

# **Leave No Child Behind Because of Poverty, Race or Ethnicity – Striving to Empower All Americans**

## **An Open letter to the American People**

America is renewing its commitment to the success of all students. Three keys to that success are professional and stakeholder conviction, professional development and community engagement.

Almost a generation ago, the National Commission on Excellence in Education sent an open letter to the American people through a White House ceremony hosted by former President Ronald Reagan and Education Secretary Terrell Bell who had commissioned their report on the state of American education. The next morning and throughout that week newspapers across the nation headlined and reprinted "A Nation At-Risk." School boards, pundits, researchers, advocates, union leaders, school leaders and policy makers at all levels raised their voices in debate about the best ways to rejuvenate K-12 public education to meet the needs of all American students and society.

The debate was vigorous in 1983. The resulting actions over the years have been expansive and, as a result, the new resources for schools have been substantial if not yet proportional or sufficiently targeted to the needs and opportunities. And so it is today.

On January 8, 2002, in ceremonies at schools in three states, Senator Edward Kennedy and other Congressional leaders joined President George Bush as he signed the bipartisan No Child Left Behind Act. It authorizes substantially raising the federal budget for education while targeting the bulk of the funds to the economically neediest communities and schools. It invests in the proposition that while poverty, race and ethnicity are factors in students' lives they are not determinants of their learning or their futures. To believe otherwise is prejudicial and a barrier to realizing the natural talents and human aspirations of all students.

### **Equity and Excellence**

Equity and excellence are inseparable. While principled educators and citizens may disagree with aspects of "A Nation At-Risk" surely few disagree with that report's declaration at its opening that "All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and the tools for developing their individual powers of mind to the utmost." That promise remains open—a responsibility for all to shoulder, demanding of systems and ourselves those public resources and personal efforts that may ensure achievement gaps among such groups are eliminated. Individuals will vary in their educational success but that should not happen because they are poor, or of a particular race, gender or ethnic group. That isn't fair.

A strength of No Child Left Behind is that the law requires careful and sustained attention to the achievement of all students with data disaggregated to track how well various student groups are performing. Averages can no longer obscure the poor performance of a sizeable number of particular students. The public and public school educators are to know how all students are performing. Professionalism and public policy require us all to pay attention—and to push hard to raise achievement while guarding against perverse twists, such as pushing out low performing students to mask a group's true performance.

Experience has taught us that there is no science that can forecast with certainty at an early age how much success an individual will attain. Nor can science predict the "late bloomer." It is vital that we not allow pseudo-science, or blind beliefs that systems just "can't do it", to consign many

students to lives of low expectations, or lesser employment. Our society, our economy, and our national unity all gain from everyone having fair chances and the full support of their families and communities, their state and their nation as they grapple with the challenges of school right through the grades. Public policy and personal principle must ensure that no individual or group is neglected and invisible, routinely getting the short end of the stick. If we do not want them to give up on America, we cannot give up on them.

Martha Minow of Harvard University recently captured the historical nature of this greater purpose, recalling the words of the Philadelphia Working Men's Committee in 1830: "Until the means of equal instruction shall be equally secured to all, liberty is but an unmeaning word, and equality an empty shadow." These words echo down the years. They challenge every teacher throughout every day. They echo in the continuing debates about how best to animate an effective, equitable, efficient and excellent system of education. They echo as students hurry to their classes. The ethic of American education is one of providing unbiased opportunity. To realize this proposition requires a working partnership—heart, mind and hand—of the public, parents and educators acting in honest harmony and fearlessness.

### **Public Support**

There is a public constituency for smart investment in education. American business supported strong planks and substantial funding of the new law—understanding that money well used does make a difference, especially for those most in need and children of color. The public believes focusing on teachers will make a difference: A recent national survey conducted by the National Alliance of Business suggests that Americans support increased funding of induction programs that pair new teachers with proven veterans. More than three-quarters of those surveyed felt that developing the professional skills and knowledge of teachers throughout their careers must be a national priority. We all are stakeholders in the nation's education.

### **Professional Development**

Every student deserves a teacher who is up-to-date and up-to-standards for subject matter and teaching skills. Every student deserves a teacher who expects that student to make it—and is devoted to that objective. Every student deserves a teacher who knows how to teach reading, respecting individual differences while striving for common standards. The power of this common sense is bolstered by recent research conducted separately by William Sanders of the University of Tennessee, and by Dan Goldhaber of the Urban Institute, showing that the performance of teachers accounts for a larger portion of the variation in student test scores than all other characteristics of a school. Sanders noted that if a child experiences three successive years of poorly prepared teachers, his/her chances of succeeding in the K-12 academic pipeline are heavily burdened.

Professional development can make a difference now. The variance in student achievement among schools in the same systems serving similar students tells us that school leadership, high expectations and skill instruction can have a positive impact. But there is no panacea in "one size fits all" programs or initiatives. The No Child Left Behind Act includes significant funds for the professional development of teachers because the President, the Congress and the American people see the potential pay-off of a substantial investment. They understand too that more funding can make a big difference in school effectiveness and in student achievement. For example, more sustained and field-tested instructional coaching will be needed if all classrooms in all schools and school systems are to improve to a new level of excellence. Skilled educators must fashion local shapes, styles and substance for instruction.

Educators, and researchers such as Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University, remind us that the bottom line question for students, especially those of color or who are poor, is whether new and higher standards—potentially good for all—will be accompanied by well-crafted efforts and adequate investments in better teaching, stronger curriculum and better functioning schools,

or will simply be used to certify their failure with louder certainty, reducing their access to future education and employment but not improving their learning. That is their question—we all must answer.

## **Urban Partnerships for Literacy**

Urban Partnerships for Literacy (UP), created by the International Reading Association and the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education, begin with the proposition that reading, writing and applying math to life are more than tools, they are evidence that an individual believes in himself or herself—and that those who raised them believe as well. John Dewey said it well many years ago: "...school should be less about the preparation for life and more about life itself."

UP proceeds with the truth that these tools are not just about mechanics, they are about meaning, that from their earliest encounters all students deserve to experience the joys as well as the labors of learning. The learning epiphany "Ah ha!" is not just an ending to the journey; it also is a beginning. Challenging questions and freedom to explore and experiment are not to be reserved for an advantaged group. They are not rewards for striving to learn. They are the means and reason for it.

By challenging and working with adults—parents, teachers, principals, and the community—UP advances the capacity in educational systems to teach. Systematic, specific professional development is an engine of that advance. Systemic reform—ensuring system support for teaching—is a vehicle. There are standards and high expectations for adults as well as students. For the whole to be greater than the sum of its parts, experts have to share their expertise, researchers share their science, successful practitioners their art; parents must share their power, and policymakers must back their rhetoric with real resources and their policies with shared accountability. All must ward off complacency and root out convictions that shackle these efforts. It requires strong will to find ways for all students to succeed. It takes sustained attention and relentless drive for positive change to come from research, from home, from political will, from professional judgment, from leadership.

Stand with UP for Literacy. Stand together in your communities for all children and youth. Stand in partnership for quality education as a matter of social justice -- to do otherwise relegates many Americans to a diminished future. That isn't fair—or productive. As America mobilizes with allies abroad, we must mobilize cooperatively at home. Our civility, intelligence and community unity depend on it.

### **Signatures:**

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