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An Open Message to President Barack Obama

By Daniel Tanner

A principal conclusion of the American creed is the belief in public education. The United States leads the world with the oldest continuing public school system, universal secondary education, and open-access higher education.

President Obama, when you were elected in 2008, teachers, parents, and most of us with an abiding faith in the public school envisioned a new era of school support and renewal in accord with the hopes and promises engendered by your election campaign. Instead, the centerpiece of your education program so far, the Race to the Top, reinforces, expands, and intensifies the No Child Left Behind Act of President George W. Bush and the America 2000 manifesto of President George H.W. Bush—all of which have embraced nationalized high-stakes testing as the instrument of accountability imposed upon children and teachers. Their presidential agendas, and yours, have promoted the charter school movement. But your Race to the Top competition has gone even further in promoting external testing and splitting up the American school system through the federal support of charter schools.

As with your predecessors, your unrelenting faith in high-stakes testing as the key metric for accountability not only lacks validity, but also is likely to have many unintended deleterious consequences for curriculum and the attitudes students have toward learning. No nation has ever tested itself out of an educational or social problem. The public schools cannot be blamed for children victimized by impoverishment or the failures of other social institutions. Yet our public schools have willingly and eagerly accepted responsibility for all the children of all the people.

Early in the 20th century, John Dewey warned of the need to invest in building and strengthening our unitary school system by providing for adequate facilities and resources, and of a danger in splitting up the school system by forming yet another kind of school even though it might be the cheaper route.

Mr. President, you have repeatedly boasted that our nation has the world's leading system of higher education. But this would not have been possible without a unitary public school system capped by a uniquely American invention: the inclusive comprehensive high school with its comprehensive curriculum.

Under your initiatives, children and adolescents are being denied access to a full and rich curriculum and facilities with modern studios, shops, laboratories, and libraries where they can really work at their studies.

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And instead of undertaking the needed funding for a rich, full curriculum for the renewal of the American unitary school system, you are calling, in effect, for it to be dismantled and broken up into charter schools when the body of research fails to support your strategy.

In our large cities, school capacity is commonly calculated by the number of seats. But children and adolescents are not made to learn by sitting and listening for most of the day. Children like to engage in active investigation—in looking into things to find out how they work. They like to construct things; they seek to engage in socialization through language, play, and collaboration; they love to draw, paint, sculpt, and sing; they want to learn to play a musical instrument—and all of this requires some physical freedom from their seats.

Standardized tests are error-oriented. Real education is idea-oriented. At a time when our greatest need is to build a more civil society for American democracy, the American high-stakes testing syndrome has gone to such an extreme that the New York state commissioner of education has declared, as reported in *The New York Times*, that teacher education programs should spend less time on abstract notions like the “role of school in democracy.”

Back in the years of the Cold War, our public schools were blamed for contributing to the alleged missile gap and the prospect of losing the space race. Federal initiatives resulted in curricular priorities in our schools given to mathematics and science, to be led by university scholar-specialists. What students learned from these initiatives was that they did not like math and science. The consequence was that university enrollments in those disciplines plummeted, leading the president of the American Chemical Society to declare in his 1967 address at the society’s annual meeting, “We have committed a crime against a generation.” Earlier, Harvard University President James B. Conant had called for a moratorium on national testing. The situation is far worse today.

The current assault on teacher tenure and unions also raises a great danger to American democracy. Virtually every modern democracy embraces teacher tenure in recognition that the teacher must be free to teach if the rising generation is to be free to learn. Over the course of our modern history, our schools have been subjected to the censorship of curricular materials, with pressures exerted against teachers who address controversial problems. The external national-standardized-testing epidemic effectively diminishes the prospects of addressing controversial issues or ideas in the classroom.

Your promotion of teacher merit pay based on test scores can be traced to the system of “payment by results” practiced in 19th-century English schools serving children of the poor. For the privileged, such a factory-like production scheme was deemed inappropriate and offensive. Your initiatives under the Race to the Top competition are reducing American teachers to the status of employees, whereas teachers are recognized and treated as professionals in almost every other civilized nation. Year after year, the ***Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup Poll*** reveals that the public, as a whole, sees the biggest problem facing the public schools as the “lack of financial support/funding/money.”

There is a great danger to our democracy with out-of-school adolescents constituting by far the largest unemployed group. Sigmund Freud held that work defines one’s place in the human community. We cannot continue to ignore the consequences of social disaffection resulting from the massive and growing population of youths who are out of school and out of work.

Toward the end of the Clinton administration, former U.S. Secretary of Labor Robert B. Reich belatedly found that his proposal for a German-style apprenticeship system in our country to solve the problem of unemployed American youths was unacceptable to the American public. At the time, I was participating in the annual meeting of the National Association of Secondary School Principals. At the conference, the air

was buzzing in anticipation of a national plan for consolidating, or at least coordinating, the last two years of high school with the two years of community college as a four-year unit for vocational-technical education. Through what is known as the 2+2 or tech-prep program, adolescents would be able to bridge the chasm between high school and gainful postsecondary employment and higher education. In the mid-20th century, a committee of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences pointed out that if the public schools actually tried to carry out the purely academic program advocated for the high school by many university liberal arts professors, our whole national life would be in danger of collapse. Unfortunately, we backed away—beginning in the 1960s—from a commitment to meaningful preparation of young people for life after high school.

Mr. President, your metrics for determining school success treat the problems of education as problems to be worked out with a yardstick—to paraphrase the late American philosopher Boyd H. Bode. As Bode reminded us in his book *Modern Educational Theory*, “We put shoes on a child to protect his health and not to bind his feet.” The Race to the Top approach is relegating the studies and activities that children love—civic education, the arts, career education—to the bottom rung of the academic ladder.

At the opening of the 20th century, John Dewey, addressing parents in a lecture and essay titled **“The School and Social Progress,”** declared: “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.” The American people should expect no less of our national leadership.

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