Many of us, non-experts on public education, may wonder whether we are qualified to discern what is good in public schools. Now that the Adequate Yearly Progress rating system of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), labels more schools “a failure” every year, we may even wonder whether it is possible to save public education in America.

I thought about the pervasive perception of school failure across the states when I was spending a month with students at Chicago’s Harold Washington Elementary School. Hallways display art collections of prints and lithographs. Along the primary wing walked, “Harold Washington Boulevard,” the late Chicago mayor’s polished black Cadillac sits parked against a wall mural of a police station, fire station, and a school bus.

The Margaret Burroughs Performing Arts Theatre, the old-fashioned, two-story auditorium filled with the original 1915 black varnished wood seats screwed to the floor, is painted pink, with life-size panels of famous Black performers lined along the walls. Principal Sandra Lewis announces, “Our school’s band, orchestra, vocal group, and dance troupe perform in this theatre. Let’s talk about the arts that are happening in this space all students posting perfect attendance enter a lottery for a new bicycle.

The old building, Dr. Lewis’s canvas for painting high expectations, shouts affirmation. How do we explain to children and adults at Harold Washington Elementary School’s NCLB report card, however, posted on the web site of the Chicago Public Schools, that the school has not made Adequate Yearly Progress under NCLB for two years running, because its special education sub-group has not scored high enough in reading.

A Change in the Direction of Public Education

The federal education law, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), culminates the growing dominance of an educational philosophy based on standards-assessments-accountability. While for forty years after the Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education, the thrust of federal education policy was to expand opportunity through access to public schools, the focus of policy began to shift during the 1990s toward outcomes, measured by performance on standardized tests.

The trend toward accountability and testing spread across the states when school boards at Washington Elementary mandated higher test scores without addressing the supposed cure equalized neither facilities, nor program offerings, nor class size across wealthy and poor schools with four levers. First an official set of standards, second an accountability system, third a sanctions system, and a feature of the political maneuvering that takes place between the legislature and demanding that teachers work harder and expect more of their colleagues, thereby closing achievement gaps. In 1999, many governors continued to implement standards-based reform in their own states. Then in 2001, Congress adopted this standards philosophy when it reauthorized the federal education law, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, with a new name, “No Child Left Behind.” The federal government set out to mandate its own form of standards and accountability for all students, raising performance on tests on top of accountability rules already being tried in particular states. Historically the standards movement was to catch states and NCLB at the federal level arose when our society had developed the computerized capacity to measure, quantify, and collect data on a large scale.

If standards-assessments-accountability was the cure, we need to look backwards to explore what the first President Bush and the nation’s governors must have diagnosed as the disease. What was supposed to be the “cure” that social ill long correlated with low student achievement—poverty, lack of health and dental care, family mobility growing from the shortage of affordable housing and access to enriched early-childhood programs. Nor did it address school resource inequity across and within the states. Inequity that has been the subject of more than forty reports since the 1970s. The supposed cure equalized neither facilities, nor program offerings, nor class size across wealthy suburban and poor rural and urban systems. By mandating higher test scores without addressing these injustices, policy makers seemed to blame educators themselves, passing the buck from the legislature to the courts and demanding that teachers work harder and expect more of their students, thereby closing achievement gaps. In fact, Michael Petrilli, who worked in the U.S. Department of Education when NCLB was designed, wrote: “Its primary mechanisms are sunshine and shame.”

The Meaning of Equal Opportunity Has Changed

President Lyndon Johnson pushed Congress to pass the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 as the cornerstone of the War on Poverty. ESEA embodied an entirely different philosophy than its newest 2001 version. The original ESEA sought to provide extra resources to serve the needs of services especially for the poorest children and the least prepared teachers. This helped give rise to the charter movement.

Charter Schools

Charter schools are “publicly funded independent schools” that operate “semi-autonomously from their state’s education code and regulatory stringings for three to twenty years.” They receive state per-pupil assistance, though many operate with additional funds from foundations or from the non-profit network or educational management company of which they are a part. The state grants a charter to a sponsoring agency, generally the school board. In most charter schools are required to be non-profit, although some states permit a charter school board to be a for-profit, educational management organization to operate the school. Historically charter schools many two philosophies of education. One group of supporters looks to charters as an opportunity to fulfill the calling of inspired educators to experiment and innovate; the second group brings a belief in schools.”

