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Why Bipartisanship Isn't Working for Education Reform

By Amy Stuart Well

It's not surprising that President Barack Obama focused heavily on both bipartisanship and education in his State of the Union address Tuesday night. Despite recent calls for civility following the shootings in Tucson, members of both parties in the divided 112th Congress have their gloves off on health care and immigration policy, with more contentious battles in the queue. Education reform, on the other hand, is one of the few policy areas in which we have seen growing political consensus. This has been good for the tenor of debate on Capitol Hill, but less so for the children in our public schools.

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Since 1989, when President George H.W. Bush and the nation's governors (including Bill Clinton) held a national summit on educational goals and standards, the two major political parties have inched closer to agreement on K-12 education policy. Democratic lawmakers such as the late Sen. Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts and Rep. George

Miller of California worked closely with President George W. Bush to pass the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which required states to regularly test students on their mastery of academic standards.

Today, it is often difficult to distinguish Republicans from Democrats on key education issues. President Obama's signature Race to the Top program, which promotes charter schools, state tests, and tough-love accountability for educators, might just as well have been proposed by a Republican president. While Democrats and Republicans may disagree on the level of federal education funding they continue to move toward each other on what to do with those funds. In fact, as an article in *Education Week* recently suggested, there is more fighting *within* than *between* the two major parties on education reform these days. ("[White House Expected to Mount Fresh ESEA Effort](#)," Jan. 19, 2011.)

While it is a difficult moment to not support greater agreement across our political parties, the reality is that this increasing bipartisanship in education reform is not working for our students. In fact, the most agreed-upon solutions—testing, privatization, deregulation, stringent accountability systems, and placement of blame on unions for all that is wrong—are doing more harm than good. Achievement overall has not improved, and the gap between the privileged and the disadvantaged has widened. Parents across the country are fed up with the stress and boredom their children feel in schools that are driven by tests and competition. Internationally, countries with better safety nets to support children's well-being are leaving us in the dust. As President Obama noted, while the United States once led the world in education, we are now falling rapidly behind.

Despite this bad news, there appears to be no dramatic change of course on the political horizon, no healthy debate on the bipartisan agenda. Indeed, consensus on bad ideas in education has become much like a naked emperor—no one wants to break from the ranks and state a bold vision.

This shift toward the consensual political center on education reform has signaled a more dramatic shift for the Democrats than the Republicans—and it is the Democrats who must ultimately reclaim a more progressive agenda. The current bipartisan reforms and the competitive, market-based ideology that underlies them have subverted what have traditionally been the goals of the Democratic Party: strong support for public schools and for expanding educational access and opportunities for groups historically denied both. The same Democrats who fight Republican efforts to privatize Social Security and Medicare have been cajoled into supporting free-market education reforms that would have made their predecessors cringe.

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The political muddle in the partisan right-of-middle began in education with the reasonable quest to hold schools accountable for public funds—about \$500 billion in federal, state, and local money in 2010. That notion, however, when combined with free-market worship, has translated into a set of policies that places enormous pressure on students and educators to perform. It has laid much blame on the doorstep of teachers' unions and tenure systems while letting testing companies and charter school management organizations—which reap the greatest economic benefit from free-market reforms—virtually off the hook.

The problem, in other words, is not with accountability or school choice policies such as charter schools per se, but rather the free-market doctrine, which has defined conservative American politics since Ronald Reagan. This thinking about schools and children has shifted the focus away from improving how students learn and how schools are organized toward facilitating wide profit margins for large testing corporations and educational entrepreneurs. Meanwhile, the gap between the rich and the poor that continues to grow in our market-driven society is profoundly affecting all public institutions, especially our schools. The need for public policies that compensate for growing inequality has never been greater or further from the radar screen.

According to the Government Accountability Office, states now spend five and six times more on tests than they did before No Child Left Behind was enacted. The vast majority of these funds—more than 90 percent in some cases—goes to private testing companies. And because simple, multiple-choice exams are cheaper to administer and grade, states are pressured both by the testing companies and their shrinking budgets to go that route. Thus, fewer exams require students to write or tackle complex problems, limiting both the content and complexity of what our children are taught in preparation for these exams, which are increasingly high-stakes for educators and students.

Nearly 20 years ago, Democrats lost the partisan battle for policies to hold society accountable for assuring students have the “opportunity to learn” before being tested. Now, standardized tests dictate whether students will move to the next grade or graduate and may soon determine what teachers will be paid and whether they will keep their jobs. We don't care how poor or overwhelmed the children or their teachers are. No one will touch this issue, no matter how critical it is to understanding our educational outcomes.

The charter school movement, despite its potential, also falls short of its potential because it is dominated by those who support it for its money-making possibilities. In fact, research indicates the range of charter school quality is huge—even wider than that of the regular public schools—because the sector is so deregulated and vulnerable to those who seek to profit from the per-pupil funding they receive. Even the pro-charter-school movie “Waiting for ‘Superman’” states that only one in five charter schools is “successful.” (In reality, the actual figure is slightly lower.)

So why have we put so much bipartisan hope into these schools? The “Superman” producer Leslie Chilcott admitted at a private screening of the film, which I attended, that there are many good public schools that could have been featured in the movie, but they lacked the drama that an admissions lottery holds. This is how “liberal” Hollywood filmmakers inadvertently feed a common sense that any and all charter schools are the answer for all poor students, despite mounds of evidence to the contrary.

Fortunately, a growing number of parents are fighting back against the bipartisan consensus on the role of market forces in public education. Through community organizations, including Concerned Advocates for Public Education ([CAPEducation](#)) and Parents United for Responsible Education ([PURE](#)), and the Facebook site Parents for Learning, not Testing. Parents are telling policymakers their children's value must not be reduced to a test score or per-pupil funding allotment. Students need to spend less time racing to the top and trying to win long-shot lotteries and more time learning how to become good citizens, workers in the 21st century, and parents.

During the civil rights era, the Democratic Party stood for supporting strong public schools and expanding access to those schools for students who had been denied educational opportunities. Not coincidentally, the black-white achievement gap closed more rapidly during this era than at any time since.

Over the past 30 years, such policies have lost favor in an effort to create a more competitive, market-driven system. While these policies of yesteryear need to be revamped, revised, and adapted to the present moment, it's time for the Democrats in Congress and President Obama to regain their moral footing and embrace the goals of a more equal society. The state of our union suggests we would all benefit from a bit of civil, partisan squabbling by progressive Democrats driven by a vision of a more just, caring, and equal public education system.

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