series of abstract rituals, unless they drop out first.

Educational intents developed at a governmental level very clearly affect the way that local districts operate. However, changing educational intent and policies at a government level can be incredibly challenging and long-winded. An easier first step to securing an educational intent that is appropriate for and representative of your community is to develop one at the communal level. Part II of this thesis discusses the development of educational intent at a local level, ending with a model to facilitate and guide this process.

## **Part II: A Community Model for Developing Representative Education Intent**

Part I of this thesis introduced two concepts: that educational intents can be designed in controlling and self-serving ways, and that negative effects can result from such educational intents. Part II begins with a case study of the local educational intent in the high school I attended, to illustrate what local educational intents may look like and examine how they're developed. Part II then explains the inspiration for my model of local educational intent development, one based on a community revitalization program designed to help resource-dependent communities sustainably develop an economic and cultural identity after the departure of their dependent resource.

Finally, Part II proposes a model for how we can develop educational intents that properly represent and advance the interests of the local communities whom education is meant to serve. My model of local educational intent development is based on a community revitalization program designed to help resource-dependent communities sustainably develop an economic and cultural identity after the departure of the resource upon which they have depended.

### **Conestoga High School, a Case Study**

This will be the first example of a local, modern educational intent that we have examined. I attended Conestoga High School in Berwyn, PA, which has consistently ranked among the top public schools in Pennsylvania (US News, 2017). Below is a screenshot of its "About" page, which contains their mission statement:

District Home | Select a School | Translate | Sign In | Search

**CONESTOGA HIGH SCHOOL**  
200 Irish Road | Berwyn, PA 19312 | (610) 240-1000

Staff Directory | Lunch Menus | Calendar | District Parent Links | Schoology

Home | **Our School** | Academics | Activities | Athletics | Parents | Staff | Students | Student Services

Home » Our School » About Conestoga | Welcome

**About Conestoga**

Welcome

Conestoga Administration

CHS Profile

Program of Studies

+ Bell Schedules

Contact Us/Directions

Conestoga History

**Welcome to Conestoga High School**

**Welcome to Conestoga High School** where our mission is to inspire a passion for learning, personal integrity, the pursuit of excellence, and social responsibility in each student.

Figure 1. Conestoga High School, "About" page

This mission statement (which amounts to a less-detailed educational intent) sounds appropriate and logical – of course we want our children to have a passion for learning, integrity, excellence, and social responsibility. But it leaves a lot questions not only unanswered, but unaddressed. For example, why is this Conestoga’s mission statement? Do they believe it’s what is best for the community? Do they understand what the community actually wants? Was the community involved at all in the creation of this mission statement? If they were not, why is that? Might this educational intent be self-serving? What problems, if any, does that create? How is this manifested in the educational practices used at Conestoga?

Here's another imperative question their mission statement neglects: how does Conestoga plan on accomplishing their proposed mission? The implementation of a plan is just as important as the intent behind it, yet we simply do not know how this is meant to be carried out. The obvious answer may be "classes," but even that is not specific enough: Are there classes on integrity and social responsibility, or are these goals meant to be developed indirectly through more traditional, academic courses? What happens if students adopt these virtues but don't do well academically or vice-versa?

Conestoga's educational intent is greatly lacking – the mission statement produces more questions than it resolves. It almost seems like this mission statement was placed there out of a sense of obligation; not because they necessarily cared what it said or if people read it, but because it would be foolish not to write one. Even the physical layout of the webpage, a tiny sentence amidst an enormously empty backdrop, serves as a metaphor for how much depth and effort could have been put into the development of their educational intent, yet wasn't.

Digging a little deeper into Conestoga's website, I did find a more detailed description of educational intent in their 2018-2019 Program of Studies:

We are committed to providing an academic program that meets the needs of the individual student. With the assistance of the faculty and counseling staff, Conestoga students select from among a large number of distinct courses to develop a completely individualized program of study designed to address personal, educational, and career needs and goals" (Conestoga High School, 2018 p. 2).

This is definitely better than their first mission statement, as it mentions more specifically how students can achieve the goals Conestoga sets forth (taking a personalized program of study). But it still doesn't address the biggest issue from before: was the community involved in creating this? If they weren't, we simply cannot know what they think about it. Maybe Conestoga and the community disagree on the classes that should be taken in order to foster students' "personal, educational and career needs or goals." Or perhaps the community simply disagrees with that intention altogether.

