

The Change We Need: The Achievement Gap and the Future of Education Policy in the Obama Administration¹

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No Child Left Behind, the Achievement Gap, and the New Discourse on Race and Achievement

No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the far-reaching education reform law enacted in 2002 under President George W. Bush, with the notable bipartisan support of Democrats Senator Ted Kennedy and Congressman George Miller, significantly expanded the role of the federal government in public education. Prior to NCLB, the federal role in education was limited largely to civil rights enforcement and ensuring compliance with various federal policies, most important among these being the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Title I), which significantly increased federal funding for children in poverty. However, unlike past initiatives that required states, and by extension school districts, to demonstrate compliance with federal mandates, NCLB required states to establish academic standards and to use standardized test scores as a means of holding schools accountable. As a result of these measures, and NCLB's requirement that schools disaggregate test scores by subgroups (e.g., race, language, income, etc.), the law drew attention to the achievement gap and exposed the glaring and profound inequities in American society that are reflected in and, more often than not, exacerbated by the American educational system.

Of course, drawing attention to a problem is not the same as solving it, and NCLB has done very little to provide schools with the guidance, support, or resources needed to actually address the achievement gap (Hanushek, 2003). Seven years after the enactment of this law, it is clear that it will take more than standards, pressure, or public humiliation to close the achievement gap or get schools to improve. Nonetheless, these have been the primary tactics employed by NCLB. For that reason alone, it could be argued that although NCLB may have taken the nation a step forward by holding schools accountable for student achievement, it also took schools backwards because it distorted our understandings of achievement, limited measures of learning to how well students performed on standardized tests, and provided schools with little guidance or

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resources to address the problem it identified. More importantly, the sanctions and penalties included within NCLB have done little to ameliorate the chronic problems and shortcomings present within a significant number of schools serving high-need student populations. Although some districts have shown progress in raising achievement, the clearest sign that NCLB has not worked is disturbingly evident: in most large urban school districts across the country, dropout rates exceed 50% (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2006; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007). Moreover, it continues to be the case that in most areas where poor children are concentrated, the funding allocated to support education continues to be considerably less than the amounts provided in affluent communities, and more often than not, the quality of education provided is often quite poor (Cowley & Mehan, 2003).

A growing number of scholars have argued that the pervasive achievement gap in American schools is largely a manifestation of broader patterns of inequality in American society, or what Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) has referred to as America's "educational debt." Throughout American history, poor children have been short-changed with respect to the educational opportunities available to them, both because of a history of racial segregation and exclusion and because, in many American schools, disadvantaged children are frequently denied the opportunity to learn. Despite all the changes that advocates of NCLB claimed it would achieve, seven years after its enactment it is clear that many children are still being left behind.

For civil rights activists and promoters of educational equity, the dismal panorama of American education is a major disappointment. Following the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, many were hopeful that the pursuit of integration might do more than merely mix children from different racial backgrounds in the nation's public schools. The goal for Thurgood Marshall and the advocates from the NAACP was to use integration as a means to extend and to begin equalizing educational opportunities. However, furthering civil rights through educational equity has remained an elusive goal. The release of the Coleman Report in 1966, with its suggestion that children's backgrounds had greater bearing on their academic outcomes than the quality of schools they attended, had the effect of undermining the push toward greater equity in education. In subsequent years efforts to advance equal opportunity through education have in many cases been undermined by those who continue to rationalize lower rates of achievement on the basis of genetic and cultural characteristics (McWhorter, 2000; Ogbu 1987).

In identifying the achievement gap as a problem that could be solved, and framing it as one that schools have a moral imperative to address, NCLB forced American schools to confront an issue that has long been ignored throughout much of American history. The achievement gap is not new; disparities in student

achievement that correspond to the racial, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds of children have been common to American public schools for years (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Miller, 1995). What is new is the idea—and the policy adopted by the federal government—that the achievement gap can be closed and that schools should be held responsible for making it happen. NCLB made it clear that schools would be held accountable for producing evidence that all students, regardless of their race, language, income, or other status, were learning. In his presidential nomination acceptance speech George Bush (2000) himself challenged schools by calling upon them to “end the soft bigotry of low expectations.” Even if it is not clear that Bush actually understood the significance of this slogan, such rhetoric and, more importantly, the mandates that accompanied it had enormous impact on thinking about schools and their role in promoting racial equality.

