Seymour Sarason’s writing shares certain characteristics with all of these distinguished writers. But his most important contributions to education are the ideas, notions, and concepts he has articulated that, over the course of six decades, have helped shape the thinking of many of these scholars, reformers, and philosophers of education. His ideas have been influential far beyond the breadth of his readership among educational practitioners and teachers-to-be. A number of his books—such as *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change* and *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform*—have sold very well, and most of his education titles are still in print. But partly because his thoughts have been spread over more than twenty-five books on educational themes, his words reach only a small percentage of the audience that he deserves. The present volume is an attempt to close this gap.

What are those ideas and concepts I claim are so vital? At risk of oversimplifying them, I will summarize a dozen of them here.

1. *Every school has a culture that manifestly defines how people within it operate.* A school is not just a building containing classrooms, teachers, and students, all of whom operate according to state and local district policies. It also has, and is, a “culture,” and, as such, it affects people in ways that they acknowledge as well as ways that are hidden from their consciousness. As examples, consider how rare it is in most schools for teachers to get together, on their own initiative, to talk about promising new ideas for improving instruction, or how rarely students volunteer questions about the meaning of what they are learning, or how new teachers are often left on their own to “sink or swim.” Only when we acknowledge this culture and ask ourselves how well, or how poorly, it reflects our values and goals for diverse learners of all ages can we take charge of our lives as teachers, parents, or students.

2. *The “regularities” of that culture—patterns, rules, and procedures that are mostly unseen and assumed—tend to undermine the basic purposes of educating our youth.* These regularities are what might be called “ways of doing business in school.” They are rarely questioned, but to an alien observer (in Sarason’s favorite image, “the Man from Mars”), they seem curious, irrational, and counterproductive of the announced mission of schools. Among such regularities are the absence of most parents from active participation with the teacher in guiding their child’s learning, and the fact that the school building bustles with activity for six hours a day, five days a week, and then is largely abandoned for any academic purpose. These regularities are not immutable “laws of nature,” nor are they the result of careful assessment of the efficacies of prac-
tice. They persist because they go unexamined and unchallenged (“But we’ve always done it that way!”). Only when we uncover such regularities can we decide whether they serve our purposes as educators.

3. **The overarching purpose of school ought to be that children should want to keep learning more about themselves, others, and the world, yet that purpose is mostly ignored.** Why should kids go to school? To learn the basics as they prepare for a career? So that we can pass our cultural heritage to another generation? So that we can inoculate them with bits of knowledge—dates, formulas, vocabulary lists—that we deem to be “basic”? Is that it? Is that enough? Or do we want them to become better learners, more confident, more capable, more curious? Is there any other goal that even comes close in importance to having students increase their desire to learn more about themselves, others, and the world? If not, why is this goal so rarely articulated and even more rarely assessed to see if, in fact, students leave our schools at least as interested in learning as when they entered?

4. **The educational “system” has an oppressive impact, and when that system continues unseen and unacknowledged, progress is stifled.** The search for culprits—bad teachers, bad students, bad parents, bad schools—who are supposedly responsible for failures in education is a popular, politically sanctioned activity. But the real culprit is the system itself, a system nobody designed, nobody champions, nobody in their right mind would duplicate, and almost nobody challenges. The system is so pervasive that it seems invisible to those who work within it. For example, at every level of schooling people tend to distrust and resent those (e.g., administrators) who wield more power than they, even as they are likely to show disdain or disrespect toward those (e.g., students) who have less power. Ignorance of “the system” perpetuates its worst attributes.

5. **The system, as it currently functions, is intractable, not easily reformed, and reform efforts that ignore systemic regularities and inherent obstacles will predictably fail.** The most significant feature of the educational system is its propensity to perpetuate itself, to just roll along in the face of considerable research illuminating its inefficiencies and failures. Reform efforts that do not acknowledge and address the undesirable features of the system itself are doomed to failure, because change gets stymied or sabotaged by the very dysfunctional aspects one is attempting to alter. For example, it is common in schools for changes to be handed down from on high—new rules, new tests, new priorities—and yet this way of initiating change almost always leads to resentment, apathy, subversion, and failure. Such failures only get compounded when a new reform effort repeats old mistakes.