I haven't said all of this to pick on Conestoga High School – as I mentioned, I attended this high school, and it consistently ranks among the best high schools in Pennsylvania.<sup>9</sup> I say all this because even when the educational intent sounds really good and appropriate like it does with Conestoga, we won't know if it's ultimately representative of the local community unless it is developed by and for them. Teachers and school staff who developed the educational intent are of course included in this community, but so are the parents and children and other community members who didn't have any input into the development of this educational intent.

Before we move on, I'd be remiss not to mention that many schools do survey and consider the needs of their communities when developing their educational intent. I certainly do not want to imply that this is not the case. But even in top-ranked high schools like Conestoga, it can be difficult to tell or understand the degree to which they worked with their community (if they did at all) to develop their educational intent. Maybe the educational intent on Conestoga's website is exactly what the community wants. That would be amazing, and this case study would certainly take a different tone. However, we just don't know how representative of the

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<sup>9</sup> What does Conestoga being nationally ranked say about what we value in education when I could so easily find issues with the way it communicates with its community?

community Conestoga's educational intent is because nothing in their mission statement or in their program of studies explains how they came to develop it. As a publicly-funded project, education is literally a service to its community. *If we as educators are only guessing what our community wants and not attempting to understand what it actually needs, then we are committing the ultimate disservice.*

### **Inspiration: Helen Lewis' 12-Step Recovery Program**

My educational intent model was inspired by Helen Lewis' 12-Step Recovery Program, a program designed to revitalize rural communities who had lost their economic bases of mining, timbering, agriculture or manufacturing. Based loosely on the 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous, Lewis' Recovery Program outlines 12 steps communities can take to bring themselves to a point of economic and cultural sustainability after key resources left their communities. (Lewis, 2007, p. 316).

In order to understand how and why my model was based off Lewis', we first need to familiarize ourselves with her model. Below I have briefly summarized each of her 12 steps:

1. Understand your history – share memories. This strengthens understanding and social connection between community members. These shared stories also help identify how current issues were created.
2. Mobilize/organize/revive community. Find suitable locations and hold community events (meetings, festivals, discussions, etc.). Make sure to include all sections of a community, not just one or two specific groups.

3. Profile and assess your local community. Examine your community's resources and needs. Resources include natural resources, companies, and individuals' abilities (skills, knowledge, leadership, personality, etc.).
4. Analyze and envision alternatives. Determine what the community wants to preserve and to change. Examine other communities for new ways of development.
5. Educate the community. People need to develop new skills to make new businesses. Community can organize classes, workshops, support groups, etc. to offer education to individuals and groups within the community.
6. Build confidence and pride. Use music, oral history and theatre to develop identity and pride that isn't tied to previous dependency culture. Recognize and celebrate group and individuals' achievements.
7. Develop local projects. Local projects (childcare, tutoring services, recreation areas, etc.) increase community participation and involve diverse groups.
8. Strengthen your organization. Broad and diverse leadership is needed for long-term sustainability. Be democratic, involve everyone in planning and evaluation.
9. Collaborate and build coalitions. Community groups should partner with other groups to share resources and learn from one another. Coalitions of groups can also become big enough to impact local government – big groups are harder to ignore.
10. Take political power. Encourage community members to run for local positions. Educate the community on how to register, work within the system to elect a local representative.
11. Initiate economic activity. Develop local business (tourism, recreation, food production, job training, etc.). If loans are needed, work with local banks. Attempt to recruit outside industry to come to your community.

12. Enter the planning process. Understand how the global economy impacts your country, region, state, community. Join international movements meant to help communities such as yours.

Each of these 12 steps either helps understand what the community wants and/or how they can achieve it. The first four steps especially influenced my development process because they all intensively diagnose the community: they help to foster cohesion and identify problem, they organize the community so that they can deliberate and share their different perspective, and they understand the resources they have to work with so that they can reasonably decide what keep or change.

Understanding a community's history increases the social cohesion of the community, a critical step that precedes the ability to successfully work together to enact change. By bonding together, communities can also identify the problems they believe are most pertinent to them. When developing educational intent, communities need to be similarly cohesive because deciding what the purpose of school is and how to enact it can be a very intimidating and stressful event. Communities will also need to be able to identify the problems they believe educational intent should address, so this step and social cohesion is crucial.

