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Creating the Schools We Need

Pedro A. Noguera

We are in the midst of a major struggle over the future of American education. A new cohort of education “experts” such as New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, former Chancellors Joel Klein and Michelle Rhee, CEOs such as Bill Gates and Eli Broad, and Education Secretary Arne Duncan, have developed plans for “fixing” America’s schools. Though none of these reformers are experienced educators their ideas matter because they have money and power behind them, and consequently, education policies across the U.S. are being shaped by what they believe.

The so-called reformers are not the only ones with ideas or an interest in redesigning American education. Throughout the country educators, often led by their unions, have organized themselves largely in opposition to the mandates issued by the new reformers. Fierce battles are being waged over school governance, merit pay for teachers, high stakes testing, the expansion of charter schools, the closure of “failing” schools, and the content of the curriculum itself. Though not as powerful as the “reformers,” these groups are nonetheless formidable because they represent many of those who do the work in America’s schools.

The stakes are high. The outcome of these struggles will have far reaching impact, not only on schools but on society as a whole. Both sides know that a great deal is at stake, and for this reason the conflict has taken on an intensity not seen in education since the struggles over bussing in the 1970s.

Left in the middle and sometimes on the sidelines, are the parents, students, and communities who stand the most to lose or gain from this conflict. Particularly in the communities where poverty is concentrated and school failure is chronic, these debates are particularly poignant. This middle group has interests that differ from both sides. Unlike the unions, they are more open to change, even radical, far-reaching change, because they have experienced the consequences of years of school failure. They know from experience that in too many schools failure has been normalized, and they know from direct experience that not all teachers or principals are dedicated to seeing their students succeed. However, they are also skeptical of billionaire reformers who make changes on their behalf but without their involvement or input, and who see them as consumers of market-based reform rather than as partners in change and revitalization. Their voices and the concerns have been most often drowned out in the debate over the future of public education.

The parents, students and communities are aware that there are a growing number of high performing, high poverty schools that are proving what decades of social science research could not: poor children of color can excel and thrive intellectually and developmentally when they are in schools that nurture and support them. Some of these are charter schools like Excellence Academy for Young Men in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn and Nuevo Camino in East Los Angeles. Others are traditional public schools like PS 28 in Brooklyn and Kingsview Middle School in Montgomery County, Maryland. Years ago, Black

scholars like Ron Edmonds, Barbara Sizemore and Asa Hilliard wrote about the existence of schools where poor, African American and Latino children excel; schools that provide undeniable proof that “the problem” is not the children but our inability to create more settings that can meet their needs. Their words went unheeded. For too long America has been mired in a debate over whether or not its most disadvantaged children are educable at all, while generation after generation suffer the consequences of failure.

The “middle group” is not waiting any longer. They are demanding new schools and they are refusing to wait passively for policy makers to “fix” America’s schools. They have taken up the work themselves and, as a result of their efforts, real change is occurring. Across the country, groups like the [Coalition for Educational Justice](#) in New York, [Inner City Struggle](#) in Los Angeles and the various groups that have organized in the Little Village section on the Westside of Chicago, have organized to demand that their interests be taken into account when reforms are implemented, and that schools become accountable and responsive to the communities they serve. They are challenging policies that have tolerated gross inequities between schools, and they are calling for an end to policies that may result in their children being suspended and pushed out of schools, feeding the school to prison pipeline.

This new generation of education activists recognizes that if indeed the fight for educational justice is the Civil Rights issue of the 21st century as so many “reformers” claim, then it must include them and be rooted in a genuine a commitment to develop relationships of reciprocal responsibility between parents and teachers, teachers and administrators, and students and schools. They are not waiting for Superman or anyone else. They are creating schools now where these values and commitments are practiced.

In the fight for the future of American education, this “middle group” is a sleeping giant with a vested interest in progressive change, but it has largely been marginalized in the current debate. While the “reformers” and the unions fight to define and direct the future of public education, those who have suffered the consequences of failure are willing to defend public education while simultaneously insisting that it be reformed.

They understand that public schools, even those that fail at educating the children they serve, are indispensable to the health, well-being, hope and aspirations of their communities. They understand that no other institution in American society is as open and accessible to their children, but they realize that too often the schools their children attend are consistent at the wrong things. This is why they are clamoring for new schools, some of which may be charter schools, because they are tired of promises, and frustrated with the indifference and incompetence they too frequently encounter in the schools they have known. They are ready to embrace something new and are insisting to be part of the process of creating it.

It is too early to tell whether or not this movement will succeed but it is clear that the future of American society will be determined to a large degree by what happens to it. The struggle for education remains vital to the struggle for democracy, equality and justice. The only question is who will align themselves with those who must be integral to making this possibility a reality.