

THE PRINCIPLES THAT UNITE US

Community and Labor Organizing Together for Educational and Social Justice October 2013

We are parents and caregivers, students and community members. We are educators and school staff. We have come together around a common commitment to public education. We believe that the only way to give *every* child the opportunity to pursue a rich and productive life both individually and as a member of society, is through a system of publicly funded, equitable and democratically controlled public schools.

We have not reached this goal as a nation—particularly for poor children and communities of color. We are not satisfied with an institution that finds the resources to provide some students with the most experienced and well-trained teachers, advanced technologies, expansive course options and state-of-the-art facilities, while other students languish in substandard buildings, taught in over-crowded classrooms by teachers lacking the basic supports they need to do their jobs.

We are not satisfied. But we believe in strengthening, not dismantling public education in the face of these challenges.

The divide between rich and poor in the United States is vast and growing. Millions of children grow up in oppressive poverty while the super-rich advocate for policies that increase *their* wealth at others' expense. For the past twenty years, we have watched as corporate interests attempt to dismantle public education and create a new, market-based system of schooling. Their strategies include ever-expanding regimes of high-stakes tests, attacks on the collective bargaining rights of educators and aggressive school closures that pave the way for privately-managed schools. The first targets for this approach have been urban African-American and immigrant communities. Yet despite dismal educational results, those advocating a corporate agenda are now also targeting rural and suburban school districts with their disruptive interventions.

They insist that poverty doesn't matter; as if hunger, unemployment, substandard housing and epidemic violence have no impact on young bodies and minds. In our work in schools and communities, we confront these shameful challenges daily. Meanwhile, some of those who claim to be "saving" public education by tearing it down also oppose health care reform and increases in the minimum wage. Deep-pocketed entrepreneurs who created the home mortgage crisis and advocacy groups that support barriers to voting are not interested in public education because they understand and want to nurture young minds. Their interests are their own.

Our interest is in public schools that serve *all* children. We need schools that are rooted in communities, that provide a rich and equitable academic experience and model democratic practices. We want schools where those closest to the classroom share in decision- and policy-making at all levels. We need schools where students feel safe, nurtured and empowered to become productive adults—that provide an alternative to the prison pipeline that too many of our children are caught in. We believe that the only way to achieve these schools is by *strengthening* the institution of public education. We are not there yet, but we can imagine no other path.

We are parents, students and educators who have come together to fight for our schools. No longer will we allow ourselves to be divided. Now, more than ever, access to good public schools is a critical civil and human right. We are committed to working together to reclaim the promise of public education as our nation's gateway to democracy and racial and economic justice.

The Principles that Unite Us

August 2013

◆ Public schools are *public* institutions.

Our school districts should be committed to providing *all* children with the opportunity to attend a quality public school in their community. The corporate model of school reform seeks to turn public schools over to private managers and encourages *competition*—as opposed to collaboration—between schools and teachers. These strategies take away the public’s right to have a voice in their schools, and inherently create winners and losers among both schools and students. Our most vulnerable children become collateral damage in these reforms. We will not accept that.

- A public school system serves all students—those with special needs or disabilities, English Language Learners, homeless kids and troubled children. Creating schools that keep or push these students out in the name of efficiency or higher achievement for a few is not education reform but a return to segregation and inequality;
- We oppose the creation of charter schools for the purpose of privatization. Charter schools can serve as incubators of innovation, but must be fully accountable to the public, part of a unified educational system and regulated and funded for equity and accessibility;
- School closures have become a strategy to transfer students from public to privately-operated schools. No research has shown that the switch from public to private management of schools improves student learning;
- Public education should not be a source of profit.

◆ Our voices matter.

Those closest to the education process— teachers, administrators, school staff, students and their parents and communities—must have a voice in education policy and practice. Our schools and districts should be guided by *them*, not by corporate executives, entrepreneurs or philanthropists. Top-down interventions rarely address the real needs of schools or students.

- We oppose mayoral control and state takeovers of our school districts. Experience has taught us that these takeovers, usually justified with words like “urgent” and “crisis” too often simply spell the end of democratic ownership of our schools;
- Our districts and our schools should be governed with multiple structures for genuine input and decision-making by parents, educators and students;
- We reject disingenuous strategies—like “parent trigger” laws and community hearings offered only after decisions have been made by others—that put profits before students and alienate communities from their neighborhood schools.

◆ Strong public schools create strong communities.

Schools are community institutions as well as centers of learning. While education alone cannot eradicate poverty, schools can help to coordinate the supports and services their students and families need to thrive. Corporate reform strategies ignore the challenges that students bring with them to school each day and view schools as separate and autonomous from the communities in which they sit.

- “Community Schools” that provide supports and services for students and their families, such as basic health and dental care, mentoring programs, English language classes and more, help strengthen whole communities as well as individual students;

- Expanded learning time can offer students additional opportunities for academic and social enrichment, and teachers additional time to collaborate and plan. It should always be implemented as part of whole school reform, and with all stakeholders at the table;
- We support high quality early childhood programs that nurture learning and social development. These programs have been shown to improve student outcomes;
- School closures should be a last resort. Closing a school harms both students and the surrounding neighborhood. Closing schools is not an education strategy and should not be used as such.

◆ Assessments should be used to improve instruction.

