

# Message on Public Education 2011

## United Church of Christ Justice & Witness Ministries



resources to support stronger and more equitable public schools



### New Federal Public Education Policies Undermine Justice, Eliminate Democracy, and Shatter Community

by Jan Resseger, Minister for Public Education and Witness

Have you noticed public school districts near you laying off their staffs and forcing teachers and principals to reapply for their jobs? Are schools in a city near you closing high schools and co-locating several unconnected small schools within the walls of a closed school? Has your state legislature just voted to allow a significant increase in the number of charter schools? What about evaluation and remuneration of teachers? Has your legislature just concluded hot debate about changing collective bargaining laws for teachers or rewritten laws to require that teachers be evaluated and paid according to their students' standardized test scores?

While such changes may seem to be happening in your community or in your state legislature, it is important to recognize that the same things are happening across many communities and many states. States have been jostling for billions of dollars that were part of the 2009 federal stimulus program because the U.S. Department of Education is dispensing billions of these dollars in competitive grants to states and school districts if they will revise laws and rules to comply with the priorities of President Barack Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

Part of the 2009 public education stimulus funding was straightforward: a massive infusion of funds—\$100 billion to state governments through the Individuals for Disability Education Act and through the Title I formula to enable states to avoid massive layoffs. Disbursing dollars through public schools was seen as an economically efficient way to save jobs overall to stimulate growth in the economy, because the distribution mechanism was in place through the network of our nation's 15,000 school districts.

At the same time, however, the Administration introduced a new public education agenda through the back door by lodging several competitive grant programs for states and school districts within the 2009 federal stimulus. Secretary Duncan was given control of nearly \$10 billion, which he divided into these programs. To qualify for the

money, states had to agree to the Administration's priorities and in many cases change state laws.

States and school districts had to apply for the funds—the \$3.5 billion Race to the Top Fund, the \$3.5 billion Title I School Improvement Grants, and a \$650 million Innovation Fund, all distributed competitively. States earned points if their legislatures changed laws to tie teacher evaluation and pay to students' test scores. States earned points if their legislatures rewrote laws to permit

rapid growth in the number of charter schools. And states and school districts earned points by promising to "turn around" schools that have struggled to raise students' scores: by firing the principal and half the staff without hearings or individual evaluations; by closing low scoring schools and moving the students elsewhere; by turning over low-scoring schools to charter operators or education management companies; or by "transforming" low-scoring schools by replacing the principal



and some staff before the schools are required to instigate further governance and instructional reform. A district with several low-scoring schools has not been permitted to overuse any of the models but instead must try several of the four types of prescribed "turnarounds."<sup>1</sup>

Even a former Bush Administration official who admires Secretary Duncan's ideas about school reform wonders whether it was wise for Congress to cede so much power to a Secretary of Education: "In taking considerable license with the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to fund its own priorities, the Administration has

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furthered its education agenda as cash-strapped states chase Race to the Top grants. Provisions of the education initiative that would have been difficult to obtain in federal legislation and weren't mentioned in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act... have now been put in place legislatively in several states in order for them to be competitive for Race to the Top grants... It is a mistake in principle—and a danger in reality—to allow any U.S. Secretary of Education this much policy discretion when doling out large sums of money.”<sup>22</sup>

One thing is certain: federal policy in public education now affects every public school in this nation through the standardized testing policies and ensuing punishments of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the Duncan Department of Education's federal stimulus grant competitions. Additionally, in their Blueprint for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), President Obama and Secretary of Education Duncan have proposed that the same four school turnaround plans that are part of Race to the Top and the School Improvement Grant competitions be imposed as part of ESEA on the 5 percent of public schools across the United States that struggle hardest to raise standardized test scores. The discussion of these radical plans will further complicate what is already likely to be a very heated Congressional debate about the pending ESEA reauthorization.