After this, physically organizing the community is the next important step. Without a common place to meet consistently, these efforts may peter out. The communal events held here also help to further increase social cohesion. An important feature of this step is that it explicitly convenes all members, not just one or two big groups. This ensures that the whole community's voice will be heard and represented. A physical meeting space is also crucial in developing educational intent. Ideally, the schoolhouse would host gatherings where community members

can relate to one another and begin to share their visions of what local education should be. And just like Lewis' model, these meetings should include all community members who are willing to participate.

The third and fourth steps assess what resources the community has and what they want to keep or change. Communities need to develop a shared understanding of the resources they have in order to form a shared understanding of what change is feasible. After understanding this, they are then able to realistically determine what communal aspects should be kept or changed. In developing educational intent, a community needs to understand what is feasibly achievable. They might want to have a certain skill taught, but realize no one has that skill. Or perhaps they want to alter the structure of the school day but they learn that policies which the local district cannot control prohibits this. After understanding what is realistically possible, the community can decide what they want to comprise their educational intent.

All the steps described above—identifying problems, organizing the community, understanding what is feasible—put the community at the center of this conversation and provide it with the impetus to change. Lewis' model is wholly designed around a local community, making it genuinely appropriate and representative. Its authentic, communal focus is why I used it as inspiration for my educational intent development model – educational intent should be community-focused and community-driven, with many different pockets working together to determine what shared values ought to be included. As such, there are many similarities between Lewis' 12-Step Recovery Program and my own model of educational intent development.

Without further ado, let's look at my model.

## **A Community Model for Developing Representative Educational Intent**

Below is my model for local educational intent development. Each step is briefly summarized, with a more nuanced discussion of the ideas following in the next paragraph.

1. Organize/gather community. Assign a physical space where the community can congregate, and advertise this information. Make every attempt to include all aspects of the local community, not just those you think would be interested in an educational meeting.

The ideal location for this meeting would be the community school. Being in the environment where learning actually occurs should reiterate the reason all this is even happening: to deliver an appropriate and quality education to students. In terms of which community members might have an interest in this meeting, a good starting foundation is anyone who is affiliated with the school (teachers, administrators, students) as well as tax-paying community members. Other elements to consider in this planning phase include the method of advertisements that will be used to notify community members of these meeting plans. Will there be flyers or emails? Will poverty or other factors impact individuals' abilities to hear about these events or attend them (e.g. internet access)? Considering these factors is very important when physically organizing your community.

2. Share desired educational values. Community members start discussing the ideas they wish to see in education. This phase should not result in concrete goals or objectives, it is meant to expose individuals to the ideas and values of the other members of their

community.

In addition to the initial sharing of ideas, this phase also serves to start generating social cohesion among community members. Some social cohesion will naturally exist in the community, but it likely hasn't been tested in the context of educational decisions. These conversations need to be respectful and candid – rudeness and deception make compromise and understanding more difficult. These discussions will likely take a long time and wind up happening over many sessions. This is okay! Determining shared educational values is difficult, and disagreement will occur frequently and fervently. This process is not meant to be done in an hour, and if it is, something probably went wrong.

3. Understand available resources and capabilities. Understand the aspects of education that can feasibly be changed. It is common to find policies outside of the district's jurisdiction which the community cannot change. It is important to acknowledge these as legitimate roadblocks instead of resistance on the part of local educators.

The biggest roadblocks to desired changes will often be money or policies. Maybe a district has a policy that forbids teachers from advancing with students through grades. Or maybe the community wants to hire a teacher to teach topics like personal finance, but the district simply doesn't have enough money or instructional time in a year for this. In these instances, school personnel should make sure to respectfully explain why these options are not viable. Honest and respectful communication is important for social cohesion and this process. In terms of available resources, the community may have

resources they can collectively contribute to the school. To reuse the previous hypothetical, let's say the community wants there to be a personal finance class offered but the school doesn't have the appropriate faculty or funds to provide it. Someone from the community could volunteer their time and expertise to offer this service. Community resources don't have to be exclusively limiting factors.

4. Construct a shared, educational intent. Understanding shared values, obstacles, and resources, the community can now begin to construct the actual statement of educational intent.