Acknowledging the impact that the Bush administration had upon educational policies and practices should not be interpreted as an endorsement of its overall approach to reforming public education. Under the Bush administration, privatization efforts aimed largely at dismantling public education gained enormous credibility and momentum. Worse still, in its efforts to control how poor children were being educated, the administration deliberately supported the profiteering of several private corporations in the testing and text book industries under the guise that those entities were offering “research-based” approaches to educating children that were superior to others. Nonetheless, NCLB has succeeded in holding schools accountable for student achievement and in generating interest in finding ways to insure that all students are learning. Even the fiercest critics of the Bush administration must acknowledge this as a significant step forward.

Undoing an Ugly Legacy: Race and Achievement in American History

In response to NCLB, a sense of urgency has developed around the need to improve the educational outcomes of underperforming students. In many communities, this has resulted in greater focus and attention being placed on the need for strategies to improve academic achievement among children who have traditionally not done well in school—namely, poor and disadvantaged children; students with learning disabilities; recent immigrants and English-as-a-second-language learners; and, in many communities, African Americans, Latinos, and other students of color (Miller, 1995). Those familiar with American history, and the history of American education in particular, will undoubtedly be struck by the irony and significance of the current national preoccupation with closing the

racial achievement gap. Racial gaps in achievement, attainment, and measures of intellectual ability are by no means new. Throughout most of American history, racial disparities in educational achievement and performance were attributed to innate genetic differences between population groups. Prior to the civil rights era, much of American law and public policy that addressed matters related to race was premised on the notion that racial differences were immutable. The inherent superiority of Whites over non-Whites was regarded widely as a “natural” phenomenon (Fredrickson, 1981), and intelligence was regarded as an innate human property rooted in the particular genetic endowments of individuals and groups (Duster, 2003). In such an ideological context, altering patterns of academic achievement was not regarded as feasible or even desirable.

Given this history, the fact that federal educational policy has made closing the achievement gap a national priority, is a step forward. Though policymakers have not characterized efforts to eliminate racial disparities in student achievement as a repudiation of views on race that prevailed in the recent past, in many ways it is. Educators at the center of these efforts are often forced to confront views and assumptions about the relationship between race and intellectual ability that remain rooted in the biases of the not-so-distant past. Unfortunately, the notion that children of color are not as intelligent or capable as White children continues to find adherents among a broad cross section of the American public (Hacker, 1992), including among some of the educators charged with solving this problem.

Throughout most of the 19th and 20th centuries beliefs about the relationship between race and intelligence held that non-Whites, specifically Blacks, Native Americans, Hispanics, and even some Eastern Europeans, possessed lower levels of intellectual capacity than Caucasians, particularly those that originated in the countries of Northwestern Europe (Gould, 1981). Such views about the relationship between race and intelligence had considerable influence on social science research, psychology, and education (Lehman, 1996). Although less overtly pernicious, these views were consistent with beliefs about race held by previous generations that rationalized slavery, genocide, imperial aggression, Manifest Destiny, and Jim Crow segregation (Fredrickson, 1981; Zinn, 1980).

Early in the 20th century, advocates of eugenics—the so-called science of genetic engineering—propagated the notion that groups and individuals with superior intellect and physical ability should be encouraged to procreate to strengthen the national gene pool, while inferior groups should be actively discouraged and even prevented from reproducing their progeny (Duster, 2003). Given the dominance of these views, it is not surprising that some eugenicists became leaders in the effort to devise tests for measuring intelligence (Lehman, 1996). The leaders of the early testing movement sought to ensure that

intelligence tests and examinations such as the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) would be seen as providing an objective measure of talent and ability. They also pushed for the results from standardized tests to be used to determine who should be recruited for top occupations and for enrollment at elite universities (Fischer et al., 1996).