### Justice in Public Education

The Prophet Micah calls the faithful to “do justice.” (Micah 6:8) Doing justice challenges the strong on behalf of the weak. According to theologian, Walter Brueggemann, justice is distributional: “Justice is to sort out what belongs to whom, and return it to them.”<sup>23</sup> Although Brueggemann speaks specifically about economic justice in his exegesis of the book of Micah, the call to do justice is not merely economic. Institutional justice requires mechanisms for distributing opportunity, just as economic justice distributes goods. The United Church of Christ's General Synod 18 declared: “in the call to ‘do justice,’ Christians are required to transform the institutions of our society so that they provide what rightly belongs to all people and no longer deny access for some.”<sup>24</sup> According to Philip Wogaman, retired pastor of Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, DC, “it is just to structure institutions and laws in such a way that communal life is enhanced and individuals are provided full opportunity for participation.”<sup>25</sup>



The UCC's General Synod 25 affirmed that strong public institutions are necessary for the common good: “While our church has historically challenged injustice in America's social institutions... we have never compromised our commitment to the public good and the role of government for protecting the public welfare. Realizing our nation's founding ideals will require ongoing attention to maintaining public institutions designed to ensure that all persons can thrive.”<sup>26</sup> Our nation's 90,000 public schools are among the primary institutions in our society.

A good society creates educational opportunity for all children in their formative years; it does not distribute quality education to some children and deny it for others. Nor does a good society support a system that permits parents who know how to be good choosers to privilege their own children while leaving masses of children behind. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King admonishes: “there are millions of God's children who will not and cannot get a good education.... You will never be what you ought to be until they are what they ought to be.”<sup>27</sup> Today the church is called to protest U.S. Department of Education policies that are more likely to serve particular children or groups of children without improving the system to protect the rights and address the needs of all children.

### Race to the Top, School Improvement Grants, and Blueprint Undermine Systemic Justice

In many ways the changes brought through the Race to the Top and Title I School Improvement Grants, and President Obama's Blueprint proposals for the upcoming ESEA reauthorization are likely to increase educational opportunity for some children while they introduce greater inequity into the system itself. These turnaround plans will punitively sanction the lowest scoring 5 percent of public schools across the United States, fewer than five thousand Title I schools that are “in need of improvement,” the designation NCLB uses for schools that have been unable to raise test scores. Therefore, much of the experimentation with public school closure, principal and teacher firings and charter school expansion is likely to imperil the primary educational institutions available to many families in low income communities. At the same time, however, the Blueprint reduces scrutiny on the more than 90 percent of schools scoring higher by eliminating NCLB's punishments for all but these bottom scoring school districts.

The Race to the Top competition for states, Title I School Improvement Grants for school districts, and the Blueprint proposal for the reauthorization of ESEA all incorporate what has been named by its proponent Paul Hill, at the University of Washington's Center for Reinventing Public Education, a “portfolio model of school reform.”<sup>28</sup> According to Kenneth Saltman of DePaul University in Chicago: “The portfolio district approach merges four strategies: 1) decentralization; 2) charter school expansion; 3) reconstituting/closing ‘failing’ schools; and 4) test-based accountability. Additionally, portfolio district restructuring often involves firing an underperforming school's staff in

its entirety, whether or not the school is reconstituted as a charter school... The portfolio district concept implements what has been since the 1990's discussed in educational policy literature as market-based 'creative destruction' or 'churn.'"<sup>9</sup>

The "portfolio model," in which schools are imagined as opening and closing in a continuous cycle, does not value the kind of systemic provision of education Americans have learned to count on: 15,000 school districts administering 90,000 public schools, publicly funded, accountable to elected boards of education, and available in all communities and neighborhoods. The "portfolio model" is less attentive to equal access and the need for comprehensive provision of services; the "portfolio district" is understood instead as a rich medium for innovation.

In several cities where the "portfolio model" has been introduced, in New York City and Chicago, for example, mayoral governance is part of the bargain. While "portfolio" proponents allege that nimble management requires the mayor to appoint the board of education, parents and community are shut out and the democratic process abridged. Nearly three thousand community members and parents attended a New York City meeting in February of 2010, for example, to protest the closing of 19 high schools and relocation of the students, but because a majority of board members are now appointed by Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who readily replaces any board members voting against School Chancellor Joel Klein's priorities, the mayor's appointees affirmed the Klein plan for closing high schools.<sup>10</sup> Members of the community were forced in New York to turn to the courts to challenge the school closings because there is no longer a democratic process to ensure that local parents can appeal when they believe the public schools are not appropriately serving their children or their neighborhood.

