

2013 Talking Points on Federal Policy in Public Education, United Church of Christ



"We act now virtually at the eleventh hour, for the public schools have come increasingly to reflect the ethnic, racial and economic inequities of our country... Even when states fund each child, whatever his/her school district, at the same level, disparities in local tax taxes put inner city and remote rural schools at a crippling economic disadvantage."
—UCC General Synod 18

"Be it further resolved that the United Church of Christ in all its settings will work to make our culture reflect the following values: that societies and nations are judged by the way they care for their most vulnerable citizens; that government policy and services are central to serving the common good; that the sum total of individual choices in any private marketplace does not necessarily constitute the public good; (and) that paying taxes for government services is a civic responsibility of individuals and businesses..."
—UCC General Synod 25

Public school policy premised on test-based accountability now dominates the agenda of both political parties. "Test-and-punish" became federal law in 2002 with the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a new version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), designed in 1965 to invest additional federal dollars in public schools serving a large number or high concentration of children in poverty. Rather than closing resource gaps, the 2002 NCLB labeled schools unable quickly to raise scores "failing," slated them for reconstitution, and threatened their teachers with sanctions. NCLB's devastating penalties targeted public schools in urban neighborhoods where poverty is concentrated.



Although Congress is expected to rework ESEA every five years, the 2007 reauthorization is now six years overdue. President Obama's Department of Education (DOE) has responded to Congressional gridlock by making policy through the DOE's administrative rules—an end-run around Congressional oversight, but the policies prescribed by the current Administration have not been an improvement over President Bush's NCLB. This year the DOE also began granting administrative waivers from some of NCLB's penalties, but to qualify, states must agree to the DOE's priorities: ranking teachers by students' test scores, firing educators when scores remain flat, closing schools that struggle, or turning over struggling schools to private managers. Thirty-four states have accepted these conditions and received waivers.

Reauthorize and overhaul ESEA. Congress needs to debate and reauthorize the ESEA. Congress should return to the roots of ESEA as a civil rights law designed to equalize opportunity by creating access for every child to quality schools. Our most urgent educational priority as a society must be to invest in improving the public schools in our poorest communities rather than punishing them, punishing their teachers, closing these schools or privatizing them.

Allocate federal resources for equity by restoring Title I as a civil rights formula program. Title I, the federal formula program created in 1965 as the centerpiece of ESEA to send federal money to schools serving a large number or high concentration of very poor children, must be preserved as a civil rights program that serves all children who qualify. Today the Title I formula program has been frozen, with funds now made available to states and school districts through competitions like Race to the Top and School Improvement Grants. Competitions with winners always create losers, which means that federal support for expanded access to education is becoming a right for poor children only in winning states and school districts. Too much money is going to grant writers and consultants and too little reaching the classroom. Congress should increase funding for the Title I formula and end the transformation of Title I into competitions that benefit only the children in winning states and school districts.



Address public school inequality by guaranteeing each child an opportunity to learn. Opportunity gaps are the disparities in resources and conditions that different school districts can provide for children and public schools. All children deserve an opportunity to learn that includes enriched pre-kindergarten, well qualified teachers, challenging curricula, and learning conditions that include small classes, the presence of enough counselors and social workers, up-to-date textbooks, science labs, and broadband connectivity. Congress must work with the states to eliminate shocking inequities in access to education from state to state and school district to school district.

Address child poverty in the United States. Congress needs to prioritize the development of a comprehensive plan to reduce child poverty. Twenty-two percent of children in the United States live in poverty, the highest rate in the industrialized world.

Improve public schools in America's poorest communities. It is time to stop labeling schools and school teachers as failures and then closing and privatizing schools and punishing teachers in our poorest communities. An urgent educational priority must be improving the public schools in impoverished communities, reducing class size, and investing in building school leadership and whole school staff development.

Support public school teachers. Public policy must support a stable, well qualified and credentialed teaching profession. Teachers need to be evaluated by their peers and expert school leaders, and their evaluations must be designed not to punish teachers but instead to improve practice.

Reduce reliance on standardized tests. Test only in ways that improve instruction, measure real performance, and encourage exploration, imagination, and critical thinking.

Address the destabilization created by school choice and district-wide churn. In so-called “portfolio school districts” that embody a philosophy of market-based school choice—districts that are projected to manage an ongoing churn of schools opening and closing—government must be responsible for addressing the destabilization of the community, its neighborhoods, and the lives of families and children. Government must secure the fiscal viability of traditional public schools that continue to serve the mass of children. Government must be responsible for ensuring that subtle screens do not enable some schools to cream off the most able children and leave those who are expensive to educate like English language learners, disabled students, and students who live in extreme poverty in public schools of last resort.



Protect the public from privatization. Privatization includes vouchers; education management organizations, the corporations like Edison hired to manage schools and school districts; private contractors like Pearson that design, analyze and manage standardized testing, test grading, and data collection; on-line virtual schools; charters; and charter management organizations, the private firms that run the chains of charter schools. In the



United States public schools have long been understood as primary institutions for distributing opportunity. For this reason the public must be responsible for monitoring and improving public schools and expanding access to quality public education. Public schools are not businesses, even though politicians and the media today often describe schools in the language of business: school districts incentivized to manage a portfolio of schools that are opened or closed depending on test scores—states competing for federal grants—teachers incentivized by merit pay for production of higher test scores. Privatization too often undermines public purpose and diminishes the capacity of government to protect the public through well-regulated institutions. Poverty, income inequality and segregation by income as well as race are public problems best addressed systemically on a scale that can be accomplished only by government. Congress should address privatization.

Resources to Support Group Study and Advocacy

This resource is posted at: <http://www.ucc.org/justice/public-education/pdfs/2013-Talking-Points.pdf>.

2013 UCC Message on Public Education: [The Public Purpose of Public Education](#)

2012 UCC Message on Public Education: [Why the Conventional Wisdom on School Reform is Wrong and Why the Church Should Care](#)

2011 UCC Message on Public Education: [New Federal Public Education Policies Undermine Justice, Eliminate Democracy, and Shatter Community](#)

National Council of Churches. [An Alternative Vision for Public Education: A Pastoral Letter on Federal Policy in Public Education—An Ecumenical Call for Justice](#)

National Council of Churches. [An Alternative Vision for Public Education: Four Short Video Conversations](#) (with [Study Guide](#))

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