The history of beliefs about the relationship between race and intelligence in the United States is relevant to current efforts aimed at closing the achievement gap. Although it is increasingly regarded as politically incorrect to attribute differences in achievement to genetic differences between racial groups, it is important to remember that Herrnstein and Murray's (1994) tome, *The Bell Curve*, made precisely that point—and that it received a mix of condemnation and acclaim at the time of its release (Fischer et al., 1996). Such views have been prevalent in American society for many years, even though they have never been supported by research on genetics or advanced by scientists engaged in research linking human biology to intelligence.

For example, even though neither of the authors of *The Bell Curve* studied genetics (Herrnstein was a psychologist and Murray is a political scientist), their lack of knowledge about genetics did not stop them or others from making arguments about the genetic basis of intellectual ability or the inferiority of racial minorities. Not long ago, former Harvard University President Lawrence Summers (currently serving as President Obama's national economic advisor) suggested that one of the reasons why women were not well represented in mathematics and science-related fields was due to innate differences in intellectual ability (Bombardi, 2005). Though his remarks generated so much controversy that he was eventually forced to resign, we can be sure that if the president of Harvard University, an economist by training, felt comfortable making remarks about the genetic basis of intelligence, it would not be a stretch of logic to conclude that similar views about the relationship between race, gender, and innate ability continue to be widely held throughout American society.

While it is increasingly less common for arguments about the genetic inferiority of minority groups to be made in public, it would be a mistake to suggest that these assumptions have disappeared entirely. In their place, arguments that attribute differences in achievement to differences in broad and undefined notions of culture (McWhorter, 2000; Ogbu, 1987), parental influences (Epstein, 1994) and even rap music (Ferguson, 2002) have been used to serve a similar purpose: rationalizing the lower rates of achievement among Black and Latino students as the result of problems that some claim are inherent to these groups. Unlike biology, culture has been embraced as a less politically distasteful explanation, in part because it is assumed that cultures are not immutable but can be changed over time.

Among those advocating this perspective are scholars such as anthropologist John Ogbu who has argued that non-voluntary minorities—that is, members of groups that were incorporated into the United States through conquest, slavery, or force (i.e., Native Americans, African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Mexican Americans)—consistently do less well in school because they adopt an “oppositional culture” in relation to schooling (Ogbu, 1987; Ogbu & Davis, 2003). According to Ogbu, non-voluntary minorities often regard schooling as a form of forced assimilation and, as a result, they are less likely to embrace the behaviors that contribute to school success (e.g., obeying school rules, studying for examinations, speaking Standard English, etc.). Ogbu’s views have been embraced by many scholars as an effective way to explain why many “voluntary” immigrant minorities (especially Asian Americans) do well in school while many non-voluntary minorities do not.

Similarly, linguist John McWhorter (2000) has attributed the lower achievement of many African American students to a “cult of anti-intellectualism” (p. 127), while former English professor Shelby Steele (1996) has attributed it to what he calls *victimology*: the tendency on the part of Blacks to blame the White man for their problems. McWhorter contends that this victimology “stems from a lethal combination of this inherited inferiority complex with the privilege of dressing down the former oppressor” and adds that it “condones weakness and failure” (p. 28). Others such as sociologist Orlando Patterson (2006) and journalist Juan Williams (2007) have cited the culture of *gangsta rap*, with its emphasis on *bling* (flashy jewelry), violence, and disdain for hard work, as producing a culture of failure among African American students. Finally, others such as Ruby Payne (2005), whose work has been embraced by a number of school districts nationwide, have cited a “culture of poverty” as one of the reasons why poor children of all races often fail to perform well in school (p. 58). Such theories draw on the work of anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1966), who coined the term “culture of poverty” and who argued that intergenerational poverty among Puerto Ricans was the result of the poor embracing norms that perpetuate poverty (e.g. teen pregnancy, substance abuse, etc.).

Cultural explanations of the achievement gap such as those articulated by Ogbu, Payne, and McWhorter have been widely embraced by researchers, policymakers, and educators (Noguera, 2003). Though such explanations of academic performance fail to account for those who deviate from established patterns—for example, poor Black students who excel, and middle-class White and Asian American students who struggle academically—these theories continue to be embraced by a broad spectrum of researchers and practitioners. A recent article in the *New York Times Magazine* (Tough, 2006) framed the cultural argument in this way: “Kids from poor families might be nicer, they might be happier, they might be more polite—but in countless ways, the manner in which

they are raised puts them at a disadvantage in the measures that count in contemporary American society” (p. 28). Recognizing how difficult it will be to achieve the goals of NCLB if cultural differences are at the root of the achievement gap, the article goes on to pose an intriguing question: “Can the culture of child-rearing be changed in poor neighborhoods, and if so, is that a project that government or community organizations have the ability, or the right, to take on?” (p. 29).

