



An Alternative Vision for Public Education



A Pastoral Letter on Federal Policy in Public Education: An Ecumenical Call for Justice

May 18, 2010

**The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA
475 Riverside Drive
New York City, NY 10115-0050**



May 2010

Dear President Obama and Members of Congress,

The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA is a community of 36 Christian communions with a combined membership of 45 million persons in more than 100,000 congregations across this country. Our member churches – from a wide spectrum of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, Evangelical, historic African American and Living Peace churches – do not agree on all things! We stand united, however, in our conviction that the church is called to speak for justice in public education. We affirm that each life is infinitely precious, created in the image of God, and therefore, that every child should be given opportunity for fullness of life, including a quality and affordable education.

We further affirm that our society's provision of public education—publicly funded, universally available, and accountable to the public—while imperfect, is essential for ensuring that all children are served. As a people called to love our neighbors as ourselves, we look for the optimal way to balance the needs of each particular child and family with the need to create a system that secures the rights and addresses the needs of all children. We know that such a system will never be perfect, and we pledge as faithful citizens to continue to improve the schools in our communities and to make our system of schools more responsive.

We value democratic governance of public schools.

We support democratic governance of public schools. Because public schools are responsible to the public, it is possible through elected school boards, open meetings, transparent record keeping and redress through the courts to ensure that traditional public schools provide access for all children. We believe that democratic operation of public schools is our best hope for ensuring that families can secure the services to which their children have a right. On balance, we believe that if government invests public funds in charter schools that report to private boards, government, not the vicissitudes of the marketplace, should be expected to provide oversight to protect the common good.

Public schools must guarantee each child's right to educational opportunity.

We value the contributions of parochial schools managed by some of our communions and the contributions of charter schools operated by some of our congregations. We affirm, however, the position of our 1999 General Assembly that “as a general rule, public funds should be used for public purposes.” Knowing that traditional public schools continue to educate more than 90 percent of our nation's 50 million school children, we again echo the 1999 General Assembly that called “on our members to direct their energies toward improving the schools that the majority of children will continue to attend.” As you craft the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, originally the 1965 cornerstone of the War on Poverty, we ask you to remember that the Civil Rights Movement sought to ensure expanded opportunity for all children through public education. In 1954 the Supreme Court eliminated *de jure* segregation and guaranteed access for all to public schools previously available only to the privileged, and in 1965 Congress began providing federal funding for public schools serving children in poverty through Title I. We are concerned today when we hear the civil right to education being re-defined as the right to school choice, for we know that equitable access to opportunity is more difficult to ensure in a mass of privatized alternatives to traditional public schools or in school districts being carved apart into small schools of choice. Experimentation with small schools must not cause us to lose sight of society's obligation to serve all children with appropriate services; we must continue to expect public school districts to provide a complete range of services accessible to children in every neighborhood of our cities. Choice-based alternatives being proposed in local, state, and federal policy pose serious questions that we ask you to consider regarding equal access and public oversight. Here are just a few examples:

- When large high schools are broken into smaller schools or when charter management or education management organizations are brought in to operate small schools, what happens to children with

special needs and English language learners when small schools cannot provide the more expensive services such children need?

- In so-called “portfolio school districts” which are projected to manage an ongoing churn of new schools coming into existence and weak schools being forced to close, won’t closing public schools and moving the students increase student mobility in cities where poverty already means that too many children change schools too often? What is the consequence for a neighborhood or a community when a public school is closed or its entire staff fired?
- When there is competition to attract students to a range of small schools or charter schools, and when these schools are sought out by parents who are active choosers, what happens to the traditional neighborhood public schools which are left to serve the majority of special education students, English language learners, and homeless children?
- What happens to children whose parents, for whatever reason, do not participate in choice? We recently heard students whose families simply bring them to register at the neighborhood public school called “over the counter” children. Many of us and many of our children have at some time in our lives been “over the counter” children. We have assumed that universally available and easily accessible public schools were part of the American Dream.
- The federal Race to the Top competition brings federal pressure on states to remove statutory caps on the authorization of new charter schools. When charter schools are regulated state-by-state, how can the federal government ensure that what has been very uneven charter school regulation across the states be made more uniform to protect the public interest?
- Finally as it is proposed that federal grants be made more competitive—in the Race to the Top competition and the President’s recent “Blueprint” for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—by de-emphasizing Title I formula grants and increasing Title I competitive grants, how will we protect the educational opportunities of children in states and districts that are the losers? While the Title I formula program has been too small to make up for the impact of family poverty and the 3:1 inequality of school funding among the school districts in most states, it remains the federal government’s primary tool for distributing funds by formula according to need, for the purpose of expanding opportunity for poor children.

