



Reclaiming the Promise of Public Education

RANDI WEINGARTEN, President, American Federation of Teachers

AS THE SCHOOL YEAR STARTS, I keep thinking about how teachers never really get a break. Despite the myth about “summers off,” I was with several thousand educators this July—not at the beach, but at TEACH, the AFT’s largest gathering of educators focused on their professional practice and growth. Teachers spent long days learning from fellow educators and other experts about concrete ways to improve teaching and learning. Many teachers told me how they were spending the rest of their summer: writing curriculum aligned to the new, challenging Common Core State Standards; taking classes, because teachers are lifelong learners; and working with students—in enrichment camps and programs to stem summer learning loss. So much for the dog days of summer.

And our conferees did much more. We also committed to reclaim the promise—the promise of public education. Not as it is today or as it was in the past, but as what public education can be to fulfill our collective obligation to help all children succeed.

Yet even amidst this dedication and inspiration there is a great frustration. The promise of a great public education for all children is under pressure not only from out-of-touch legislators, but from economic and societal factors outside school that make it much more difficult to achieve success within the classroom. Nearly 1 out of every 2 students in public schools lives in poverty, and educators have become the first responders to their stress, hunger, and hardships. But these factors don’t keep us from teaching, they keep us up at night.

Public education is also under assault from people whose brand of “reform” consists of austerity, polarization, privatization, and deprofessionalization—and who then argue that public education is failing.

Nowhere is that more apparent than in Philadelphia. Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Corbett has cut \$1 billion from education statewide, manufacturing a crisis in Philadelphia’s public schools, including school closures, mass layoffs, and schools stripped of the things kids need. And we know that Philadelphia today could be 10 more cities tomorrow. Maybe these “leaders” never learned the difference between cause and effect.



JOHN HARRINGTON

Weingarten at the opening of Oliver Partnership School in Lawrence, MA

It’s no wonder I hear from teachers over and over again that the people passing the laws, calling the shots, and defunding our schools are totally out of touch with what their students need and what it’s like in their classrooms.

But people are beginning to see that the emperors of reform have no clothes. Years of top-down edicts, mass school closures, and test fixation with sanctions instead of support haven’t moved the needle—not in the right direction, at least.

The AFT recently conducted a poll of a broad array of public school parents. Parents want approaches that are vastly different from prevailing policies they believe hurt schools and students. They overwhelmingly choose strong neighborhood public schools over expanding choice, charters, and vouchers. The majority are concerned about overtesting. Parents soundly reject the austerity-driven policies gutting schools, including teacher and staff layoffs; increased class sizes; school closings; and cutbacks in art, music, libraries, and physical education. And they strongly support wraparound services in

schools to mitigate the effects of poverty. This frustration and fatigue over failed “reforms,” and a growing consensus among parents and educators about more-promising ways to provide all children with a great education, make this a critical moment to reclaim the promise of public education.

Reclaiming the promise of public education is about fighting for neighborhood public schools that are safe, welcoming places for teaching and learning.

We must reclaim the promise of public education to fulfill our collective obligation to help all children succeed.

Reclaiming the promise is about ensuring that teachers are well-prepared and supported, and that they have time to collaborate and the tools they need, such as appropriate class size. Reclaiming the promise is about enabling them to teach an engaging curriculum that includes art, music, and the sciences. Reclaiming the promise is about ensuring that kids have access to wraparound services to meet their emotional, social, and health needs.

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This vision may look different in different communities, but it has common elements. Reclaiming the promise of public education will bring back the joy of teaching and learning, which has been drained by years of harmful policies. It’s the way to make every public school a place where parents want to send their kids, teachers want to teach, and children are engaged. We are looking forward to parents and community partners joining with educators to achieve this promise.

Read more at go.aft.org/promise.