

# Two visions

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If you had \$50,000 or more to invest in the privatization of public education, you could have been welcome at a recent meeting in Philadelphia of self-described school reformers. But if you're an educator or parent interested in strengthening public education, you'd be out of luck, because that closed-door meeting was limited to deep-pocketed donors and investors—and it wasn't meant to discuss how to restore funding to help children in Philadelphia's resource-starved public schools, or to address the educational and financial failures of the city's charter schools.

Far from it—it focused instead on “education investment strategies” and how to “support rapid charter school growth.”

And in Boston last week, Jeb Bush convened the annual summit of his Foundation for Excellence in Education, which an independent monitor calls “a dating service for corporations selling educational products—including virtual schools—to school chiefs responsible for making policies and cutting the checks.”

These meetings and their promoters press for school vouchers, franchise charter schools, cybereducation, testing and mass school closures, even though these sanction- and market-based reforms haven't moved the needle—not in the right direction, at least. Dissatisfaction with these approaches has led many parents, educators and policy-makers to look for alternatives that are both public and aimed at helping all children succeed. That's why the American Federation of Teachers and numerous partners are joining together to reclaim the promise of public education to help all kids be ready for a good future.

That was the focus of a very different meeting in Los Angeles in early October. More than 500 teachers union members and leaders, students, parents, community organizers, civil rights advocates and faith leaders gathered to solidify our joint commitment to fight for high-quality public schools for all students. The meeting, sponsored by the AFT with the National Opportunity to Learn Campaign, the National Education Association, and Communities for Public Education Reform, was the

culmination of a dozen nationwide community town hall gatherings that identified a set of common principles rooted in the need for public involvement—parents, teachers and the greater community—in our public schools and public school system.

These principles also lay out solutions geared to providing all students access to the great education they deserve. This means ensuring equity—that those with less get more to level the playing field. The principles seek to ensure that students are respected and their teachers are well-prepared and supported; that teachers can teach a rigorous, engaging curricu-

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lum; that testing is used as a tool, not a weapon; that kids have access to wraparound services to meet their social, emotional and health needs; that neighborhood public schools are safe and welcoming; and that children have many instructional opportunities and multiple pathways from pre-K to high school graduation.

These discordant sets of meetings epitomize the divide in American education. On one side are those who seek to dismantle and privatize public education and who see it as a lucrative market. It includes those who

stand silently as deep cuts devastate public schools, and then argue that public education is failing.

On the other side are those who believe in the promise of public education as a civil right and a gateway to opportunity. It is exemplified by the highly successful New York Performance Standards Consortium, 39 diverse public high schools that have won waivers from four of New York's five standardized high school exams required for graduation, with great results, including that 85 percent of graduates attend colleges rated competitive or better. This side includes the parents and educators demanding an end to the devastating cuts that have had disastrous consequences for children in public schools in Philadelphia, Chicago and elsewhere. It includes alliances like Great Public Schools—Pittsburgh, which is trying to stop school closures and the overemphasis on standardized tests.

Momentum around reclaiming the promise of public education is growing. Yet market reformers still seem to operate in an evidence-free zone. The more data that emerges about the ineffectiveness of privatization, competition and test fixation, the more their proponents double down.

Our focus must be to rely on what evidence and experience tell us kids need. We are at a pivotal moment—a moment when we must reclaim the promise of public education without further detours, distractions and delays.



Weingarten presenting the 2013 AFT Prize for Solution-Driven Unionism.

Photo: Michael Campbell

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