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- Events
- Features & Releases
- e-Newsletters
- **Ed. Magazine**
- HGSE in the Media
- Webcasts

[Alumni & Friends](#)

A Challenge to Be Met

By Elizabeth Gehrman

"What's past is prologue," Shakespeare wrote — and it is certainly the case for John and Pamela Humphrey, who, despite their very different pasts, both developed through their family histories an abiding interest in education.



"There are learning disabilities in my family," says Pamela, now a certified learning disabled reading specialist. "And during a time when people thought that kids were slow instead of learning-different, my mother consistently challenged the education system."

John also credits his mother. "She earned her master's at Columbia," he says. "[Her studies were based around] being a principal. Education was of very high value in my family."

After receiving his bachelor's in engineering at Iowa State and an MBA at Harvard, John started his career in the field of corporate education, founding the Forum Corporation, which specialized in management, sales, and customer-service training internationally. Today he is chair of Humphrey Enterprises, an investment firm that focuses on the automotive, health care, and education industries.

"In the 1980s, Forum started doing work with the Ed School, working with faculty members on ways to evaluate training programs," John says. "They



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- ▶ [Dean's Perspective](#)
- ▶ [Letters](#)
- ▶ [The Appian Way](#)
- ▶ [Investing in Education](#)
- ▶ [In the Media](#)
- ▶ [Alumni News and Notes](#)
- ▶ [Recess](#)
- ▶ [Previous Issues](#)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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also had some very interesting ideas on leadership, which we incorporated into our programs. In the late 1990s, they asked me to consider becoming more involved with the school." Since then, he has cochaired the advisory committee on the Arts in Education Program, served on the dean's council and the visiting committee, and chaired a dean's weekend with Pamela. It was that weekend, Pamela says, that "catapulted me in terms of engagement," when she gave the opening remarks.

"Harvard takes a pragmatic, holistic approach to education," she adds. "It's about leadership and educating leaders — about what works."

For John, too, the Ed School's practical focus is a draw. "When people at the school talk about being at the nexus of policy, practice, and research," he says, "it's really true that they are creating new approaches to knowledge and to preparing people in education to be both current and future leaders." The couple, who believe that education is one of our nation's and the world's biggest challenges, agree that the curricula of the country's teacher-education programs needs to be overhauled. The Ed School, they say, is in the vanguard of the revolution.

"Leadership is essential to meeting challenges in education," John says. "There are so many constituencies involved — parents, kids, teachers, unions, politicians — and such a mix of politics and ideology and practice. Framing and moving the agenda forward, in that cauldron of interests and activities, is a leadership challenge. Harvard is producing wellinformed, capable leaders who are bringing good research and the best practice to the job. We've seen the results."

When he goes to dinner parties throughout the country, John adds, "there's probably a 60 percent chance that schools and the plight of education will come up. Most of the time it's a 'Woe is me' conversation, or an 'Ain't it terrible' conversation, and you come away from it thinking, 'My God, it's just hopeless,' and it has such a long-term, generational impact."

When he is at an event at the Ed School, however, the effect of such conversations is just the opposite. "I meet and mix with people and hear their real-life experiences and I come away hopeful," he says. "I come away energized. I come away with a feeling that this is a challenge that can be met over time, with the right people and the right tools, focused and supported. I come away with a positive feeling.

"The Ed School changes people's lives," he adds.

"It changes lives because of the power and the importance of the cause, because of the practical optimism and capability with which it approaches problems, and because it is welcoming to a broad circle of supporters. It sees its role not as a priesthood but as a collector, energizer, and a focuser of power, ideas, and actions."

He recalls research that suggested skeptics are more likely to be accurate but optimists are more likely to be successful. "I come away from the Ed School optimistic."

About the Article

A version of this article originally appeared in the Winter 2008 issue of *Ed.*, the magazine of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

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