Now the community is actually constructing the educational intent. There will likely be disagreements about what the educational intent ought to be, and it's important to keep in mind that the entire community might not agree on one. While a 100% approval rating is ideal, a majority (>50%) is should be the aim. Also, remember that educational intent should include a statement of what students are supposed to learn and also why. For many communities, the "why" might just be to go to college and/or get a good job, and this is okay. The educational intent doesn't have to be anything supremely complex or philosophical, it just has to reflect what the community wants for their students.

5. Determine how the educational intent will be implemented and measured. The community will need to work closely with school staff to determine how they will implement and measure the community educational intent that was devised.

This could very likely be the most difficult and frustrating step. If your educational intent includes the development of personal responsibility, how do you implement this and measure it? Do you introduce a class, or perhaps require an out-of-school project, like is done in the Boy Scouts? This is for the community to decide, and the ambiguous nature of some educational intents is what makes this potentially the hardest step. Just like in step 3, school personnel should be honest and respectful in explaining what is or what is not feasible for them to do – it's unlikely that they will be able to accommodate everything that is requested of them. This step also will likely take more than one individual session. It is a complex issue that requires dedicated consideration.

6. Record and publish details of meetings. Keeping and publishing accurate records of the meetings allow the community to understand what decisions were reached and how they were reached. It serves as an accountability system for when communities look back and evaluate the development of their educational intent.

These records should include specific discussion points, outcomes, how decisions were reached policies and resources affecting the district; basically, all the reasons and explanations for why the educational intent became what it did. These records should be published somewhere that is easily accessible for the community. The school website would be a good location. In communities where there is no school website or internet access is lacking, they should be posted in a publicly accessible physical location, like the school or library.

7. Review and evaluate the educational intent after a period of time. The values and desires of the community will change over time, and sometimes implementation or measurement methods do not work as intended. As such, it is imperative to hold follow-up meetings to review and assess the designed educational intent.

Before adjourning, the community should set a timetable for when they plan to meet again and discuss the implementation and efficacy of their developed educational intent. Perhaps they will meet four times a year, or more or less frequently. That is for the community to decide. At these reviews, the community should critically assess how their ideas were implemented and measured. If there were problems with either of those processes, address those issues. If the processes went smoothly but the community still isn't pleased with the results, perhaps it makes sense to reexamine their desired values and/or their created educational intent.

Just like Lewis' model, mine is wholly centered around the community. Community members are creating this model for themselves based off shared values they determined together through physical meetings and interaction. They're examining the needs of their community and understanding realistically what they have the resources and political capabilities to implement. They're creating an educational intent that can be utilized by teachers and the district to better instruct students. And they're holding themselves accountable by both recording their actions and reviewing the decisions they've made.

The steps in my model will not necessarily happen in perfect succession, and they don't need to for a community to successfully develop a representative educational intent. A

community may skip a step, repeat a step several times, or return to a previous step after encountering obstacles. There are many legitimate reasons why this community model may not progress in a sequential fashion, but it by no means dooms the project. For example, many community members will already have spoken with one another about what they believe education should be before they actually convene as a community. It's also possible that when drafting their educational intent, the community realizes that state policies will prevent them from drafting it as they had originally planned. They may need to reconsider what they want in their educational intent and if it is feasible given the policies that influence their community.

By this point, I have written extensively about my desire for those who are not traditionally involved in educational decisions to become involved. With all of my emphasis on community involvement and development of educational intent, it may seem like I am trying to push educators out of the equation, relinquishing them of their roles altogether. As a future educator, I believe this could not be further from the truth. One of the many benefits of an explicit and communal educational intent is that teachers will better understand what the community wants for their students. While most good teachers should inherently understand the community's needs, an explicit educational intent offers the opportunity to compare your expectations and understanding against reality. I'd be shocked if there weren't a single thing even veteran teachers could learn from a community diagnostic procedure like this. An explicit educational intent would also be especially beneficial for newer teachers, providing a starting foundation to understand the needs of the community.

Another point to consider is that teachers are heavily involved in the creation of this educational intent. After all, they are a part of the community that drafts the educational intent. During the discussion and development of shared educational intent, teachers will be constantly

offering their input to the community. Furthermore, an entire step in my model is devoted to helping the community understand what is and what is not feasible in a school environment. Whether due to policy or the limitations of the human body, teachers cannot do everything that is requested of them. If the community is requesting something that simply cannot be accommodated, the teachers have the authority and responsibility to honestly explain why it wouldn't work.