For more information consult our public education web pages at http://www.ucc.org/justice/public-education/. For additional copies of this resource, contact Jan Resseger (216-736-3711) <resseger@ucc.org>.
The idea that tough graduation exit exams professional society. Performed test preparation has become accepted wisdom. Promoters of the standards-assessments-accountability movement promised the goal of guaranteeing to businesses, colleges and universities a graduate who can perform at a standardized level of accomplishment. However, it is now well documented that exit exams require passage of a high school exam for graduation, the test-and-punish philosophy contributes to a rapidly accelerating dropout rate.

According to the Center on Education Policy, by 2007, 22 states required passage of a test for high school graduation, even if the student had attended school regularly and passed all required classes. Eighteenth century states had attached high stakes to the standardized test required once in high school by NCLB. Here we see the nexus of federal and state policy, as the states, not the federal government, are putting high stakes to the exam required by the federal law.

While states have historically under-reported the rates by which students drop out of high school by assuming that students are simply moving to another school, research now documents that many primarily urban high schools graduate less than 60 percent of those who enter four years earlier in ninth grade. The number of these schools, said to have “weak promoting power,” has nearly doubled since 1995.

Daniel Losen of the Civil Rights Project worries that rising dropout rates not only challenge the students who disappear prematurely to graduation, but also undermine the well-being of society: “At an absolute minimum, adults need a high school diploma if they are to have any reasonable opportunity to earn a living wage. Students who earn a GED have a much higher rate of unemployment than diploma recipients and are much more likely to end up in parole or other forms of government assistance… Yet the United States is allowing a dangerously high percentage of students to disappear from the educational pipeline… Fifty plus percent of federal prison inmates and 75 percent of state prison inmates lack a high school diploma.

The Center on Education Policy documents that students with disabilities have the lowest passing rates on exit exams. In Arizona, while 71 percent of all students passed, only 8 percent of those with disabilities passed. In Massachusetts the ratio was 79 percent to 16 percent.11 Other groups most seriously affected are students of color, students in poverty, and English language learners.

University Researcher Linda McNeil concludes that requiring passage of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) for high school graduation has rapidly accelerated the high school drop-out rate in that state. McNeil describes rigid annual performance contracts by which high school principals in Texas have been required to sign away their tenure and to guarantee rapid test score increases for all subgroups whose scores are disaggregated under NCLB. Under pressure from school leaders, the state created a waiver that permits schools to divert the students likely to fail the TAKS by refusing to promote to graduation students who have failed even one semester of a required ninth grade course. Waivers permit schools to hold students in ninth grade sometimes indefinitely to protect the school itself from the students’ failure on the tenth grade exam. 12 McNeil theorizes that retention in eighth grade or high school is an even greater predictor for dropping out than retention in ninth grade. The number of these schools, said to have “weak promoting power,” has nearly doubled since 1995.

“With a 3 to 1 ratio between high-and-low spending schools in most states, multiplied further by large inequalities across states, international studies repeatedly found that the U.S. has one of the most inequitable education systems in the industrialized world. Moreover, the gaps along racial and class lines have been growing rather than shrinking, as inequality in funding has also grown since the 1980s... Current federal policy tackles the equity issue by demanding equal outcomes from schools without equalizing the resources.”

Gloria Ladson-Billings, 2006 president of the American Educational Research Association, challenges this stance. “Nothing is more profound than the depiction of inequity. Ladson-Billings believes that by defining our problem as closing test-score achievement gap, we also define ourselves to the magnitude of our own moral responsibility. She challenges America not to define the goal as closing the achievement gap but instead as addressing the education deficit that has grown over time: a historical debt that dates back to substandard schools provided for slave children, schools for poor children under Jim Crow, and the boarding schools provided for Native American children; an economic debt that has allowed white and privileged graduates of the best public schools to escape the effects of that history for centuries; a sociopolitical debt that has excluded communities of color from the civic process; and finally a moral debt, that “reflects the disparity between what we know is right and what we actually do. Saint Thomas Aquinas saw the moral debt as what human beings owe to each other in the giving of, or failure to give, honor to another when honor is due.” 13 Even as we have put the spotlight on disparities in outcomes, our society has not been willing to equalize opportunity.

Prominent educators have agreed that the goal of education should be to form the whole child. School superintendent, Dr. Rudy Crew argues that “We are committed to the belief that public schools should be places where all children develop the unique moral and cognitive qualities of a mature and conscious contributor to society—personality, integrity, workplace literacy, civic awareness, and academic proficiency.” 14 Yale University child psychiatrist and school reformer, James Comer has insisted that schools form children and adolescents along all of the six normal developmental pathways: physical, social-interaction, psychological-emotional, ethical, linguistic, and cognitive-intellectual. 15 Standardized tests measure only a portion of the last two categories—linguistic and cognitive-intellectual.

