

## Where's the 'collective action' in Obama education policy?

By Valerie Strauss , Updated: January 22, 2013

President Obama's second term now officially begins, and in [his inaugural address](#) he spoke about the need for "collective action" to solve America's problems. Here's an argument that his own education policies have violated that principle, with suggestions on what he can do to remedy that. This was written by Arthur H. Camins, director of the Center for Innovation in Engineering and Science Education at the Stevens Institute of Technology in New Jersey.

By Arthur H. Camins

In his 2013 Inaugural [Address](#), President Obama issued a call for "collective action," arguing forcefully that we cannot "meet the demands of today's world" by acting alone. "Now, more than ever," he said, "we must do these things together, as one nation, and one people." But, this is not the philosophy that guides education policy today. Bill Clinton nailed the policy choice starkly [in his speech](#) at the Democratic National Convention in August. He said, "You see, we believe that *we're all in this together* is a far better philosophy *than you're on your own.*"

This frames current education debate because most of the solutions being promulgated by the U.S. Department of Education and their corporate partners are about the latter.... being on your own.

As the number of charter schools increase and regular public schools close, parents are on their own to "choose" a school for their children. In fact, they are competitors with other parents on an inequitable playing field. With differential knowledge, time and resources and continued variation in school quality, some will win and some will lose.

As teachers compete for merit bonuses, they are forced to be on their own. Teachers will need to look out for their own job security and compensation with respect to whether the students they teach will influence their test-based evaluation ratings. They will also need to decide whether to work collaboratively to support colleagues with whom they are competing for [merit pay](#), so that all become more effective teachers, or just look out for their own interests. Schools and districts are on their own as they compete for limited federal, state and private grant funds, just to do what's best by every student.

To counter the political power and millions of dollars behind the *you're on your own* strategy, we need a *we're in this together* appeal to every educator and parent – no, every citizen – who understands that we are interdependent and that we need each other for each of us to be successful. While there is a strong, deeply engrained, individualist strand in our culture, there is

also a strong sense of mutual responsibility. It emerged in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, as it does every time there is a natural disaster. I think we feel and do far better as individuals and as a nation when we help each other than when we are scrambling over each other for our own share. There is no evidence that making parents compete for slots in schools, teacher compete for merit pay increases, or schools compete for students, makes for better education for all children.

We need to shift the [conversation about educational improvement](#) from *you're on your own* to *we are all in this together* solutions. A starting point is to get past blame, assume positive intentions and accept that everyone wants to do their best. To do so, we need community conversations in which we – educators, parents, and students – ask one another two questions:

1) “When do you persist to do your best?” We need to ask this because persistence is the key to both sustainable learning and to improvement. Improvement means changing what we believe and understand and changing behavior. This is an iterative enterprise that requires a willingness to engage and persist in the face of setback and resistance.

2) “What kind of experience do you want for children in school?” Clearly opposition to [testing](#) and privatization, however strongly grounded in evidence, is not a sufficient answer. The starting point for opposition is a common understanding and commitment to the goals and values we want for children.

As it turns out, the conditions for teachers and students to do their best are remarkably similar. And, in reality most educators are not just employees but will be or have been parents of school children.

I think parents, students and educators will all agree that they do their best when they:

- are noticed, known, respected and cared for as individuals and are accepted as a valuable member of the school community;
  - learn the knowledge, skills, habits and attitudes for success at work and in relationships with other people;
  - are challenged and supported to work hard and persist even in the face of difficulty and disappointment; and when they are
  - supported to develop self-confidence in multiple areas of knowledge and performance.
- We are not where we want or need to be for too many kids ... not even close. Many have outlined common sense strategies for improvement. I'll highlight some of them below, but since they are not new, what is important is their framing.

*We're all in this together, so we should:*

- 1) Provide support services to children and their families so that all children come to school ready to learn everyday;
- 2) Make a supported full year of supervised clinical practice with recognized highly effective practitioners a regular part of teacher preparation, just like it is for doctors;
- 3) Provide time in every teachers' day for reflection and professional growth with colleagues

and experts;

- 4) Provide avenues for professional advancement for teachers so that they do not have to leave the classroom to advance their careers;
- 5) Provide incentives for school systems to make economic and racial diversity in every classroom a high priority;
- 6) Transform the culture of schools and districts from bureaucracies to learning organizations, in which non-defensive self-examination is the norm.
- 7) Shift the emphasis in assessment from summative consequential testing of students to diagnostic and formative use of daily student work;
- 8) Ensure that social and emotional growth and the arts have a high priority in the school day alongside literacy, mathematics, science, and social studies.

The *you're on your own* promoters have been successful, at least in part, because they have effectively controlled the framing and language of the debate. They've used resonant phrases such as, No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top and built on common notions like rewarding performance to advance their goals. Could Clinton's framing- *You're not on your own, we're in this together*- be the clarion call for a different, inclusive education agenda?

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