The "portfolio model" prescribes rapid expansion of charter schools. While in the past many state legislatures have created caps on the authorization of new charter schools to ensure careful and deliberate experimentation with schools that are public in the sense that they receive public funds and at the same time private because they are governed by private boards, the Duncan Department of Education has used Race to the Top rapidly to accelerate the rate of charterization. The UCC's General Synod has never opposed charter schools, and it is true that many excellent charter schools serve their students well. A respected Stanford University study reports that 17 percent of charter schools do a better job than comparable public schools.<sup>11</sup> However, General Synod 25 "affirmed the role of public institutions... for ensuring essential services," declared that "the sum total of individual choices in any private marketplace does not necessarily constitute the public good," and confirmed that society must "provide opportunity for every child in well-funded, high quality public schools."<sup>12</sup> While particular charter schools may be excellent, serious concerns arise about the impact of rapid charterization on existing public school systems.

The Race to the Top grant competition has awarded points to states whose legislatures remove such caps. The Race to the Top and Title I School Improvement Grant programs, along with the Blueprint proposal for the ESEA reauthorization additionally prescribe, as one of four "turnaround" plans, the "Restart Model," that "converts or closes and reopens the school under the management of an effective charter operator, charter management organization, or education management organization."<sup>13</sup>

At the same time these federal policies are driving the rapid proliferation of charter schools, charter schools continue to be regulated solely in state law. Across the states regulation of both financial management and academic accountability has been extremely uneven. In Ohio, for example, charter schools are required neither to observe sunshine laws nor to report on the disbursement of state funds. Life Skills Center in Toledo, a school administered by the huge, for-profit, White Hat Management Company, allocated \$4,821,765 to a category called "administrative expenditures" in 2005.<sup>14</sup> This amount constituted the total amount spent by the school that year. The state did not require the school to break down expenditures into categories that could be compared to spending patterns in other schools—for teachers' salaries, administrative salaries, textbooks, or maintenance—or to report how much public money resulted in profit for the owner. While the federal government is creating incentives for state legislatures to remove caps on authorization of

new charter schools, no expanded federal regulation has been proposed to protect the public investment and the public interest.



Families in privately managed charter schools may not have the right to bring concerns directly to the school's privately appointed board that lacks any real incentive to hear the concerns of the public, including parents. Today in New Orleans more than forty different boards, some public and others private, manage schools that receive public funding.<sup>15</sup> For this

reason parents in New Orleans, where a post-Katrina charter experiment means that over 60 percent of children now attend charter schools, have complained that the mass charterization of the schools has undermined democracy. Parents' loss of redress in New Orleans epitomizes the dilemma described by political philosopher, Benjamin Barber: "Privatization is a kind of reverse social contract: it dissolves the bonds that tie us together into free communities and democratic republics. It puts us back in the state of nature where we possess a natural right to get



whatever we can on our own, but at the same time lose any real ability to secure that to which we have a right.”<sup>16</sup>

In New Orleans parents have struggled to find appropriate services for children with disabilities and special learning needs. Despite that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires public schools to ensure the availability of such services, a New Orleans charter school board member wondered, “How does one plan a program in advance for a child you did not know existed? Should we have classrooms reserved with teachers and aides hired for the visually impaired, in case a child enrolls with those exceptionalities?”<sup>17</sup> In New York City, the New School Center for New York City Affairs reports:

“Students with special needs are often assigned to schools that don’t have the services they need. The Department of Education (DOE) has no formal mechanism for matching a child’s particular needs with programs offered at a school. . . . Children whose parents speak a language other than English, who represent 42 percent of the student population, are at a particular disadvantage in the high school admissions process. While the DOE has made great efforts

to translate key documents and to provide interpreters at high school fairs, the system of school choice assumes a level of parent involvement that is unfamiliar to many new immigrants.”<sup>18</sup> Attorneys for Advocates for Children and the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund report that the closing of two comprehensive New York high schools and subsequent institution of small school choice has resulted in “the concomitant elimination of each school’s bilingual education programs.”<sup>19</sup> One young woman, a recent immigrant from Myanmar, sought legal assistance to petition for a better school placement after she was assigned to a small school whose curricular focus was sports management and whose program lacked any special services for English language learners.<sup>20</sup>

