

AN EDUCATION MANIFESTO

Many of our country's enduring dilemmas are the products of inequalities in power and wealth created by social class, race, culture, and sexism. Challenges exist inside and outside the education system. Although the society has made visible historic progress on many fronts, our nation's most pressing educational problem remains the opportunity gap between the children of the haves and those of the have-nots; this gap has grown with the mounting social inequality of the last 40 years. We believe the schools can and should do much more to make progress in many areas. Yet we recognize that improving schools for the families of the have-nots on any large scale will in the end depend on broader steps toward democracy and equality. In any case, we are unlikely to renew our democracy without a fresh commitment to quality public education.

With this understanding we, as members of the North Dakota Study Group, affirm our beliefs about what quality public education could and should be:

1. Children, from 4 to 18 (and those with disabilities, from 4 to 21) deserve a free, comprehensive, quality education with equal access to resources, regardless of their families' national origin or cultural, religious, racial or economic backgrounds. Education should not be a race with winners and losers, not a competition for scarce resources.
2. Children are active learners, naturally curious about their social and physical environments. In good schools, students are encouraged to imagine, speculate, create, reflect, question, and construct understanding and knowledge, rather than being treated as passive receivers of a standardized curriculum.
3. A quality education includes competence in the skills of reading and writing; knowledge and understanding of mathematics, science, history and social science; knowledge of a foreign language, and broad experience in literature and the arts – as well as development of an appreciation of these areas. In a democracy, education needs to serve civic, cultural and personal as well as economic goals. Elimination or minimization of any of these crucial subjects prevents students from receiving a first class, well-rounded education that will serve them well in later life.
4. Physical and social/psychological health and well being are crucial to students' successful school experience. Schools need to ensure that students have nutritious school meals, daily exercise and, especially in kindergarten and the early grades, periods of play. The responsibility of public education also includes providing tutoring and counseling to struggling students, adjusting the curriculum and instruction for students with special needs and seeing that families in need are informed about available social services.

5. Educational decisions about curriculum and pedagogy should be school- and community- based, made primarily by teachers/educators and parents (those who know the children best). When politicians and the business establishment - who lack relevant knowledge and experience - take control of schooling, the effectiveness of public education is endangered.

6. Teachers, trained professionals responsible for educating the students in their charge, are primarily accountable to their school administration, parents and community. Authentic assessment, central to effective teaching, is ongoing, classroom-based, relevant to the curriculum and in the immediate service of student learning. Summaries of results from multiple methods of assessment (including teacher-made tests and documentation of student learning along with aggregated scores from any tests given) should be reported to the school district. Because standardized testing is often harmful to children, yields relatively little useful information and takes time away from learning, it should be kept to a strict minimum.

7. Teaching is a highly skilled, demanding profession; preparation for effective teaching at all levels requires both academic and professional preparation and practical experience. Beyond the requirement for a certified college degree, there is no single best system of teacher education. Good programs include: subject matter knowledge, child study, substantial, well-supported and supervised classroom experience, as well as opportunities for conversation, reflection and critical thinking.

Good

teacher education is a necessary if not sufficient first step toward creating and maintaining the kind of professionalism our schools need in order to thrive. Evaluation of teacher effectiveness should be done by peers and in-school administrators, based on observation and documentation.

8. The school district is a useful interface between schools and the more remote state and federal authorities. The responsibility of the local district for hiring teachers should be carried out in consultation with schools. District offices also carry responsibility for maintaining safe, clean school buildings and providing schools with food, adequate supplies, materials and equipment; also for providing schools with information, technical support and advising as needed. Local systems are responsible to state authorities for reporting on the academic achievement of students within their districts and for supplying the state with data to do with educational access and equity.

Charter schools, whose operations are largely independent of local authorities, are also required to report results of testing to the state and federal governments. Although there are good, serious and worthwhile charter schools, we stand in general against the current corporate-led

charter school movement that serves the interests of privatization, includes for-profit EMO's (Education Management Organizations) and excludes teacher unions.

9. The interests of the U.S. Department of Education in the overall level of educational achievement in the United States can be met through sample assessments. Statistical sampling of student achievement, the method currently in use by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, is more economical of both time and money than testing each individual student, while still yielding adequate data for the purposes of the federal government. The federal government has an investment in the states' adherence to principles of access and equity, its authority exercised, as it is presently, through financial incentives and legislation. It also has a responsibility to synthesize, summarize and publish national data based on that provided by the individual states. The U.S. Department of Education should not, however, use its influence (as it has been doing under both No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top) to prescribe specific educational methods or solutions on the classroom or school level; it has done this through mandated testing with sanctions applied to schools and now also to teachers. This "one size fits all" approach to educational reform denies the reality and potential benefits of local conditions, opportunities and, most important, the character of individual schools, teachers and students.

10. Education for democracy means practicing democratic values throughout the school system. The exercise of top-down, unresponsive and authoritarian educational administration undermines innovative practices, teacher initiative and school morale. It also contradicts, in actual practice, principles of social justice which we try to instill in our students. Although there is a need for state and local school authorities to keep track of, and oversee, the educational enterprise, their role should be essentially supportive and responsive rather than authoritarian and punitive. Thus the state and local authorities should respond to the expressed needs of schools; schools, in turn, to the needs of teachers, students and families; teachers should respond to the needs of students and families.

Note: This is not a petition. It is a statement of beliefs about education intended to bring people's attention to some of the abuses in our present system; to stimulate thinking, discussion and action. Please circulate this among your friends and enemies.