And frankly, if a community still insists on sweeping changes even after school staff have engaged them in numerous level-headed discussions, perhaps those changes should occur. Educators are public servants after all, and if they can't convince their community that what they're doing is appropriate and reasonable, I find it difficult to justify why changes shouldn't happen.

## **Conclusion**

Educational intent is the reason for which education has been provided, usually by a central or governing body. Throughout American history, the educational intents expressed by governing organizations tend to be controlling or self-serving in nature. Though there are exceptions such as Thomas Jefferson's "Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge," more often than not educational intents benefit the government at the expense of the local communities which education is meant to serve. Furthermore, educational intents designed in faraway government buildings can have very real, negative impacts on the quality of teaching and education in a local community, like preventing teachers from spending instructional time on the topics they believe are most relevant and important.

By explaining all of this in Part I, my goal was to introduce you to the concept of educational intent and convince you of its importance. In Part II I shifted to educational intent at a local level. I first analyzed a local educational intent at Conestoga High School – while it may have seemed appropriate, it was lacking a lot of detail and we couldn't tell if the community had been involved at all in its development. I explained how Helen Lewis' community revitalization model inspired my own model by intensely diagnosing the community and involving the entirety of it in the decision-making process. My model for local educational intent development brought the same principles, involving the community in decisions about what they wanted to see from their education.

I don't expect my thesis to change anything overnight. I'd consider my thesis a success if it helped anyone just think critically about the educational intent of the institutions that educated them or their children. And if you're a teacher, think critically about the communal and/or state educational intents that are most salient to you and how they impact your job perception and performance. It'd be fantastic, too, if this thesis spurs readers to actively consider the role they could play in the development of their own local educational intent. I think any decent teacher should be receptive to this community-based model. As a soon-to-be teacher, I know I am.

I've spent this thesis arguing that an appropriate educational intent is one derived from a community's values. Therefore, it's impossible to know what an educational intent ought to be until you engage in discussion. To that end, you don't yet know what my personal educational intent is because we haven't had that discussion. Here it is: *I believe education should empower students to think and learn for themselves so that they can lead fulfilling lives.* If we as individuals are able to think and learn on our own, we can form unique opinions, teach ourselves new skills, and make sense of the world around us.

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# Academic Vita

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### EDUCATION

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**The Pennsylvania State University, Schreyer Honors College** **Grad: 2018**

- Bachelor of Arts - *Psychology*
- Master of Education - *Learning, Design, & Technology*

**Global Penn State: Todi, Italy** **Summer 2015**

- Studied Italian language, culture, and art in immersive setting; conversational fluency in Italian

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

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**Penn State Division of Undergraduate Studies** **May 2017 - July 2017**

*Academic Advisor & Consultant*

- Worked with over 1000 new PSU students to assess appropriateness of their academic plans
- Helped undecided students create schedules that allowed them to pursue their various interests
- Input notes detailing students' decisions and rationale for future advisors

**Conjecture YouTube Channel** **Mar 2014 - Present**

*Creative Director*

- YouTube channel I created and run featuring informational videos every ~2 weeks
- Research, write, film, edit, and produce every single episode; use *Final Cut Pro X* & *Adobe Photoshop*
- Featured alongside TED Talks and other prominent YouTube creators
- 450,000 total views and 8,500 subscribers - <https://goo.gl/4u9ku1>

**Center Learning Country Charter School** **Sep 2015 - Dec 2015**

*Instructor, Video Production*

- Directed after-school program teaching video production and graphic design to middle school students
- Created curriculum and projects for students to complete during the semester

**Penn State, Schreyer Honors College** **Jan 2015 - Dec 2015**

*Course Developer & Teaching Assistant*

- Developed curriculum for Penn State Honors Course with Schreyer's Associate Dean
- Taught and led classes with Assoc. Dean about various aspects of leadership
- Created digital library of distinguished Schreyer alumni for use in classroom

### LEADERSHIP

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**Musical Director, None of the Above (N.O.T.A.)** **Sep 2016 - May 2017**

- Arrange and teach music to members of N.O.T.A., Penn State's oldest co-ed a cappella group
- Organized 50-person concert with N.O.T.A. members from all over the US
- Brought together a cappella groups (which do not usually collaborate) to perform multiple events

**Presidential Leadership Academy** **Sep 2014 - May 2017**

- Highly-selective program developing leadership and critical thinking
- Advise President on issues brought before PSU board of Trustees