A 2010 study by the Institute on Race and Poverty at the University of Minnesota Law School documents that in New Orleans, the traditional Recovery School District (RSD) public schools have become increasingly segregated; these are the schools that must enroll all children who present themselves to register. RSD traditional schools serve the poorest children and those with special needs who cannot find services in schools managed more selectively by other governmental systems, all of which contract out a significant number of schools to charter managers: “The ‘tiered’ system of public schools in the city of New Orleans



sorts white students and a relatively small share of students of color into selective schools in the OPSB (Orleans Parish School Board) and BESE (Louisiana Board for Elementary and Secondary Education) sectors, while steering the majority of low-income students of color to high-poverty schools in the RSD sector. . . . As a result of rules that put RSD traditional schools at a competitive disadvantage, schools in this sector are reduced to ‘schools of last resort.’ This sector continues to educate the hardest-to-educate students in racially segregated, high-poverty schools.”<sup>21</sup> A marketplace where 60 percent of children now attend charter schools has not found a way to provide quality services for a full range of children.

One concern that is never addressed satisfactorily is the comparative disadvantage for families who move to a city after the choice process for that school year has been completed. While laws in many places prohibit formal selective admission through qualifying exams in charter schools and require lotteries when charter schools are over-subscribed, such schools are rarely required to accept students once the school reaches what it considers to be its optimal size. Families displaced after Hurricane Katrina and subsequently trickling back to New Orleans mid-school year, when a house could be rehabilitated or the family could secure enough funds for the move back home, found that charter schools were not obligated to create additional places for their children. Such children have been able to find seats only in the public Recovery School District. In New York City, the New School reports: “Some 14,000 high school students each year are assigned to schools they did not choose. This number includes more than 7,000 who are rejected at all their choices and another 7,000 who arrive in the summer or early fall after the choice process is complete and are then assigned to whatever schools still have space.”<sup>22</sup> Even the researcher adopts the language of the marketplace by referring to children whose parents present them at the local public school for registration as “over-the-counter students.”<sup>23</sup>

Another serious concern is that at any time during the school year traditional public schools are expected to welcome all students, including students who leave charter schools because they have posed discipline problems or in cases where parents or students have not fulfilled the requirements of signed behavior and academic contracts required by charter schools. A recent critique of the acclaimed KIPP charter schools reported that while KIPP middle schools do not have a higher dropout rate than the neighboring public schools, KIPP does not admit new students to fill the seats of students who drop out.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, the neighboring public schools are required to serve the students who drop out of KIPP and other charter schools, along with other children who move in and out during the school year. KIPP has in this way been able to maintain the intensely disciplined academic culture for which it is famous by working with a middle school population formed in its special culture since fifth grade.

Serious questions have also arisen about whether school districts and the charter schools within their boundaries have the capacity to market choices effectively in all neighborhoods. In Chicago, charter operators have sometimes niche-marketed charter schools by locating them in neighborhoods where the operators imagine their special focus will be sought out. According to *Catalyst-Chicago*, “Most charters have deep ties to particular communities: United Neighborhood Organization runs five charters in heavily Latino areas on the Southwest and Northwest sides of town, and plans to open three more in Archer Heights next year. The tendency for charters to clump together explains, in part, why some communities have yet to get Renaissance schools.”<sup>25</sup> In New York City, the New School report describes school choice in a city where Chancellor Joel Klein is moving quickly to eliminate traditional high schools with guaranteed attendance zones. “The system of school choice assumes each child has a parent or other adult who is willing and able to take time to tour schools and fill out applications. In fact many children have no such help.”<sup>26</sup> “Many middle-school guidance counselors, charged with helping students fill out their high school applications, are overwhelmed by huge caseloads and the sheer complexity of giving meaningful advice about 400 different schools.”<sup>27</sup> Once placed, students are not permitted a transfer to another school if the fit is poor.<sup>28</sup>

