

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: February 1, 2011

Published in Print: February 2, 2011, as **A Letter to My President—The One I Voted for...**

A Letter to My President—The One I Voted for...

By Paul Karrer

Dear President Obama:

I mean this with all respect. I'm on my knees here, and there's a knife in my back, and the prints on it kinda match yours. I think you don't get it.

Your **Race to the Top** is killing the wrong guys. You're hitting the good guys with friendly fire. I'm teaching in a barrio in California. I had 32 kids in my class last year. I love them to tears. They're 5th graders. That means they're 10 years old, mostly. Six of them were 11 because they were retained. Five more were in special education, and two more should have been. I stopped using the word "parents" with my kids because so many of them don't have them. Amanda's mom died in October. She lives with her 30-year-old brother. (A thousand blessings on him.) Seven kids live with their "Grams," six with their dads. A few rotate between parents. So "parents" is out as a descriptor.

Here's the kicker: Fifty percent of my students have set foot in a jail or prison to visit a family member.

Do you and your secretary of education, Arne Duncan, understand the significance of that? I'm afraid not. It's not bad teaching that got things to the current state of affairs. It's pure, raw poverty. We don't teach in failing schools. We teach in failing communities. It's called the ZIP Code Quandary. If the kids live in a wealthy ZIP code, they have high scores; if they live in a ZIP code that's entombed with poverty, guess how they do?

We also have massive teacher turnover at my school. Now, we have no money. We haven't had an art or music teacher in 10 years. We have a nurse twice a week. And because of the **No Child Left Behind Act**, struggling public schools like mine are held to impossible standards and punished brutally when they don't meet them. Did you know that 100 percent of our students have to be on grade level, or else we could face oversight by an outside agency? That's like saying you have to achieve 100 percent of your policy objectives every year.

[← Back to Story](#)



You lived in Indonesia, so you know what conditions are like in the rest of the world. President Obama, I swear that conditions in my school are akin to those in the third world. We had a test when I taught in the Peace Corps. We had to describe a glass filled to the middle. (We were supposed to say it was half full.) Too many of my kids *don't even have the glass!*

It's not bad teaching that got things to the current state of affairs. It's pure, raw poverty.

Next, gangs. Gangs eat my kids, their parents, and the neighborhood. One of my former students stuffed an AK47 down his pants at a local bank and was shot dead by the police. Another one of my favorites has been incarcerated since he was 13. He'll be 27 in November. I've been writing to him for 10 years and visiting him in the maximum-security section of Salinas Valley State Prison. He's a major gangster.

Do you get that it's tough here? Charter schools and voucher schools aren't the solution. They are an excuse not to fix the real issues. You promised us so much. And you want to give us merit pay? Anyway, I think we really need to talk. Oh, and can you pull the knife out while you're standing behind me? It really hurts.

Sincerely yours,

Paul Karrer

*Paul Karrer is a 5th grade teacher at **Castroville Elementary School** in north Monterey County, Calif. He is a union negotiator and was the League of United Latin American Citizens' 2009 teacher of the year for north Monterey County.*

Vol. 30, Issue 19, Page 23

RELATED STORIES

"Race to Top Winners, Meeting in D.C., See Challenges Ahead," September 16, 2010.

"Chat: Race to the Top: Win, Lose, and Draw Conclusions," September 2, 2010.

"Commentary: What Would Real School Reform Look Like?," July 29, 2010.

"Commentary: How to Improve Urban High Schools At Scale," May 24, 2010.