On the sunny October day that I’m scheduled to interview author Charles Ungerleider, the Vancouver Sun runs this front page headline: “School, police were warned of prior knife threats by student.” The story reports how a thirteen-year-old student slashed the throat of a sixteen-year-old student. A subtitle reports that “Everyone in the school knew about the knives.” On the previous weekend, The Province ran a front page story entitled “High at School,” recounting the largest high school drug seizure in British Columbian history. Two kilograms of cocaine had been discovered in the locker of a seventeen-year-old female student. The news was in the volume of cocaine. That illicit drugs are present in schools has been reported so frequently, it’s no longer really news.

As a teacher in a British Columbian high school, such negative news coverage is always somewhat troubling. It’s not that I don’t want these stories reported: it is important for the public to know that schools are not immune to such occurrences. It’s the fact that these stories seem to be all we hear. Furthermore, they often seems to imply that the school is somehow responsible for allowing these incidents to occur.

For Dr. Charles Ungerleider, this constant flow of media-generated bad news is just one of the many factors that contributes to the current state of “our public schools collapsing from malign neglect.” In his new book,
Failing Our Kids: How We Are Ruining Our Public Schools,
Ungerleider outlines the negative practices, policies, and attitudes which threaten the future of Canadian public education, and he then provides a number of provocative solutions. In so doing, he offers a much needed ringing of the bell, a sounding of the public school alarm. He warns that if Canadians don’t change our attitudes toward public schools, we will very likely lose the high quality public education system that has become an essential part of the Canadian social fabric. The book provides a sorely needed reminder of all that is working in schools, and all that we risk losing if we don’t start paying more attention to the current state of public education.

Sitting in his office in an impressively stylish woolen suit, Charles Ungerleider, author, professor of sociology of education, and one-time Deputy Minister of Education (his friends like to joke that he was “the only guy who had the clothes for it”), argues that our increasing tendency to see public education as an institution for serving the individual rather than the public good is the single gravest threat to public schools.” For most of the history of Canadian public schooling, we’ve had a good balance between education as a benefit to the individual and education as a benefit to the society. I see that balance shifting to where people are seeing education primarily as an individual benefit.”

Ungerleider offers a summary of the social transformations that have offset this now tenuous balance and the impact that these transformations have had on our schools. Throughout a broad range of topics (e.g. conflicting educational philosophies, the public school curriculum, students with special needs, teachers’ work conditions, unions, school competition and choice, finance and governance, the failure of leadership, accountability, and finally, suggestions for change), the unifying thread is the author’s persistent effort to revive our diminishing commitment to public education. This comes at a time when, despite the immense benefits that public education has conferred to Canadians, there is a disconcerting paucity of supportive and pro-active commentary that actually reaches the public, and an increasing number of government policies and financial shortfalls that impact negatively on the ability of public education to achieve its goals.

Educational professionals, already familiar with the challenges facing public education, will be drawn to Ungerleider’s many suggestions for improvement. During our interview, he offers his most important advice for teachers: build alliances with parents. “Get people into your class. Most people don’t have firsthand experience of public education beyond their own attendance in school. If they saw what goes on, they’d have a better appreciation of it as an institution. They would understand the complexities of the task that faces teachers every day. They would also
understand why it is necessary to create the right kind of conditions for kids to learn and for teachers to teach.”

For the principals and vice-principals, he offers the following: “Lead from your knowledge base. When I talk about the failure of leadership, it is the failure to use the accumulated knowledge that we have in education, and the failure to give advice on the basis of that knowledge. Over the years, I’ve seen administrators increasingly giving advice on the basis of other than their professional knowledge and getting themselves into silly positions.”

Ungerleider maintains that Canadians who are neither parents of children in public schools nor educational professionals need to appreciate how they benefit from having a strong education system. “My wife slipped on the stairs and hurt herself the other day, fortunately not seriously. The paramedic who came, he’s a product of the education system. I want the average citizen to know that the foundation of what these people [members of the community] know is the public education system. If we [educators] are successful, we diminish the burden that a person is going to be on society, and if we are really successful, that person contributes a lot back to us.” What we, as taxpayers and members of society contribute in taxes towards public education is returned multifold.

The photo on the jacket cover of an anonymous young boy sitting in class in a touchingly attentive pose reminds us, as does Ungerleider’s text, of the profoundly meaningful role of a public institution that provides “society’s last meeting place.” Schools provide a valuable place “in Canadian society where people from diverse backgrounds regularly come together for significant periods of time during which they learn to work together, respecting the differences among them.” (294) In other words, it is in schools that we learn the values that are at the heart of the Canadian identity. “If we care about Canada,” Ungerleider writes, “we must care about our public schools” (294). It is also in our schools that we are often first captivated by the promise of a just world where we will strive to make the best of ourselves and our communities.

The photo reminds us of the immense hope and promise with which Canadians, both individually and as a nation, first entered into the dream of high quality public education. Will this young boy’s optimism about what public school has to offer, or indeed is able to offer, wane? Will he grow tired of the prolonged, hard work that is required to fulfill education’s promise? Will he, influenced by cynics, the disillusioned, and promoters of self-interest, decide that working for the advancement of the public good is more trouble than it’s worth, and that he’d be better off focusing on his own individual interests?
One can only hope that somewhere along the way, he comes across someone who has not lost faith, and who will take the time to remind him of the immense value in public education’s ability to knit together a strong, compassionate nation in which people of diverse backgrounds feel a sense of security and dignity.

As our brief conversation winds up, I ask Dr. Ungerleider for the one word that best describes his book’s message: “Hopeful. It’s a very affirmative act, writing a book, and I’m hopeful about Canadian public education. But only if people wake up and start treating public education the way they should and not the way they have been.”

Charles Ungerleider provides a passionate and compelling defense of a dream that became a reality. He manages to enter his message of hope into a public dialogue that is too often either simplified for political gain, or marred by sensationalized media stories of high school violence and drugs. As a man who has committed his impressive career to all levels of public education, I imagine that what Ungerleider would most like from his readers is what all good educators want from their students: that they take what they’ve learned and apply it.

Often, when my work as a teacher seems particularly overwhelming, I take comfort in distilling my sense of education down to its timeless and universal essence: to share with my younger students my hope and belief that we should never give up striving to bring more justice and compassion to the world, and that the thoughtfully examined life is the first step toward such goal. And, like Ungerleider, I believe, that one of the best places for cultivating this shared understanding is in our public schools.

Teachers can do well to learn from Ungerleider’s message of hope. For we too are subject to the steady stream of bad news stories, school budget underfunding, politically driven and pedagogically unsound policies, and a perceived diminishing of public support that so often lead to apathy or even despair. It is against this backdrop that Ungerleider’s book rings out its message: a sounding of the school bell to remind us that, as Canadians, we have created an education system that reinforces our most sacred values of tolerance, respect, and compassion. And now it’s time to get down to the business of defending our schools for the communal benefit of our children and our communities.

About the Author

When not at the University of British Columbia working toward his M.A. in Curriculum Studies, Sean Cook teaches English and Creative
Writing at Centennial School in Coquitlam, British Columbia. He is an outspoken social critic whose ideas have been cited in local (Vancouver Sun, Tri-City News, Coquitlam Now, Shaw Cable Television, and Teacher Newsmagazine), national (CBC Television's “Undercurrents”), and international media (Radio-France Internation’s “Le temps des ecoles”). In 2001, he was awarded the “Golden Leaf Award” for excellence in the category of "Writing and Editing, Educational Issues Reporting" by the Canadian Educational Press Association.

His three-act play “School Inc.” is scheduled for production next fall.