Charter school expansion will occur primarily in cities, because the choice model is less workable in smaller towns and rural areas. For all these reasons, the rapid expansion of charter schools threatens primarily the future of America’s big city school districts, the districts serving concentrations of America’s poorest and most invisible children. Education historian Diane Ravitch writes: “As more charter schools open, the dilemma of educating *all* students will grow sharper. The resolution of this dilemma will determine the fate of public education. The question for the future is whether the continued growth of charter schools in urban districts will leave regular public schools with the most difficult students to educate, thus creating a two-tier system of widening inequality... As charter schools increase in number and able students enroll in them, the regular public schools in the nation’s cities will be locked into a downward trajectory. This would be an ominous development for public education and for our nation.”<sup>29</sup>

### **The Portfolio Model and the Values of the Church**

“Portfolio model” theory imagines public schools as an extension of the marketplace, not as an expression of community. The public, as responsible stewards of civic institutions, is not part of the idea. The civil right to education is understood as the right to school choice and the right to escape so-called “failing” schools. Parents are regarded as consumers not as citizens. The “turnaround” models in the Race to the Top, the Title I School Improvement Grants, and the President’s Blueprint for the ESEA reauthorization epitomize thinking that is mechanistic, with the buildings, the principals, the

teachers, and the students all just moveable parts that can be switched around without attention to the value of human relationship. The “portfolio model” incorporates a range of strategies for neighborhood destabilization, while public schools have traditionally been expected to serve basic needs of families and children as stable neighborhood anchors.

A 2010 pastoral letter adopted by the Governing Board of the National Council of Churches expresses opposition to such technocratic thinking: “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 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.”<sup>30</sup>

The United Church of Christ’s former General Minister and President, the Rev. John Thomas reflects on another time, when public schools were understood as an expression of community: “When you travel across the country through numerous county seat towns and cities, it’s easy to see what was important to those who established those communities. They built—at great personal sacrifice—churches, schools, libraries, and court houses, public institutions.... announcing to all that the spiritual, intellectual, and moral enrichment of the public was a central priority.”<sup>31</sup>



The “Turnaround Model” that lays off at least 50 percent of a school’s staff without individual evaluations or due process demonstrates to children that human relationships do not matter. Strategies that fire entire staffs of teachers ensure that children will be taught by strangers, however well the

replacements are qualified. A mass of educational research demonstrates that organizational trust, a key ingredient for school reform, can be nurtured only when staffs are stable from year to year. For education writer Mike Rose, the way we talk about teachers today reflects our diminished valuing of human connection in schools: “There is little talk of the power of teaching, of this remarkable kind of human relationship, honored in all cultures. In our time, teaching is... often defined as a knowledge-delivery system. Yet



teaching carries with it the obligation to understand the people in one's charge, to teach subject matter and skills, but also to inquire, to nurture, to have a sense of who a student is."<sup>32</sup>

Rose calls society back to a more careful conversation about school reform, one that requires citizens to critique public schools and to address their problems and injustices, but that also lifts up hope: "Citizens in a democracy must continually assess the performance of their public institutions. But the quality and language of that evaluation matter... Neither the sweeping rhetoric of public school failure nor the narrow focus on test scores helps us here. Both exclude the important, challenging work done daily in schools across the country, thereby limiting the educational vocabulary and imagery available to us."<sup>33</sup>

### **New Obama-Duncan Policies Complicate Federal Education Law Reauthorization**

Although the Administration's public education strategies are troubling on their own, they will also further complicate the festering problems brought by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the latest reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), passed by Congress in the fall of 2001, and signed by President George Bush in January of 2002. NCLB culminated a movement through the 1990s toward test-based business accountability for public schools. Although the churches have raised alarms about NCLB and advocated for a massive overhaul, the five-year reauthorization of ESEA, due in 2007, continues to be delayed. Here are four of NCLB's most serious problems that Congress needs to address.