In debates with proponents of these cultural arguments, I have often pointed out that culture cannot explain the high percentage of Asian American students at schools such as Galileo High School in San Francisco or Richmond High School in Richmond, California, who drop out of school; nor, conversely, can they explain the high percentage of low-income African American students at schools such as Fredrick Douglass Academy or Medgar Evers Middle College High School in New York City who excel. Close examination of achievement patterns at these schools reveals that it is conditions within these schools—and the ability of the educators to create an environment where students do not believe that their racial identities determine their academic ability—that play a major role in shaping academic outcomes.

This does not mean that cultural influences are irrelevant to student achievement. At an aggregate level, Asian American students do outperform other groups in mathematics, White students do achieve at higher levels than Black and Latino students, and middle-class children generally outperform poor children (Farkas, 2004; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). Individual exceptions exist, but the patterns cited are fairly consistent (Ferguson, 2007). To some degree, these patterns may be attributed, in part, to characteristics loosely associated with culture. However, in order to be helpful in finding ways to ameliorate or, at least, to reduce disparities in achievement, the specific aspects of culture that seem to be most influential must be identified.

For example, certain child-rearing practices such as parents reading to children during infancy or posing questions, rather than issuing demands, when speaking to children are associated with the development of intellectual traits that contribute to school success (Rothstein, 2004). Similarly, parental expectations about grades, homework, and the use of recreational time have been shown to influence adolescent behavior and academic performance (Ferguson, 2007). In his research at the University of California, Uri Treisman (1992) found that many Asian American students studied in groups and helped one another to excel while reinforcing norms that contribute to the importance of academic success. In contrast, the African American students Treisman studied were more likely to socialize together but study alone. Whether or not such behaviors can be attributed to culture can be debated, but clearly identifying specific behaviors that

seem to influence academic achievement positively is more helpful than making broad generalizations about “oppositional” and “anti-intellectual” cultures.

Even when behaviors that appear rooted in culture are identified, educators must be careful about relying on cultural explanations to guide their thinking about academic achievement. Such thinking often has the effect of reinforcing inaccurate stereotypes because it fails to account for the high degree of diversity within racial groups. Differences related to socioeconomic status and income, the educational background of parents, the kind of neighborhood a student lives in, and, most importantly, the quality of the school a student attends, significantly affect student achievement (Miller, 1995; Noguera, 2003). Such factors influence the academic performance of all students, but because of the tendency to overemphasize the influence of culture on the performance of racial groups, they often are ignored. A number of White students do poorly in school (Jencks & Phillips, 1998), but substantially less attention is paid to this problem than to the issues facing minority students. Academic failure among White students, like the existence of poverty among White people in the United States, is a phenomenon that often is rendered invisible due to the high degree of emphasis placed on race in many aspects of American social policy. It is rare indeed to hear “the experts” cite culture as an explanation for why some White students do poorly in school.

It is hard to imagine how schools in the United States might go about changing the culture of individuals who seem to embrace attitudes and norms that undermine possibilities for academic success. It is far more sensible to focus on factors that can actually be controlled such as poverty and racial segregation, equalizing funding between middle-class and poor schools, lowering class size, and ensuring that qualified and competent teachers are hired. These are all factors that research has shown can have a positive effect on student achievement (Noguera, 2003), and none of them involves trying to figure out how to change a person’s culture.

The fact that the effort to close the gap in academic achievement is now at the top of the nation’s educational agenda is a significant and historic departure from the past. It suggests that prevailing beliefs about race in the United States may have shifted dramatically away from the assumption that differences in intellectual ability are rooted in one’s genes toward an assumption that regards these differences as the product of social experiences. NCLB has placed the onus upon schools to devise ways to boost the achievement of all students regardless of their backgrounds. This is not an endorsement of the educational policies pursued by the Bush administration, but rather an acknowledgment that despite its failure to address the more substantive inequities that plague American education—school funding, the lack of health care for many poor children, and so forth—the Bush administration did use its bully pulpit to change the discourse about what

schools can do. When, at the highest levels of government, public officials espouse the notion that the primary obstacle to higher achievement for children of color is rooted in educational practices and beliefs that limit student performance rather than innate ability, the door may be opened to major changes in the way children are educated.

