

Reframing the Education Debate

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After two years, it has become clear that the education policies pursued by the Obama administration too closely resemble those of the Bush administration. They are leading us in the wrong direction and not producing the changes we need.

The vast number of parents and children throughout the country who rely on public schools are a natural constituency for the Democratic Party. So, too, are the 2.1 million teachers and administrators who draw their livelihoods from public education. Both groups are more likely to understand and support the need to direct public dollars not only to education but to healthcare and social welfare. They are also less likely to embrace the intolerance and fiscal conservatism of the Tea Party and the GOP right wing.

One lesson Obama should draw from his party's drubbing in the midterm elections is that this constituency is frustrated with his leadership on education. Increasingly, public school students and parents are unenthusiastic about the administration's reliance on high-stakes testing and its embrace of market-oriented reform strategies—performance pay for teachers, charter schools, etc. And many teachers have been alienated by the overt hostility toward their unions expressed by Education Secretary Arne Duncan and a growing number of Democratic politicians.

The defeat of Washington Mayor Adrian Fenty should serve as a lesson. Fenty's re-election race was in many ways a referendum on the performance of his controversial schools chancellor, Michelle Rhee, an outspoken advocate of the narrow reforms supported by the Obama administration. Even though some of what Rhee tried to accomplish made sense (reducing the number of highly paid administrators, for example, and holding principals accountable for school performance), Fenty's loss shows that those who rely on public schools can insist that change be made *with* rather than *to* them.

Instead of waiting for this administration to recognize that it should head in a new

direction, those of us who know the importance of public education must initiate a campaign to defend and improve it. We need to organize parents, teachers unions, school board members and others around a reform agenda that calls for protecting public education while also calling for its renewal.

For more than two years, a group of educators, policy advocates and scholars have called for a "broader and bolder approach to education" (boldapproach.org ^[1]). The campaign advocates universal child access to healthcare and early childhood education and extending learning opportunities into the summer. Similarly, several civil rights organizations and advocacy groups have embraced an "opportunity to learn" agenda, focused on reducing inequities in funding among schools and helping schools create conditions conducive to learning and healthy child development. Others, such as the Forum for Education and Democracy, Educators for Social Justice and Parents for Public Schools, have advocated a shift in focus away from test preparation and toward an expansion of learning opportunities that foster self-motivation and higher-order thinking.

Ironically, it may be easier to gain traction on some aspects of a new policy agenda in a Republican-dominated House than it was when Democrats held the majority. On education policy, Republicans are divided into three camps: those who support the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind, those who regard NCLB as an overreach of federal authority and want to see it repealed, and those on the far right who would like to see the Education Department abolished. With such significant differences among Republicans, pulling together enough votes to launch a new wave of reform or to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act appears unlikely. It will also be more difficult for the administration to get permission to use stimulus funds to continue pursuing its narrow agenda.

In the vacuum created by divided government, it may be possible to jump-start a serious discussion about changing policy. But to make the most of this opportunity, those who support public education must be organized enough to present a clear alternative and savvy enough to avoid the pitfalls of the polarizing issues that often divide us. Parents and educators must recognize their mutual interest in a well-rounded, balanced education that includes academic rigor in science and math but also has room for art, music and physical education. Most people want an education that cultivates critical thinking and all children's natural curiosity. They also want practical schools that prepare students for college and work. Our schools should offer both. There are many schools where such progressive and practical goals are aligned. Schools like High Tech High School in San Diego and University Park Campus School in Worcester, Massachusetts, demonstrate that high standards are not incompatible with nourishing intellectual curiosity.

It's up to parents and educators to hold politicians accountable for fair school funding, adequate facilities and reasonable class size. Complex and controversial issues like

charter schools, teacher tenure and linking teacher pay to student test scores shouldn't be framed as either/or propositions. Reasonable compromises on these issues have been made by unions and school districts in a number of cities (e.g., Baltimore, New Haven, Denver, Newark), and there is no reason that a balanced, broad-based reform agenda could not be asserted at a national level.

A campaign for support and change in public education can be successful, but it will take work to bring a progressive vision from the margins to the center of political discourse. Powerful private foundations support the administration's policies, and they have been behind efforts to privatize schools in cities like New Orleans, Detroit and Washington. Still, there is good reason to believe that they can be successfully opposed.

Forcing a change in education policy and in our flawed but indispensable public schools, the only institutions that serve all children regardless of background, will be difficult and complicated—but it can be done. It will require the broad but disorganized popular base, which understands the importance of public education, to organize. The need for such an effort is clear. What is not clear is whether those who have the most at stake can muster the will to make it happen.

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[1] <http://boldapproach.org>