**No Child Left Behind demands rapidly increasing outcomes as measured by test scores, but it has not equalized resources.** Schools remain unequal because school funding, as defined in state constitutions, continues to depend on local property taxes. Schools in outer ring suburbs continue to spend the most public money on children from the wealthiest families, while schools in rural areas and segregated large cities spend less public money on children from very poor families. Children in underfunded schools may also be experiencing hunger, lack of quality health care, and high family mobility among many other overwhelming challenges. Poor children are likely to be cut off from the opportunity systems privileged families can access for their children. And yet, NCLB demands more of the poorest children, their schools and

their teachers without adequately supporting their schools or improving their circumstances outside school.

No Child Left Behind has been largely silent about the resources that create the opportunity to learn. Congress has never even fully allocated the money it authorized when the law was passed; by 2008, NCLB had been cumulatively underfunded below what Congress authorized by \$71 billion.<sup>34</sup> Nor has Congress used federal leverage to press states to address school resource inequity. NCLB has equalized neither facilities, nor program offerings, nor class size across wealthy suburban and poor rural and urban systems.<sup>35</sup>

**No Child Left Behind operates through a massive regime of standardized testing followed by sanctions for schools that cannot quickly raise scores for all groups.** All schools that cannot quickly raise scores and that therefore fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress experience sanctions that include diverting Title I funds to transport children to other schools and to provide privatized tutoring services. The punitive philosophy has resulted in a narrowed curriculum focused on the tested subjects of basic reading and math. In the schools that have struggled hardest to raise scores, school time has been dominated too often by test prep to the exclusion of social studies, literature, the arts and even recess. The law imposes a 2014 deadline by which schools must make all students proficient or be ranked "in need of improvement." Today in some states, more than half the schools carry this "failing" label, with the number continuing to grow. Students themselves suffer "consequences," because many states have made the standardized tests carry high stakes, resulting in retention in grade or ultimately denial of high school graduation.

Because ESEA has not been reauthorized, unless Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stops enforcing the sanctions of NCLB, schools will continue to experience sanctions. To the Obama Administration's credit, the President's Blueprint for the reauthorization proposes to eliminate the onerous Adequate Yearly Progress requirement and the utopian 2014 deadline, as well as some of the sanctions—specifically the use of Title I money to help students in so-called "failing" schools to transfer out, and the "supplemental education services" program that has wasted Title I money and accomplished little apart from unleashing a vast and poorly regulated private tutoring sector.<sup>36</sup> However, the Obama Administration does not propose to reduce the amount of standardized testing. The Administration has created incentives in Race to the Top for state legislatures to tie teachers' evaluations and salaries to students' scores on NCLB's current tests. Although the President has said that tests will now measure student growth over time and although the Department of Education has set aside money for the development of "value added" tests, at this time no valid system of growth-model tests is operational in any state.

**Society seems to have begun worshipping standardization.** NCLB has incorporated a business



metaphor, demanding ever-increasing production targets on standardized tests. Christian theology instead insists on a philosophy of education that develops the unique gifts of each child, created in the image of God. The UCC's General Synod 18 described the goals of public education: "As Christians we believe that God desires for children the life abundant which comes from the fullest development of their gifts—physical, intellectual, social and spiritual."<sup>37</sup>

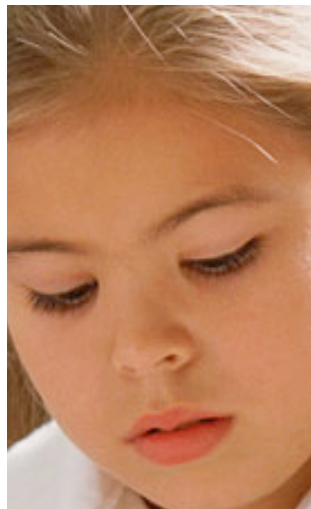
**No Child Left Behind demands that schools, on their own, close achievement gaps without society's addressing poverty, segregation, and other institutional structures that contribute to achievement gaps.** Here is the indictment of Gary Orfield, Director of the Civil Rights Project: "The basic emphasis in recent decades has been on policies that simply ignore divisions of race, ethnicity, class, and immigrant status and assume that the problem is nothing that relates to those facts but one of laxity in the institutions serving certain groups of people or the lack of appropriate market incentives... So since the early 1980s, as poverty and civil rights policies have been reversed, there has been a tidal wave of requirements and tests and accountability measures, insistently rooted in the belief that the principal causes of remaining inequality are laxness of teachers and of students and that they can be cured by more demands and harsh sanctions."<sup>38</sup>