Yet, seven years after the adoption of NCLB, it is clear that eliminating racial disparities in academic outcomes will require more than an official renunciation of traditional views about the nature of race. Race continues to be implicated in patterns of student achievement in predictable and disturbing ways, and the persistence and pervasiveness of these patterns compels Americans to ask why? It also forces us to reconsider what it might take to alter the longstanding relationship between race and achievement given that so many efforts to alter racial patterns have been unsuccessful.

A New Direction under Obama?

Despite its many promises, it is clear that the Obama administration will not be able to deliver the “change we need” quickly. The problems facing the United States—war, recession, budget deficits, and more—are so vast and complex that it may well take some time before educational issues receive the attention they deserve. It is also clear that we will need more than just money to fix the nation’s schools and address the achievement gap. Although more money is needed in many communities, there is no guarantee that more money alone would generate better results in public education. Over the last 20 years, billions of dollars have been spent in the name of reforming public schools, with little evidence of success in schools that disproportionately serve poor children (Payne, 2008). Even in resource-scarce districts where facilities are crumbling and basic learning supplies are lacking, it is highly unlikely that increased funding alone would produce a change in results. Failure has been endemic in too many schools for too long for the problems to be fixed quickly or easily.

If genuine progress is to be achieved, then what is needed is a complete change in direction. The United States needs a new policy agenda for education that will make it possible for schools to play a central role in ongoing efforts to rebuild the U.S. economy. The Obama administration has been clear about its determination to expand access to high-quality early childhood programs and after-school programs. Throughout his campaign, President Obama also promised to end the federal obsession with using standardized testing as the exclusive tool for evaluating the performance of schools. As the current administration contemplates what else it will do to address the challenges confronting our nation’s schools it must understand that these problems cannot be solved by a few

sweeping reforms or major investments in a few discrete initiatives. New approaches to educating children and managing schools and districts are necessary to bring about the kinds of changes in educational outcomes that the nation so desperately needs.

Even in many affluent suburban districts where resources are less of an issue, racialized patterns of achievement are often deeply entrenched and reinforced by tracking systems that deny children of color access to honors and college track courses (Noguera & Wing, 2008). Despite the federal government's fixation with using test scores as a barometer of progress, several indicators suggest that large numbers of children, including many White and affluent children, are not performing at levels commensurate with children in most other economically advanced nations. In international comparisons of math and science achievement among the world's wealthiest nations, children from the United States consistently rank far lower than children in other nations (Schmidt, 2008). Similarly, in a recent comparative study of the 25 wealthiest nations (Innocenti Research Centre, 2007), UNICEF ranked the U.S. 24th out of 25 on a broad set of indicators related to the well-being of children.

Creating an Equity Agenda

Despite the complexity of the challenges confronting public education, it is clear that the Obama administration cannot afford to put off the task of addressing them indefinitely. Education is implicated in the causes and potential solutions to several major social and economic problems confronting American society. From finding ways to break the cycle of poverty to devising new means to generate employment in cities where the manufacturing sector has collapsed, the Obama administration will need a bold new strategy for reforming public education if the nation is to move forward.

There can be no new future for Detroit if that city's public schools, which presently are in shambles, are not capable of educating a new generation of workers to staff the new industries that will replace the declining auto industry. Likewise, it is highly unlikely that cities like Cleveland, Buffalo, Flint, Gary, and dozens more across America's rust belt can be revived if the shortage of competent high school graduates produced by schools in these communities today is not addressed. The sooner we realize that the distribution of economic rewards in American society is tied to the state of our schools, as Jencks (1972) contends, the sooner we will see that urgent action is needed in the way we go about preparing our disadvantaged children for education and for the workforce.

However, before the Obama administration can proceed with "fixing" the schools, we must be clear about the nature of the problem that must be addressed.