In a new introduction for a reprint of her famous book, Other People’s Children, educator and author Linda Darling-Hammond writes, “The standards-based and “whole-child” philosophies of education:

“Since the publication of Other People’s Children, the country’s educational system has become caught in the vise of the No Child Left Behind Act, which mandates more standardized testing of children than the country has ever seen... We in education have long been taught to act as if the most important goal of our work is to raise test scores. Never mind the development of the human beings in our charge—the integrity, the artistic expressiveness, the ingenuity, the persistence, or the kindness of those who will inherit the earth—the conversation in education has been reduced to a conversation about one small aspect of the child’s worth.”

In the church we are called to care deeply about public education, the only institution large enough to accommodate the 50 million children currently being served. We are called to work in alliance with groups advocating for reform that will expand the opportunity to learn.

We are called to recognize with the National Education Association that, “NCLB does not account for the extraordinary American experiences that make up the daily lives of students in public schools, from those blessed with family income and stability, to those with...”

Looking for a great discussion in your adult education class or congregational reading group? The National Council of Churches Committee on National and Global Concerns and the National Council of Churches Faith-based study guide to help you consider TEA7ED. Linda Darling-Hammond. Public schools in a new school year in third grade classrooms that epitomize the test-and-punish trauma of NCLB. http://www.nccua.org/merit/ TEA7ED.htm
disabilities, to students living in neighborhoods of poverty, to the sons and daughters of immigrant families who need to learn a new language when they arrive at school. NCLB prescribes a one-size-fits-all system to the most changeable and diverse group of children.

20. With a prominent group of sixty leaders from the fields of economics, civil rights, pediatrics, sociology, religion and education who have proclaimed “A Broad, BOLDER Approach to Education,” we are called to insist that society must also increase investment in developmentally appropriate, high-quality early childhood education and preschool programs and high quality health care services, and pay more attention to the activities in which children can engage outside of the school day. Pubic charter schools can be a place where children learn to triumph over poverty and racial injustice.

With the Forum for Education and Democracy we are called to demand that the education debt be addressed in federal policy. When the federal education law is reauthorized in 2007, the Individuals for Disabilities Education Act should be fully funded at the authorized level, and the federal government should use its power to leverage school funding equity in the states. “One central tool for this task is linking state eligibility for federal funds to state progress toward equitable school funding.”

Finally with educational psychologist Michelle Fine (2006), we risk remembering that schools should “buffer poor and working-class youth from stressors they experience outside of school.”

Many of the children at Chicago’s Harold Washington Elementary School come to school with great needs. This neighborhood school serves all children in its attendance area, all African American and Hispanic, 93 percent poor, with a family median income of $10,000. When children walk through the school’s front door, however, they enter a special world of bright color, music, friends, and high expectations. Harold Washington Elementary School gives them a chance, despite its rating as a “failing school” by the federal education law.

Why Consider the Standards-Assessment Accountability Movement Now?

The federal education law, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act whose most recent version is NCLB, was scheduled for its formal reauthorization in 2007, but that reauthorization has been delayed. Despite hard work by their staffs, Committee Chairs Senator Ted Kennedy and Representative George Miller of California, and a compromise bill acceptable to Democrats and Republicans. The reauthorization has now been pushed into 2009.

We call on you and your congregation to remain informed and present voice to President that although society has now developed the quantitative capacity to process and disaggregate data, education remains primarily qualitative.

Ask your elected officials to reduce high stakes testing; expand federal funding to pay for federal education requirements; use federal power to press states to fund public schools more adequately; uphold high expectations for all children but honor every child’s accomplishments; and shift the focus from blaming educators to providing public data, education remains primarily qualitative.

(Continued on page 4)
The public schools are expected to welcome the pupil funding distribution, the public schools to on which the state makes its head-count for per-

or families whose parents fail to comply with a

If a charter school pushes out behavior problems

renovations underway in Chicago Public Schools

become a dumping ground for the vulnerable.

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Even though they are publicly funded, charter schools are independent, so that schools are frequently not subject to sunshine laws or

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Public Purpose

Equity

Public schools are expected to provide appropriate programs no matter what skill level or special needs. It is the charter or system of charters that does not provide for accommodation for students’ learning challenges is no longer working within the spirit and intent of public education,” write Sizer and Wood. Through system-wide-programming and economies of scale, charter systems can hire psychologists and special needs experts to design federally required Individualized Education Plans and to shape district-wide services for blind, deaf, learning disabled or autistic children. School districts also design curricula and hire specialists for immigrants who need to learn English.

