



MERYL STREEP: THOUGHTS ON SCHOOL

Following is the text of Oscar-winning actress Meryl Streep's introduction to "SCHOOL: The Story of American Public Education," a companion book to the PBS series. Ms. Streep serves as narrator for the series, scheduled to air on public television stations nationwide this September. Her book introduction, which may be quoted in whole or in part, must be credited as follows:

From *School: The Story of Public Education*, edited by Sarah Mondale and Sarah Patton, published by Beacon Press

When we think about our days in school, we often recall a particular teacher who made the most difference in our lives. For me, it was my music teacher, Claire Callahan. I was in high school and thought she was inconceivably old—something like twenty-four. She was a guitar student of Andre Segovia. She didn't have enough money for her lessons, so she came to my suburban school in New Jersey and taught music. She was absolutely amazing.

Teachers perform major miracles in America, daily. My interest in this subject comes from the respect I have for what they do, and is very personal. My brother teaches in New York City public high school today, and I'm really proud of him. He has made me aware of the issues that our teachers face, a lot of them having to do with the lack of attention that is paid to them, and their low salaries. I went to public schools in New Jersey as a child, and have sent my children to public school and private schools on over four continents and two coasts. They've been in every kind of school you can imagine, in Africa, England, Australia, Texas, California, New York and Connecticut.

It always confounded me, once I became a parent, that the school in my district in Connecticut was always under-funded. First we couldn't get uniforms for our band. Then we couldn't get instruments. Then, well, perhaps we wouldn't have a music program at all. And the school needed a lot of money that was raised, and contributed, by parents. I thought back to when I was growing up, and the fact that in our school we had had a band. We had an enormous hot lunch served in the cafeteria. We had a new school with an auditorium where plays were staged. When I sent my kids to public school, I had to pack lunch for them. My kids held plays not in an auditorium, but in the gym. Why is this? Why, after the war when everybody was coming out of the army and didn't have a lot of money, a time when everyone on my street lived in small houses, did we have these fabulous schools? Somehow, when I was growing up, we were able to have a wonderful music teacher. And a fantastic art department. And a drama department in which I got my start, as Marian the Librarian in *The Music Man*, and for which I'm very grateful.

I wonder at the reasons behind the differences in public schools then and now, and one that seems evident is that money was spent on public schools after the war because they were deemed important.

Another reason is that at that time, there were many very, very bright women who had no other sort of place to put their intelligence and ambition except in the school system. Those women now are in law school, they are doctors, they have other kinds of lives that give them other advantages, including better pay. We've lost some great teachers. To keep this from happening, we need to pay people who teach more. I think that if we were to make the positions in inner city schools more valuable, we would immediately draw people to teach there.

We've reached a very controversial moment in the history of public education, a time when we need to pay attention to our schools, and invest in the specific school systems that need it. This book takes a historical look at public education, while keeping an eye on the present. It teaches us that all the questions that we ask about public education today have been thought about at some point before. And it reminds us of the fact that public education for all Americans is relatively new, and something we cannot afford to take for granted.