Firstly, we must recognize that our troubles in education are inextricably related to the deep and profound inequality that characterizes most aspects of life in American society. After all, the achievement gap is in many respects nothing more than an educational manifestation of social inequality (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Any serious attempt to reform public education must be based upon a clear understanding of how the policies enacted should interact with other efforts to further equity (e.g., housing, wages, and health care reforms), to create a social safety net for children, and to expand access to opportunity and mobility. This will mean addressing the following three crucial dimensions of inequality in education:

- **Funding**—Our nation’s public schools are characterized by profound disparities in quality and resources because we fund schools largely through local property taxes and we consistently spend more money to educate affluent children than poor children. In states like New York, New Jersey, and Texas, efforts to equalize funding between school districts have been hurt by the recession, budget shortfalls, and political opposition in affluent suburban communities. Additionally, even larger funding disparities exist between and among the states, with Southern states like Mississippi and Louisiana consistently spending far less than wealthy states like New York and Massachusetts to educate children (Rothstein, 2008). If the Obama administration is to have a major impact on public education it must do more to ensure that the effort to set standards for schools and students also includes a commitment that all schools meet basic opportunity-to-learn standards and ensure that all students have access to high-quality learning conditions regardless of where their schools are located. This will mean taking a more active role in ensuring access to qualified teachers, adequate learning facilities and supplies, and a curriculum that prepares students for good-paying, 21st-century jobs.
- **Segregation**—More than 50 years after the *Brown* decision, the United States continues to send its children to schools that are segregated on the basis of race and class (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000). Although commitment to old remedies like school busing to further the goal of racial integration appears to have waned, the Obama administration must do more to make sure that more recent initiatives like charter and magnet schools are not allowed to exacerbate existing patterns of segregation. Many of these new schools have adopted admissions policies that allow them to exclude the neediest children, particularly those with limited proficiency in English and special needs (Wells, 2002). The administration can also further efforts to reduce residential segregation by supporting the development of low-income housing in middle-class communities as a

way to bring about increased integration in schools. Finally, it must engage intermediaries with track records of success in turning around failing schools to improve the quality of schools in high-need areas. The inclusion of high-quality preschool and after-school programs are just some of the enticements that could be used to lure middle-class children to integrated schools.

- **Unmet Needs**—Although one out of five children in the United States are poor and another fifth come from households that are struggling financially (Auerbach & Krimgold 2000), school reform initiatives thus far have largely ignored the nonacademic needs of poor children (e.g., health, nutrition, housing, etc.). A variety of studies have shown that these unmet needs invariably have an impact upon the ability of children to learn in school (Rothstein, 2004). In the name of equity, however, NCLB has been used to hold poor children to the same academic standards as privileged children in affluent school districts, even though the two groups of children are not educated under similar circumstances. Nearly a quarter of poor children do not have access to adequate health care and miss far too many days of school because they are sick (Children’s Defense Fund, 2007). Given that family income and parental education continue to exert powerful influence over student academic outcomes (Jencks & Phillips, 1998), it is not surprising that our nation’s schools rarely serve as a vehicle for poor children to escape poverty. By expanding access to critical social services for students in need, including helping schools to provide such services in communities where no other agencies have stepped up to the plate, the Obama administration can provide support to schools so that they can do a better job of helping children overcome social and economic handicaps.

Additionally, public school systems in many cities across the United States are dysfunctional and not organized to respond effectively to the needs of the children they serve. They are also often the largest employers in many cities, a reality that contributes to the tendency for powerful constituencies that should be concerned about the quality of education to be more focused on controlling contracts for services and jobs within the system. State and federal intervention is needed, for example, in school districts such as St. Louis, Detroit, and Cleveland, where the local school boards have become so mired in political battles that their leaders can no longer function adequately. National leadership by the Obama administration and the teachers' unions is critical to move the conversation about teacher quality beyond a narrow debate over merit pay and job protection to one focused more broadly on how to ensure that teachers receive adequate support and training to meet the academic needs of their students and to ascertain their

effectiveness in the classroom (Cowley & Mehan, 2003). As Elmore (1996) argues, internal accountability must include everyone—administrators, teachers, parents, students, and, most importantly, the politicians who allocate the funds and set the policies under which schools must operate.

