

Opportunity to Learn in Public Education: An Alternative Vision

National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy



Caring for children means caring for the public schools that serve 50 million (90 percent) of our young people in the United States.

Jesus valued children. National Council of Churches General Secretary, Michael Kinnamon reminds us: “Each and every child is the earth’s most precious resource, an amazing gift from God.



This, of course, is not how they were regarded in Roman culture at the time of Jesus, which is why some of the stories found in the gospels would have been utterly shocking to the original audience. My favorite is from Mark 9: ‘Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them. And taking the child in his arms, he said to them [the disciples], ‘whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me – and whoever wel-

comes me, welcomes the One who sent me.’ ... Little children... are to be welcomed, cared for, because of their special relationship with our Lord... This is part of the eschatological reversal of scripture: Greatness is redefined as caring for, as receiving, the most vulnerable among us.”

As Congress prepares for the long overdue reauthorization of the federal education law, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, faithful citizens are called to speak for eliminating injustices in the current version, No Child Left Behind, passed in the fall of 2001 with the stated goal of closing achievement gaps. Among the most serious of the current law’s many problems is that NCLB has ratcheted up standardized testing and punished schools that cannot quickly raise scores while remaining silent about providing the resources to guarantee that every child has an equal opportunity to learn.

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 education between wealthy and poor school districts remains 3:1 in most states. State school finance systems, still heavily reliant on local property taxes, only



magnify disparities in family resources 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 has distracted us, drawing our attention to test scores and away from the opportunity gaps beneath the achievement gaps.

By mandating higher test scores while remaining silent about unequal resources, federal policy makers framed an agenda that can only be interpreted as an attack on educators themselves, passing the buck from Congress to the schools and demanding that teachers and children work harder and thereby compensate for society’s structural injustices.

NCLB’s silence about opportunity to learn—about the public’s responsibility to invest in equity—is among the law’s most serious flaws. In the reauthorization of the federal education law, Congress should address the injustice of vast inequality of opportunity by:

- Fully funding Title I, the federal funding stream that was created to support public schools that serve many children in poverty, in accord with the current formula.
- Providing strong federal incentives for states to reform inequitable school funding formulas.
- Establishing a comprehensive school funding indicator system where states would report spending patterns from school district to school district about access to core opportunities like early childhood education, qualified teachers, challenging curriculum, and instructional resources.
- Requiring states to develop plans for overcoming resource inequity and documenting their progress toward the goals they have themselves established.
- Creating a transparent, regular federal report that exposes the scope of unequal access to opportunity.



Congress must ensure that public schools in all communities can promise every child an opportunity to learn.

NCC Committee on Public Education and Literacy, Jan Resseger Chair, ressegerj@ucc.org, 216-736-3711. Check out our website, <http://www.nccusa.org/elmc/specialministries.htm#anchorwgpel>, for a more detailed informational resource about the need for Congress to address Opportunity to Learn.

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