
230 YEARS OF EDUCATIONAL “CRISIS” IN AMERICA

Wisdom and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people, being necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties; and as these depend on spreading the opportunities and advantages of education in the various parts of the country, and among the different orders of the people...[schools should be established] to countenance and inculcate the principles of humanity and general benevolence, public and private charity, industry and frugality, honesty and punctuality in their dealings; sincerity, good-humour, and all social affectations, and generous sentiments among the people.
John Adams. (1780)

Schools of hope are places where children are honored and well-served. They have a number of common characteristics, no matter where they are to be found across the country. They are safe and welcome places, comfortable environments that have a homey feel. They are places where students can work hard without being harassed, but also places where the joy of learning is expressed in the work of the children and in their sense of being part of a convivial learning community. They are places where the teachers and staff are delighted to work and are free to innovate, while at the same time they are willing to take responsibility for their students' achievement. If you look to children in schools like these, they express a pride of place and sense of ownership that are also manifest in how the rest of the community regards the school. Parents feel welcome and often have a role in school governance. Community volunteers are abundant. Hope, projected primarily through the children's learning, is also manifest in how the physical environment of the school is treated with respect.

Herbert Kohl. *The Discipline of Hope: Learning from a Lifetime of Teaching*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998.

The above excerpts come from two points in time on a journey that will never see completion. It is a journey in which all participants (students, teachers, parents, and community members) seek to achieve a perfect end, but can at best hope for some sign of progress in their lifetime. John Adams expressed his ideas of what education should become. Herbert Kohl reflected on what education, in a few isolated instances, has become in the 218 years since Adams' draft. The idealized picture Kohl portrays of a 'School of Hope' goes beyond the prescription given by Adams. Kohl eloquently depicts an environment in which parents, teachers and community members who have likely received the kind of education Adams envisioned, are able to provide that same education to their students. Lamentably, as Kohl points out later in his book, this scenario is not just uncommon, it is exceptional.

Of the various domestic policy issues facing the United States, few succeed in stirring such passionate debate as education. This debate began when the concept of common schooling was introduced into a country younger than any of the children it concerned and it will continue as long as there are children to educate. We live in a society that has, in less than 50 years, achieved such incredible technological advances as landing men on the moon and evolving computers from the size of a football stadium to the size of a postage stamp while increasing their computational power over 10,000 times. Why

is it that in 230 years since the advocacy of common schools we have only achieved a relative handful of 'Schools of Hope' within the entire nation's education system? As with most impassioned debates, the participants generally enter the fray from a specific and personalized perspective which often leaves no room for compromise. Stephen Carter's "demon on the other side" is an accurate characterization of this phenomenon. The result of these battles is more often than not a loss for both sides and specifically for any middle position. It is this middle ground that I will explore in the second half of this article: ground allowing that elements of both have some truth to them; the position that puts education and ultimately students above the debate itself and seeks an outcome most beneficial to them. It would, however, be premature to turn to that without first briefly exploring the current status of some of these debates.

In his introduction to "Children as Pawns: The Politics of Educational Reform" (2002), Timothy Hacs points out that there is virtually unanimous agreement that the nation's schools have problems but that there is also extensive disagreement about the specific diagnoses of the problems. The most notable characteristic shared by each of the major debates on education is its tendency to be politicized. Education is an easy political target because it deals with an issue that is closer to our hearts than almost any other – the future of our children. In some cases, there are valid issues *within* the overall platforms that are directly applicable to schools (e.g. Equal opportunity *to learn*, accommodation for diversity *in learning styles and abilities*). In others, the school has become both scapegoat and proposed cure for the more overarching social dysfunction which cannot be addressed in the classroom without first being addressed in the national culture. "There is no evidence to support the claim that the public school monopoly is a useful mechanism to prevent cultural differentiation..." Mark Holmes (2001). Regardless of the applicability, schools become the battleground. Unfortunately, the political debates boil down to classic politics – charisma, money and spin.

It is this political power of education arguments that have resulted in Federal involvement waxing and waning over time. If the public perception is that schools are failing, the Federal government jumps in with broad sweeping solutions which are generally poorly planned and primarily designed to address symptomatic issues rather than root causes. Once the voting public has bought in to the administration's wonder pill, the issue loses attention to other more pressing agendas. It is in this calm that the proposed solution either dies in congress through lack of funding or fails miserably because of poor implementation and/or lack of follow-up of a plan which was flawed in the first place. All the while, credibility of local districts and teachers is eroded in the eye of the public.

Roles must be reversed. It is the teachers and local districts that should be driving education reform. A solid grass roots initiative with a three-pronged approach – teachers, parents, and community – must be undertaken to make substantial progress on our journey toward Equal Opportunity to Learn, which must be the ultimate goal. What if we had the resources to place the most sophisticated and powerful supercomputer into every classroom to analyze and evaluate the students in that classroom moment by moment? What if we used that data to tailor a learning experience for each student that optimizes her or his Opportunity To Learn? What if we supplemented that classroom effort with a community that surrounds its students wherever they are and partners with the teachers to support what is happening in the classroom? What if, instead of super computers (which I submit, would never be a budgetary possibility) we placed something even more powerful in the rooms with the students? Even the fastest and most complex computer developed to date can not come close to matching the power of the human mind.

I can hear the argument now "Wait a minute! You're talking about teachers! We already have that and it clearly doesn't work." I disagree. As Kohl (1998) pointed out, 'schools of hope' exist. These schools exist in isolated instances scattered across the country and across socioeconomic geographies. They

exist in the midst of mediocrity because of one element – people. They are shining examples of teachers, parents and communities working together in an environment of mutual respect. They exist in spite of rather than because of national and state educational policies and mandates.

Roles must be reversed. Teachers must be held up in our society as one of its most valuable resources. Teachers, parents and community are the elements needed for change, not politics and bureaucracy. In order for this shift to occur, trust has to be placed in teachers to carry out their charge in the classrooms. Teachers with appropriate skills and abilities, however, are not enough in and of themselves to achieve EOTL.

Although I believe teachers are our most valuable resource, I do not believe that they can accomplish what we expect with the support we currently provide. Although adequate compensation for teachers would be a reflection of the community's regard for the profession, this community support must go beyond money. Businesses and families, whether or not they have children in the schools, must recognize their role in providing positive examples to students. They can accomplish this through direct involvement in classrooms or tutoring programs, internships, monetary support and flexibility for parents in the workplace. In this fashion, not only are they demonstrating their respect for the teachers and schools, they are demonstrating their regard for the importance of the children to the community's future as well as the future of our nation.

Global programs are for politics. Community support and involvement is the key. We may have developed computers and improved them to levels that would have been unthinkable just 15 years ago and they may go to levels yet undreamed of, but they will never replace the human mind. We have developed technology to the point of being able to land hardware on distant stars, but our teachers hold the key to send our children's minds beyond the reaches of the universe... and they always have.

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