Creating Schools for the 21st Century

Under NCLB, schools have become preoccupied with teaching basic skills that can be assessed on standardized tests, and student performance on these tests has served as the basis for how schools are judged. As President Obama observed during his presidential campaign, teaching to the test has become a pervasive and harmful phenomenon. This is especially true in schools that serve poor children, but the distortion of the curriculum has occurred in many schools serving middle-class children as well. In their desire to raise test scores, too many schools have limited students' access to subjects not covered on the tests, including science, social studies, art and music, social skills, leadership training, and character development. It is hardly surprising that students commonly complain that school is boring when the mode of instruction relied upon in most schools consists largely of lecture and test preparation. Thought-provoking literature is in short supply. Students do very little research or writing in school, and the average middle school student is generally more comfortable with technology than the average teacher.

As the Obama administration contemplates what it will do to reform NCLB, it must find a way to restore the proper balance between assessment and instruction to ensure that schools are cultivating students' higher order skills, including creativity, fluency in a second language, and problem solving. These intellectual traits are not easily tested, but they are the kinds of abilities that our society will need most if education is to play a role in expanding opportunity and reviving the sagging economy. The good-paying jobs of the future in health, telecommunications, renewable energy, organic food production, biotechnology, and environmental protection will be more accessible to individuals who have the ability to learn new skills quickly and to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances.

Immigration is unlikely to fade as an issue (Clark, 1998), so the Obama administration must also find ways to ensure that schools can meet the learning needs of documented and undocumented children, especially since the nation's courts consistently have ruled that undocumented children have the right to an education. Additionally, it must attempt to minimize the extent to which those who cross our borders become a permanent underclass trapped in low-wage jobs. As our society is transformed through changing demographics, our public schools will continue to be called upon to help prepare immigrant children to participate

fully in American society. Schools will need resources and support to meet this challenge.

Finally, it will be essential for the new administration to recognize that the fate of the U.S. economy is fundamentally tied to the state of its schools and universities. Recognition of this linkage must compel us to think in new ways about how to address the problems facing public education. A growing number of U.S. industries have come to rely increasingly upon foreign labor, both because it is cheaper and often more skilled for their labor needs (Reich, 2007). Unless this pattern is reversed, large segments of our population will become permanently marginalized.

New thinking about how to reform schools is desperately needed. Our nation cannot afford to repeat past mistakes that not only have been costly, but also have reinforced the notion that improving schools is a hopeless endeavor. Since the 1983 release of the National Commission on Excellence in Education report, *A Nation at Risk*, numerous efforts have aimed at reforming the nation's public schools, but most of these have produced relatively little evidence of improvement. Undoubtedly there are some who believe that the fate of the U.S. economy is not at all tied to the state of our nation's schools; however, whether or not we find ways to improve our schools will determine whether America's disadvantaged youth will be able to reap the fruits of a recovered economy or simply harvest more inequity.

Even if the Obama administration does not take action in the short term, it must recognize that improving education is the best long-term strategy for expanding opportunity and addressing rising unemployment rates. This is especially so in our nation's cities, where the unemployment rates for minority males were high even before the current recession (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). For the federal government to begin using education as part of the strategy for reviving the national economy and addressing the marginalization of communities that have long been denied the ability to participate and share in the benefits of American society, its school reform efforts must include, at minimum, the following:

- A revision of NCLB so that greater emphasis is placed on providing students with access to high-quality instruction and learning environments that support their intellectual development (Rothstein & Noguera, 2009);
- Expansion of access to early childhood, preschool, health care, and after-school programs for poor children to address some of the nonacademic needs that affect their learning and to expand their opportunities to learn (see www.boldapproach.org);
- A concerted effort to recruit highly trained teachers and principals to high-need schools and provide them with extended, site-based mentorship

during the first two or three years of service to increase the likelihood of their success and retention;

- Greater alignment between economic development goals and educational plans related to how schools can prepare students for jobs in the “new economy.”