6. **More specifically, reforms that do not change the power relationships between and among people in schools are fated to suffer paralyzing inertia, if not direct opposition.** Power is unjustly and inequitably distributed in schools and school systems, such that each group feels victimized by those with seemingly more power. We have to address these inequities and imbalances head-on, to ask ourselves why we behave as we do toward those above and below us in the hierarchy of power and how we can change those
relationships so that they reflect our democratic values and promote shared decision making.

7. **Sustained and productive contexts of learning cannot exist for students if they do not simultaneously exist for teachers.** Everyone within a school needs to work together to create an environment in which learners feel motivated and supported as they build on what they know and seek to learn more. But unless teachers also feel that they, too, are part of a high quality and respectful learning environment—that they are learning in a sustained and productive way—we cannot expect more than a few of such teachers to create that environment for their students.

8. **Applying labels to people, especially children, based on pseudo-scientific presumptions about their intelligence, their disabilities, or their academic potential is futile and unjust.** Since the thirties, with the introduction of IQ tests, and continuing with increasing fervor today, millions of children have had their academic careers misshaped by being tested and put into categories that often have had little to do with their real potential as learners. Even the humanizing promise of legislation for the handicapped, such as P.L. 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, has been undermined by the tendency of schools and school districts to “code” and label students.

9. **The democratic principle, while celebrated in America, is undermined or ignored in our schools and school systems.** This nation was founded on the revolutionary principle that those who will be affected by a decision have a right to be included in helping to shape that decision—except, evidently, in schools, where the exclusion of parents, students, and teachers from responsible roles in decision making continues unabated. Sarason is that most annoying of patriots. An unabashed champion of American constitutional values, he insists that we live up to them.

10. **Parents are vital partners, teachers are qualified leaders, and both (acting together) are potential governors of schools.** It is easy to proclaim the value of parent participation or involvement. But such advocacy is meaningless when parents are sidelined by school traditions that trivialize roles allotted to parents. Parents, along with teachers, deserve a much greater role—even if that means eliminating school boards and empowering parents and teachers to run the schools.

11. **U.S. presidents (with the exception of Jefferson) have failed to understand the systemic features of our education system.** The pathetic tendency of our highest political leaders to view schools as merely collections of classrooms, each made up of one teacher and a bunch of kids, is inexcusable. This failure is compounded every time a new president sets forth another list of a dozen goals, a “model program,” or a battery of high-stakes tests to be foisted on teachers and kids. If the same haphazard strategy had been applied to international affairs, the United States would have lost every war it has fought.

12. **American psychology has been reluctant to address, or has disdained to examine, critical issues in schools.** How can the very discipline that was pioneered, in this
country, by William James and John Dewey—both of whom were fascinated by the nature of learning—so neglect the plight of learners in schools and out? Psychology needs to own, once again, its responsibility to public institutions, including schools, and regain its historical role as a contributor to the improvement of human institutions.

"The Culture of the School"—The Impact of a Notion

The influence of Sarason’s ideas has been much more widespread than is generally known even within the education community (let alone the book-reading public). Many if not most of the leading progressive theoreticians and scholars in education credit Sarason with helping to shape their thinking about schools and society. Such people as Theodore Sizer, Linda Darling-Hammond, Michael Fullan, John Goodlad, Deborah Meier, Ernesto Cortes, and the late Al Shanker acclaim Sarason’s ideas for playing a major role in the formation of their philosophical stances.

The one place most of us begin is Sarason’s notion of the culture of the school. The school culture is so evident, so pervasive, yet so invisible. We know a school as a building, a group of classrooms, a bunch of students, a staff of teachers and administrators, a curriculum of studies, a library, a playground. But how is it also a “culture”? And why is it so important that the main features of that culture be identified, examined, challenged, and changed? If we continue to fail to see the school as a culture, Sarason argues, we will be continually disappointed by the inability of people in school to make those changes that are called for by research, public will, economic necessity, intellectual honesty, and democratic principles. We will fail to see the forest for the trees.