### **Federal Public Education Policy: Priorities for the Church**

While in the past it was sufficient for advocates to address public education policies at the state legislative level, today federal policies intrude into every public school and classroom. But while federal policy has become more intrusive, it has not only failed to address desperate conditions in the schools of our poorest communities, but it has also punished rather than helping children and educators trapped in inadequate schools. So called "solutions" have too often led to privatization. Although implementation of programs like Race to the Top and the competitive School Improvement Grants cannot be derailed, because control of these funds was given to the Department of Education by Congress as part of the 2009 economic stimulus package, Congress will oversee the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). While the reauthorization may now be delayed until 2011 or even 2012, it will be important to use that delay to speak regularly with Senators and Congressional Representatives about four elements that a just ESEA reauthorization should incorporate.

**Federal policy must address public school inequality.** In the upcoming reauthorization of the ESEA, Congress should allocate federal resources for equity and use its power to press states to close opportunity gaps. Congress should ensure that Title I, the program for schools serving children in poverty, is fully funded at the level Congress itself authorized in 2002, when NCLB was passed. One way to ensure that Title I is fully funded would be to move it from the discretionary to the mandatory funding

category to remove this important program from the annual budget allocation debate. Congress should also assist school districts by fulfilling a promise it has never delivered: federally funding 40 percent of the cost of implementing the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. These two steps alone would nearly double federal investment in the two largest federal education



programs. Congress should also create federal incentives for states to equalize school funding. While there has been some discussion in Congress and in the Administration of using the ESEA reauthorization to require what is called "comparability" (insisting that all schools within a school district have comparable resources), Congress should also pressure states to ensure resource equity from school district to school district.

Congress should insist that Title I funding be distributed by formula and should reject the Administration's proposal to make a larger portion of Title I funding competitive. Nothing can justify the Administration's Blueprint proposal that freezes Title I formula programs and shifts Title I into a competitive grant program. No child should lose services because her school district lost out in a competitive funding race. No child should lose services because his district does not have the fiscal capacity to hire a staff of skilled grant proposal writers. The Title I formula program is important as the federal government's primary tool for distributing funds for the purpose of expanding opportunity for poor children at school.

### **Federal policy must reduce reliance on standardized tests as a primary "school improvement" strategy.**

Children need fewer tests, and those that are employed should be better designed to improve instruction, measure real performance, and encourage exploration, imagination and critical thinking. The church must insist that Congress redirect its attention to the needs of each child, created in the image of God, by insisting that a rich and rewarding school curriculum replace today's fixation on standardized test scores.

### **Federal policy must support and improve, not punish, public schools in America's poorest communities.**

Public school improvement requires adequate resources and intense, collaborative work by school professionals. The Consortium on Chicago School Research, in a 20 year longitudinal study, identifies five essential supports that have been shown to improve academic achievement in public schools—the presence of a principal who is strategic



and focused on instruction; a hospitable and connected environment for families; professional and highly skilled teachers with support through quality, embedded staff development; a safe, stimulating and nurturing school setting for children; and a high quality, academically challenging curriculum—all of which must be supported by attention to building a stable climate of relational trust among the staff.<sup>39</sup> There is also broad agreement that lifting school achievement will require out-of-school enrichments including universal early childhood education, summer and after school programs, and significant plans to ameliorate unmet health and welfare needs.

**Federal policy must improve public education as the bedrock of our democracy and public schools as the anchors of communities.** The church must insist that Congress turn away from marketplace schemes and strategies that treat children, teachers, principals and school buildings as mere moveable parts. While innovative ideas will always be required, the idea of a fertile medium for innovation is insufficient as a philosophy of public education. Only a just system of public education has the capacity to secure the rights and address the needs of all children, and only if citizens are attentive and work to make it so. It is a good time to reflect on the vision of philosopher John Dewey: “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy. All that society has accomplished for itself is put, through the agency of the school, at the disposal of its future members... Here individualism and socialism are at one. Only by being true to the full growth of all the individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself.”<sup>40</sup>



## (Endnotes)

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