Examples of the last three initiatives are already evident in a small number of sites across the country. For example, through public-private partnerships the city of Chicago has created over 100 full-service schools that make a variety of social services available to students. Similarly, the Harlem Children’s Zone in New York City, headed by Geoffrey Canada, has provided comprehensive social services to 6,000 poor children. The state of Oklahoma has made sure that the vast majority of its children are enrolled in quality preschools. In the Bay Area of northern California, plans are being developed for a number of “green schools,” whose focus will be on preparing students for jobs in environmental protection. Additionally, a number of innovative career academies at schools across the country currently teach students how to produce animated films, grow organic fruits and vegetables, build robots, and how to start and run small businesses.

More must be done! The challenge for the Obama administration will be to expand efforts like these on a much larger scale and overcome the political obstacles that most assuredly will make implementation of these reforms more difficult.

Clear signs have emerged that the political obstacles to more substantial reform will be significant ones. Most challenging perhaps is the reality that, in many parts of the country and especially in the nation’s urban areas, the middle class has abandoned the public schools and no longer feels it has a role to play in ensuring their viability. Joe Nocera (1990), a regularly featured columnist in the *Wall Street Journal*, made this point bluntly in an article titled “How the Middle Class has Ruined Public Schools.” He argued that without the support of the middle class—the constituency most capable of demanding adherence to academic standards and responsiveness to parents and communities—U.S. school systems frequently experience difficulty raising public funds for education.

Other important political debates that are likely to distract the Obama administration and prevent it from taking on the larger issues confronting the nation’s schools, unless it finds ways to address these issues quickly and effectively, include those surrounding teacher tenure and merit pay. Regarding the first of these, Washington, D.C., public schools chancellor Michelle Rhee has made the elimination of teacher tenure a centerpiece in her reform efforts. Other educational leaders, such as Chancellor Joel Klein in New York, have cited tenure as an obstacle to change and claim that it impedes efforts to remove inept teachers from classrooms. On this point, the teachers’ unions are vulnerable. During

periods of fiscal austerity, tenure policies often result in newer teachers being laid off first under “last hired-first fired” agreements. Moreover, in too many cases, unions feel obligated to defend the due process rights of their colleagues, including paying costly legal fees even when they know that not all of those individuals belong in the classroom. Rhee’s plan to raise teacher salaries substantially if they voluntarily give up tenure may be draconian, but until unions take a leadership role in monitoring the performance of their members and even supporting their removal when necessary, such calls for change are unlikely to go away.

Recently, a number of school districts have flirted with the idea of pegging teacher salaries to changes in student test scores. Advocates of merit pay frequently make an important point that cannot be easily dismissed: teaching is a profession where compensation is not connected to performance, and teacher salaries are not affected either by how hard or how effectively they work. Few other jobs work this way, and although opponents of merit pay may argue that teachers work hard out of a genuine desire to serve their students, the reality is that not every teacher works hard. The idea of providing teachers with incentives for improving their students’ academic performance may seem attractive, but merit pay plans are fraught with problems. Even in districts where merit incentives are based upon value-added measures of student growth, such plans often have the unintended consequence of narrowing curricula to test-preparation tasks only and creating a disincentive for teachers to work with the lowest-achieving students for whom generating an increase on standardized test scores may be most difficult.

Conclusion: The Change We Need

It is important to keep in mind President Obama's prophetic campaign statement that “change doesn’t come *from* Washington—it must come *to* Washington.” The future of public education in the United States has been the subject of fierce ideological debate in recent years. The forces behind NCLB who continue to view testing as the salvation for the nation’s schools, who view merit pay for teachers as the critical issue for improving the quality of instruction students receive, and who see various privatization schemes as the best way to improve the performance of schools, have powerful voices. They remain active in both the Democratic and Republican parties, and they persistently attempt to undermine the Obama administration's commitment to genuine reform. Undoubtedly, their narrow views about what schools and students need will continue to exert considerable influence over policy at the state and local levels.

A broader view of education is needed to achieve success in bringing sustainable reform to public education. This broader view is rooted in recognition that children must be well-fed, healthy, and intellectually challenged and stimulated if they are to thrive and achieve. If the Obama administration's policies are to succeed in reflecting this broader view, they will require the mobilization of grassroots support. Advocates of this broader view must be prepared to organize and advocate for it at the local, state, and national levels to create the schools our children need and deserve.

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