While competitive, market based “reforms” may increase educational opportunity for a few children, or even for some groups of children, do they introduce more equity or more inequity into the system itself?

We reject the language of business for discussing public education.

Not only has the language of the marketplace entered discussions of school governance and management, but we also notice that the language of business accountability is used to talk about education, a human endeavor of caring. The primary mechanism of the No Child Left Behind Act has been annual standardized tests of reading and math for all children in grades 3-8, followed by punishments for the schools that cannot rapidly reach ever increasing test score production targets. We worry that our society has come to view what is good as what can be measured and compared. The relentless focus on testing basic skills has diminished our attention to the humanities, the social studies, the arts, and child and adolescent development. As people of faith we do not view our children as products to be tested and managed but instead as unique human beings, created in the image of God, to be nurtured and educated.

ESEA Reauthorization must expand educational opportunity.

As you craft the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, we call on you to be faithful to the law’s original purpose: expanding educational opportunity by providing additional support for the schools that serve our nation’s poorest children. We ask you to address what are too rarely named these days:

the cavernous resource opportunity gaps—from state to state and from school district to school district—underneath the achievement gaps that No Child Left Behind has so carefully documented. We ask you to allocate federal resources for equity and insistently press states to close opportunity gaps. It is time to guarantee for all children in the United States a comparable opportunity to learn that includes a quality early childhood education, highly qualified teachers, a curriculum that will prepare students for college, work and community, and equitable instructional resources. It is also time to recognize that the blessings of healthcare remain unequal among American children, as do enrichments like after school programs, and summer experiences.

We value public school educators.

Our biblical heritage and our theology teach us that we live in community, not solely in the marketplace. As we strive to move our imperfect world closer to the realm of God, we recognize that we are all responsible for making sure that public schools, as primary civic institutions, embody our love for one another. We are called to create institutions that serve families and children with hospitality. We are called to work as citizens for the resources that will support a climate of trust and community within each public school. We are also called to value those whose vocation is teaching. Lately we have been dismayed by federal policy that encourages states to change laws to eliminate due process, to devalue the credentials of excellent teachers, and to fire teachers and principals as though that were a tested recipe for school reform, when we know that no research supports the President's proposed "turnaround" model that purports to improve a school by firing the principal and at least half the staff. We look for a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that honors the professionalism of teachers and treats these individuals with respect. Wholesale scapegoating of public school teachers is an ugly and unfortunate development in federal policy.

We pledge to partner with you for just reform.

We pledge to partner with you in prayer and action, working for reform that values the whole child as uniquely created, values teachers, and encourages and equips the family and community to participate in nurturing the full development of every child. We pledge to partner with you by:

- encouraging congregations to value public education and teachers through sermons, worship, and prayer;
- supporting parent education and adult literacy;
- encouraging congregations to partner with public schools to provide tutors, school supplies, exposure to computers and many other supports;
- supporting out-of-school supports like better and widely available pre-school and after school programs; and
- continuing to educate our members about the value of Community Schools that surround public schools with social supports.

We ask you to partner with us to challenge the unfair and detrimental language of the current discourse in educational reform, to re-examine untested assumptions about public education policy, and to ensure that untested models of school reform are not imposed from above in our nation's most fragile school districts. 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, and when schools are often limited by lack of funds or resources, we know that public schools cannot be improved by concentrating on public 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.

Sincerely,



The Rev. Dr. Michael Kinnamon General Secretary



The Rev. Peg Chamberlin, President

On Behalf of the Governing Board of The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (see attached)

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