

# Repairing the Breach: A Just Agenda for Public School Reform

## Questions for Federal & State Public Officials

### Background

Christian faith speaks to public morality and the ways our nation should bring justice and compassion into our civic life. This call to justice is central to needed reform in public education, because caring for children means caring for the public schools that serve 50 million—90 percent—of our young people in the United States.



The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is now ten years old, and Congress continues to delay its long overdue reauthorization. Among the law's most serious problems is that NCLB has ratcheted up standardized testing and then punished schools that cannot quickly raise scores. NCLB is silent about providing the resources to guarantee that every child has an equal opportunity to learn.

Now the U.S. Department of Education has begun granting states unilateral waivers from NCLB's most punitive label of "failing" for schools that cannot raise test scores to a utopian level by 2014, but the catch is that to qualify, states must present accountability plans that work very much like NCLB itself.

The punishments include the requirement that teachers be evaluated by their students' test scores, that collective bargaining and due process for teachers are curtailed, and that schools that continue to struggle will be closed or chartered.

At the same time, state budget crises lingering from the 2008 recession continue to limit and in many places diminish funding for public education. State school finance systems remain heavily reliant on local property taxes, only magnifying injustice in an America where some children live in pockets of concentrated poverty and others in pockets of concentrated affluence.

NCLB's test-and-punish strategy—along with the Department of Education's competitive Race to the Top program and the new NCLB waiver program—have made our society think like business managers watching the student test score production bottom line. We seem to forget that children, created in the image of God, are unique human beings who need to be guided, nurtured and educated; they are not mere products to be tested and managed. And as we read the "value-added measurement" ratings for teachers, we forget that education is more than the basic skills being measured. Perhaps more important are imagination, critical thinking, the love of learning, respect for others, compassion, and a sense of fairness and justice.

By mandating higher test scores while remaining silent about unequal school resources and our society's lack of willingness to address the needs of children in poverty, today's policies at the federal and state level have been turned into an attack on educators themselves, as society blames the teachers who are unable to make up for all of society's structural injustices. NCLB, the new NCLB waivers, and competitive programs like Race to the Top do very little to close the opportunity gaps that cause achievement gaps. It is time to call the attention of elected officials and candidates for office to the size of the opportunity gaps in resources that society provides for children and schools from place to place.

At a recent national conference addressing the need for commitment to educational opportunity, the Rev. Jesse Jackson declared, "There are those who would make the case for a Race to the Top for those who can run. Instead 'lift from the bottom' is the moral imperative because it includes everybody. If we do nothing else tonight, we must agree that our present education system does not meet the moral imperative." As faithful citizens we must name the injustices of inequality and poverty and press the candidates for office to change the conversation.

The questions on the back of this resource are designed to stimulate conversation with public officials. The questions are designed to probe beneath the political clichés and rhetoric of our times and to encourage our elected representatives to discuss their core values regarding our children and our public schools.

**"Too often, criticism of the public schools fails to reflect our present societal complexity. At a moment when childhood poverty is shamefully widespread, when many families are under constant stress, when schools are often limited by lack of funds or resources, criticism of the public schools often ignores an essential truth: we cannot believe that we can improve public schools by concentrating on the schools alone. They alone can neither cause nor cure the problems we face. In this context, we must address with prayerful determination the issues of race and class, which threaten both public education and democracy in America."**

*—The Churches and the Public Schools at the Close of the Twentieth Century, National Council of Churches Policy Statement, November 11, 1999*



## Questions for Public Officials

1. Opportunity gaps are the differences in resources that society provides for children and schools from place to place. Despite more than 30 years of lawsuits in more than 40 states and the improved funding they have brought, inequity in funding for public schools between wealthy and poor school districts remains 3:1 in most states. Too often current education policy blames teachers and struggling schools and punishes them for not solving inequalities that have their basis not in the schools but in economically struggling and racially segregated communities. What will you do to direct federal (state) policy toward equalizing resources and opportunity to learn and to help struggling schools in economically disadvantaged communities, especially communities of color?
2. The United States tolerates a child poverty rate of 22 percent, the highest among all nations in the developed world. What specific policies do you support to reduce childhood poverty?
3. There is a lot of talk about merit pay for teachers and evaluating teachers by their students' test scores. What do you see as the problems with using standardized test scores to evaluate teachers? Why?
4. We know that particular conditions help children thrive at school. These include resources for children from birth to three and their families, enriched pre-kindergarten for all children, small classes, well qualified teachers, challenging curricula, and learning resources such as up-to-date textbooks, science labs, broadband connectivity and the presence of social workers and other support professionals. Many students lack access to these resources. What will you do to ensure that these resources are distributed equitably for all children?
5. No Child Left Behind has created the label "failing" for schools where children cannot quickly increase their test scores. Schools and teachers are blamed for complex problems that may include poverty, family mobility, high rates of truancy, lack of school resources, and schools where ratios of teachers and support staff to children are alarmingly high. What reforms would build the capacity of our struggling schools and support the teachers?
6. Title I was created in 1965 in the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act to provide federal aid for schools serving children in poverty. Although the Title I formula program is small relative to state and local funding, it is the federal government's primary tool for equalizing educational opportunity as a civil right for every child. No Child Left Behind has never fully funded the Title I formula. Now in the 2012 federal budget and the proposed 2013 budget, the federal government freezes funding for the Title I formula and makes Title I funds competitively available for states and school districts that win Race to the Top and School Improvement Grants. Would you explain the difference between competitive programs with some states winners and others losers and the traditional formula program that distributes funds to all schools serving children in poverty? Which do you favor and why?
7. The standards movement has become the conventional wisdom of both political parties today. We talk about 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 funding—teachers incentivized by merit pay for production of higher test scores—management efficiency valued over democratic governance. Historically in contrast, our nation has prided itself on public education as part of the common good—publicly funded, universally available, and accountable to the public. What do you think are the primary mission and goals of public education in the United States?
8. Recognizing that many parochial schools, private schools and quality charter schools do a good job of serving children, we also know it is essential to balance the needs and choices of each particular child and family with a system by which society can secure the rights of all children. Faithful advocates have raised serious questions about access, equity, public purpose and public ownership when public schools are privatized or chartered. I ask you:
  - In so-called "portfolio school districts" which are projected to manage an ongoing churn of schools opening and closing, what is the consequence for a neighborhood or a community when a public school is closed or its entire staff fired? What is the government's (local, state, federal) responsibility to address the destabilization of that community?
  - When there is competition to attract students to a range of small schools or charter schools, what happens to the traditional neighborhood public schools which frequently are left to serve the majority of special education students, English language learners, homeless and other very poor children? What is the government's (local, state, federal) moral and fiscal responsibility to the students remaining in the neighborhood public schools?
  - Research documents a wide range of quality in charter schools. What should the federal government (state) government do to improve the regulation of charter schools?