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School Reform, But From Whose Perspective?

By Cheryl Scott Williams

Public K-12 schooling is a popular subject in all forms of media these days, with the majority of coverage highly critical of both the professionals who work within the system and the performance of the students with whom they work. Prominent national leaders from government, corporations, and philanthropic organizations, having positioned themselves as "reformers," hold the bully pulpit in not only proclaiming education professionals as inadequate in ability and practice, but also in controlling access to significant resources to define and support reform efforts.

Those of us who have spent our careers in public education have always welcomed interest and enthusiasm from those outside the profession when that involvement focuses on unique perspectives and skill sets they can bring to the learning environment, including financial support, assistance with new technologies, participation in career days, and internship opportunities for students. We also welcome open discussion and the sharing of experience that can contribute to new ways of thinking about the challenges we face in our daily work with students.

But the tone, language, and proposals for change currently articulated by the most prominent "reformers" at the national level reveal both a lack of knowledge and experience of the daily realities of even the most successful public schools and a total lack of respect for the professionals now working in public education. A [New York Times article](#) by Michael Winerip last year provided insight into the genesis of the worldview of these "reformers." It was chilling in its revelation of our country's movement toward endowing decisionmaking by only a privileged ruling class of leaders whose experience in no way reflects the background or upbringing of the majority of Americans.

What Mr. Winerip discovered is that the most prominent K-12 education "reformers" today are products of private education, either for their entire precollegiate schooling, or in part: from U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan; to former District of Columbia Schools Chancellor Michelle A. Rhee; to Microsoft co-founder and Gates Foundation co-chair Bill Gates; to

"Waiting for 'Superman' " producer-director Davis Guggenheim; to, most prominently, President Barack Obama. The list could be expanded to include many others.

All of us self-refer. We build our opinions based on personal experience, and it has become evident that the personal experience of many of the most vocal education "reformers" whose initiatives, financial resources, and bully pulpits are crafting policy for K-12 education in the United States have no valid reference point in the realities of the public school experience for both students and their teachers and administrators.

What's missing in the current rhetoric of the "reform" agenda is a nuanced perspective of the dynamics at play in community-based public schools and a respect for the professionals who devote careers to meeting the needs of diverse student populations while operating under policies and regulations over which they have little or no control. Some of what the "reformers" assert is accurate: The strongest teachers don't work in our poorest communities, not all K-12 students are held to high standards, few of our top university students choose teaching as a career, and many teacher-preparation institutions don't provide the rigor or experiences to produce skilled classroom practitioners.

A closer examination of these and other realities could help us work toward solutions rather than choose the route of demeaning and blaming educators and establishing policies that work around the current public schools (e.g., charter schools, private school vouchers, and alternative certification for teachers).

First, public schools in the United States are required by law to serve and educate every student within the community the school district serves. Further, more than 80 percent of the funding for local school districts is derived from local property or other local taxing sources. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that small, poor, or rural communities have fewer resources to educate the children within their boundaries. The federal government attempts to provide equitable funding for those communities; however, the funding provided doesn't totally make up for the shortfall (not even for programs mandated by federal law), and the compliance paperwork for use of federal funds drains staffing resources from the classroom to the much-maligned central office. Communities with fewer local financial resources are frequently "poor" in community support for education in general. It should be no surprise that teachers who have a genuine love of learning and commitment to student success find the difficult working conditions in communities with multiple challenges and few financial resources undesirable.

Another phenomenon that has challenged the success of urban public schools is that, in many of our cities, the middle class has abandoned the public school system by sending its children to private schools to ensure they sit in classes with students from the same—or higher—socioeconomic class. When the middle class leaves the public schools, poor and disadvantaged children lose the dynamic of interacting with children from different backgrounds from whom they can also learn; ironically, the same is true for those affluent children carted off to expensive private academies (where many of our "reformers" received their privileged, if narrow, preparation for life).

In addition, the assertion that the teaching profession doesn't attract our top students could be examined from many levels, but it's hard to see why we're surprised by this phenomenon. Public educators at all levels are maligned on a daily basis by our "reformer" friends and the general press. Working conditions

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are challenging and don't begin to compare to conditions for other professionals who are expected to have advanced degrees. It has become popular to charge that educator benefits, including pension funds, are bankrupting state coffers. Furthermore, the very certification requirements that so many critics decry are the result of state policies over which teacher-preparation institutions and teachers themselves have no control. If teacher-certification requirements are inadequate, then state policymakers should work thoughtfully to update or abolish them. If charter schools that don't have to follow state and local policies and procedures work better (some do; some don't), then those in power should change policies so all schools can be freed up to innovate.

Most importantly, we should move the conversation with leaders, from both privileged private school and successful public school backgrounds, to a platform of mutual respect that focuses the discussion on solutions that will help all our children succeed and support the educators who work with them so they will also be successful.

In the end, we're all responsible for building and sustaining the best educational experience possible for all our children. To the extent we continue to polarize the debate, with privileged powerbrokers dictating investments and practices designed to circumvent the professionals now working in the field, we're doomed to failure. Improving the public education system in the United States so that it serves all our students is too important to let that happen.

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