Charter schools, which are just now seeing two programs one school at a time, are often unprepared to provide a full range of services. Early in January 2008, a five-year-old white student in Chicago’s McDonogh No. 42 Charter School was quoted by the Times-Picayune asking, “How does one plan a party for a child you don’t know exist? Should we have classrooms reserved with teachers and aids hired for the visually impaired? Or do we just throw in the classroom’s children with those exceptionalities?”

In New Orleans, where charter schools are now over 60 percent of all schools, children with special needs find themselves acceptable only to the traditional public system known as the Recovery School District, whose schools are limited to have become a dumping ground for the vulnerable.

Charter schools do not embody the potential to bring about the needed transformations necessary for the assessment of Miami-Dade Superintendent and former New York City Chancellor, Dr. Rudy Crew: “The bottom line is this: Does the student benefit and does it in the debate or what should have been achieved with that money if it had been applied in a broader fashion.”

There are many kinds of funding inequity at the intersection of the traditional public school and charter schools. Catalyst Chicago has identified inequity in funding for building repairs. In May 2007, 19 percent of renovations at Chicago’s public elementary and secondary schools were in Renaissance and charter schools housing 4 percent of the district’s students. Sixty-two percent of repairs were concentrated in traditional public schools and charter schools, compared to only 45 percent in traditional neighborhood schools.

The inequity of funding among charter schools and traditional schools creates funding problems. If a charter school pushes out behavior problems or fails a state test, the school’s minority parent contract will become the issue at the heart of the charter school’s funding. The school loses money which the state allocates to the school’s per-pupil dollars, which will remain at the charter school. If the school’s superintendent then fails to deliver a high test score, the per-pupil dollars are suddenly lost after the state’s autumn “head-count” day, all the children in that school will find that they are in a public school district during that school year. However, the public schools are expected to welcome the children with teachers and programs ready.

Much of the big money behind charter school reform has been ideologically driven in a school finance climate where public schools lack funds and inequity in teacher quality. New Orleans charter schools received a five-year charter grant from the U.S. Department of Education for $24.5 million. That year charter school enrollment grew 30 percent million charter grant from the Gates Foundation in addition to school-specific grants to support the Renaissance and charter reform [22]. In New Orleans, in December of 2007, the Gates, Broad, and Fisher foundations announced a three-year grant of $10 million to charter schools for New Orleans.

And of course, the original charterization of New Orleans was funded by the U.S. Department of Education. "The dismantling of the New Orleans Public Schools began before the floodwaters receded. Within two weeks of the hurricane, Secretaries of Education and Labor sent a letter to state superintendents across the country announcing that charter schools were ‘uniquely equipped’ to serve students in New Orleans and that they would waive federal restrictions on charter schools in order to help New Orleans. Two weeks later, she announced the first of two charter school grants of more than $20 each to Louisiana."

Depending on local collective bargaining laws, charter schools also sometimes exacerbate inequalities in teacher qualifications. In New Orleans, where charter schools are not required to follow to a unique contract, these schools are free to set their own salaries and fringe benefits.

Members of the community worry about the ongoing churning of inexperienced and therefore young and inexperienced teachers through the city’s charter schools where there is an ongoing increase in teacher costs. Education professor Linda Darling-Hammond warns, “There are substantial equity and access implications of governmental accountability to charter school funding, linked in particular to whether states view charter schools as a strategy for competition and cost-cutting, or, alternatively, as a means to promote democratic engagement that develops higher quality and greater innovation."

Public Purpose

Even though they are publicly funded, charter schools are independent, so that schools are frequently not subject to sunshine laws or

Policy

Endnotes


3. Ted Sizer, George Wood, Lorraine Forte, Deputy Editor, reports that many Chicago charter school operators choose the neighborhoods that uses charter schools would have to involve


5. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

6. While we should admire the innovation and commitment in the best charter schools, New Orleans is teaching us that a fragmented mass of charter schools cannot replace a public school system and at the same time meet the goals of access and equity. Nor can public school systems be sufficiently improved by adding a few charter schools around the country. It will take a way to ensure that each charter school serves its students, for they are our children. We must also find enough schools that are closely involved with a charter school, to address the injustices that remain in the larger system of public schools.

7. Icid.


10. Charter Schools, from p. 3