Assessments are critical tools to guide teachers in improving their lesson plans and framing their instruction to meet the needs of individual students. We support accountability. But standardized assessments are *misused* when teachers are fired, schools are closed and students are penalized based on a single set of scores. Excessive high stakes testing takes away valuable instructional time and narrows the curriculum—with the greatest impact on our most vulnerable students.

- All children deserve a well-rounded and rich educational experience, with a culturally relevant and comprehensive curriculum that includes the arts, world languages, sciences, social studies and physical education;
- Excessive testing has narrowed the content and skills our students are taught. In some states teachers may spend as many as 100 school days on testing or preparing for tests.¹ We must end excessive testing and teaching to the test and focus instead on a rich and rigorous curriculum that helps our children be more engaged in school and succeed in college, careers and civil society;
- Teachers need to have the training, the time and the tools to evaluate their students' progress through multiple measures. Appropriate student assessment information includes documentation and evaluation of ongoing work, observations and discussions with students themselves;
- Assessments used for public reporting and accountability should include these multiple types of assessment information, gathered over time, and reflecting clear standards and learning goals;
- Assessments must be administered and reported in a timely manner, and both students and teachers should have access to individualized results so that the assessments can inform and guide instruction;
- No single exam should be used as a stand-alone hurdle to determine course placement, grade, promotion, course credit, graduation or classroom funding;
- Assessment results alone should not be used to rate and rank teachers, administrators or schools, or be linked to financial rewards, bonuses or penalties.

◆ Quality teaching must be delivered by committed, respected and supported educators.

Today's corporate reformers have launched a war on teachers. We believe that teachers should be honored. Teaching is a career, not a temporary stop on the way to one. Our teachers should be well-trained and supported. They should be given the opportunity to assume leadership roles in their schools. Highly qualified teachers and school staff are our schools' greatest assets. Let's treat them that way.

- Teacher preparation should be comprehensive and include significant student teaching time in the classroom under the supervision of a highly skilled experienced educator;
- Districts *must* address disparities in the distribution of experienced teachers. All of our students deserve access to high quality teaching, as well as a teaching staff that reflects their cultures;
- Alternative teacher credentialing programs should not be targeted exclusively at low-income schools or our most vulnerable students;

¹ <http://www.politifact.com/georgia/statements/2013/apr/24/randi-weingarten/union-chief-criticizes-days-spent-testing/>

- Professional development should be school-based and tailored to the individual needs of the teachers and school staff in the building. It should include as well, opportunities for teachers and community partners and parents to work and learn together to strengthen the quality of student academic experiences;
- Collective bargaining must be defended to assure that educators feel free to advocate for their students and for fair working conditions and compensation;
- Class size matters. Particularly in the most struggling schools, class size must be kept low enough that teachers are able to differentiate their instruction and provide individualized support to their students.

◆ **Schools must be welcoming and respectful places for all.**

Schools should be welcoming and inclusive. Students, parents, educators and community residents should feel that their cultures and contributions are respected and valued. Schools that push out the most vulnerable students and treat parents as intruders cannot succeed in creating a strong learning environment. Respectful schools are better places to both work and learn.

- School offices should be accessible to families whose primary language is one other than English. School enrollment forms and other materials should be available in languages that are significantly represented in the community;
- All schools should strive to provide the services and support needed by students to succeed in a diverse classroom. Practices that deny services, segregate or disproportionately punish or push-out students with disabilities or other high-needs students have no place in our public schools;
- Respect between administration and staff is a crucial component of a strong and healthy school climate;
- Respect for students includes elimination of zero-tolerance and other policies that push students out of school. Students should play a role in creating and enforcing discipline policies that are grounded in restorative practices;
- As workplaces, schools must be safe and secure, as well as resourced for the purposes of teaching and learning.

◆ **Our schools must be fully funded for success and equity.**

Over 50 years ago, in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the U.S. Supreme Court acknowledged that African American students were being denied their constitutional right to an integrated and equitable public education. We have not come far enough. Today our schools remain segregated and unequal. When we short-change some students, we short-change our nation as a whole. It is time to fund public schools for success and equity, for we are destined to hand off the future of our nation to all our young people.

- We must end the practice of funding our schools based on local property wealth. Only when we take responsibility for *all* our schools, and all our children, will schools succeed for all our society;
- School and district budgets should be developed through a transparent and democratic process that is guided by a commitment to equity;
- Corporations, Wall Street and the wealthy must pay their fair share of taxes at the local, state and national levels so that our schools have the resources they need to succeed. Wealthy corporations and individuals should not be allowed to “privatize” their contributions to public education through the use of tax write-offs or credits in lieu of payments that support all schools;
- Education funding should reflect the real costs of supporting and nurturing our young people, rather than budgetary convenience or economic circumstances. The devastating state and local budget cuts to our schools must stop. If we can find the money to support new stadiums and offer tax breaks to the wealthy, we can find the money to educate our children.

A Call to Action

Our schools belong to all of us: the students who learn in them, the parents who support them, the educators and staff who work in them and the communities that they anchor. No longer will we allow ourselves to be divided. We have developed these principles and are committed to working together to achieve the policies and practices that they represent. Corporate-style interventions that disregard our voices, and attempt to impose a system of winners and losers must end. None of our children deserve to be collateral damage.

We call on our communities, and commit the power of the organizations that we represent, to pursue these principles in our schools, districts and states. Together, we will work nationally to make this vision of public education a reality.