Foreword

Educators will often tell you that schools get too much negative coverage in the press. That may be true from their perspective. Just one or two stories about bad cafeteria food or missing textbooks may be too much for some people. But I have been reading education stories in *The Washington Post* and other newspapers, as well as watching them on television, for 40 years, and most of those stories have been positive.

We education reporters know that our readers are mostly parents, teachers, and students. They want to know what is happening in schools. They have invested so much time and hope in those places, they are much more pleased to read happy stories than nasty ones. Carolyn Warner, an extraordinarily experienced veteran of education news coverage in America, understands that. Notice how upbeat and optimistic her suggestions are for promoting one's school. She knows that we journalists (well, most of us at least) are well-brought-up and friendly people, motivated not by a desire to make schools look bad but by a need to make enough money to eat and pay the rent. We know we will not be able to do that if we don't write a lot of interesting stories and get them to our editors on time.

Reflect for a moment on the kinds of newspapers that do most of the education reporting in this country. They are the opposite of *The Washington Post*. They are small, not big. They are very local, not regional or national. They are often weeklies, not dailies. And what do the editors of those small papers want to see, first and foremost, in their school stories? Blood? Tragedy? Corruption? Nope. They want to see names—names of students, names of parents, names of teachers, as many names as possible. Why? Because people *love* to see their names in the paper and are more likely to buy it if the editors and reporters make a great effort to mention lots of local folks.

Former Arizona state school superintendent Warner also appreciates a unique advantage that educators have when dealing with reporters. People become teachers because they want to help kids. They are, in my view, among the most humane people I know. I have covered business tycoons, and bureaucrats, and politicians. When I made mistakes in stories about people like that, they never took my phone calls again. But whenever I make a mistake in a story about a teacher—and I have done that many times—the teacher will take my call or answer my e-mail the next day, without hesitation. She will explain to me what I did wrong, and tell me how I can do better the next time. She treats me just like the student she gave a D+ to on an exam. To her, all people are educable, and she treats them that way.

That is exactly the way we journalists should be dealt with, like slow-witted pupils who need more time and guidance to do our work correctly. Ms. Warner is too polite to say this in her book, but the best way to handle a conversation with any of us is to pretend we are about 12 years old. That way, you won't yell at us, you won't question our parentage, you won't hang up the phone. You will simply tell us how to do better and encourage us in that direction.

Sounds simple, right? It's not. This book is 264 pages long, and Ms. Warner has not wasted a single word. Forging a strong and healthy bond between a community and its schools can be hard work. It takes thought and preparation and teamwork. Ms. Warner has seen how this is done from every possible perspective. I may quarrel with some of her advice, but not much of it. And I suspect that wherever we differ—given that she has much more experience with these issues than I do—she is right and I am wrong.

So, enjoy the book. If I were you, I would use the table of contents to sample parts of the book that interest you most. But if you are an educator, or an active community member, for whom these issues are an important part of your life, I would read the whole thing.

And remember, the next time you see reporters like me, annoying and intrusive and demanding more than you can give, just smile and say you are so impressed with our good questions, and will be happy to help us with our story. We mean well, usually, even if it doesn't sound like it. You should not pat us on the head, but treat us like the occasionally impatient and clueless girls and boys we are, and all will work out fine.

—Jay Mathews
Washington Post *Education Columnist, 2008*