

Education, Freedom and Equal Opportunity

The United States was born from intertwined strands of renunciation, rebellion, and freedom. We renounced the unequal societies of class privilege of 17th century Europe and refused to recreate a royal line. We rebelled against being treated as second class citizens by the British motherland and forcibly threw off their rule. And we made a commitment to a government that would ensure each individual's right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" regardless of the accident of one's birth. When DeToqueville visited the country in the 1831, he saw the American credo as rooted in classlessness and equal opportunity. Our political myth was to create a country where accidents of birth did not decree what you could become or how you would live your life.

"The leading object of government is to lift artificial weights from all shoulders...to afford all an unfettered start and a fair chance in the race of life." – Abraham Lincoln

Equal opportunity became the most American of our rights along with freedom of religion. It was the essential condition to guarantee the promises of democracy – freedom from and freedom to – freedom from the oppression of class boundaries and freedom to make the life you choose.

Access to a high quality public education is now the most essential vehicle for delivering on those promises of democracy. It has always been important, but in the latter part of the 20th century it became indispensable. Previously you could make a good living and support a family if you had a good work ethic. But now you also need good literacy and numerical skills to earn your way into the middle class. There lies the challenge to domestic policy.

"When a state has undertaken to provide an opportunity for an education in the public schools, such an opportunity is a right that *must be made available to all on equal terms.*" [Brown vs. Bd. of Education, 1954. Italics not in original.] We do not have that now, and for the last 25 years we have been actually losing ground. Nevertheless this is a hopeful time. Let me explain.

In my travels across this country I have encountered many people of all political persuasions who are united by a common cause. They are trying to improve our schools because of their commitment to democracy and freedom. They are trying to reawaken the generous spirit of this country that has always accompanied our commitment to equal opportunity. They believe we can, indeed, be individualistic; we can be free; we can be entrepreneurial; but we can also be fair and just to all our brothers and sisters. A first class education is the most democratic and most American way to safeguard freedom for our citizens – i.e., freedom to make of yourself what you wish, freedom to have the kind of family and work life you aspire to. So the people in this alliance say: let us as a nation make a first class education for all our children, including children of poverty, the first priority of domestic policy. We are a long way from there now, despite our wealth and know-how.

Consider this: good teaching is the core of a good education. Good teaching is the most significant factor in student achievement, dwarfing all other variables. Ensuring it for all children is the most direct way to fulfill the promises of our democracy for equal opportunity.

We have not achieved sustained school improvement for children of poverty by changing school structures, by emphasizing testing, or by introducing new curriculum, smaller schools, local governance, or school choice. These changes may help in some circumstances, but the overriding goal and one guiding principle that we need to keep in view when we consider any innovation, consider any program, change any structure is this: *everything hinges on improving the expertise of the individual teachers who work with the children*. And teaching expertise is far more complicated and sophisticated than we have allowed. It is intellectually complicated, difficult, and demanding work with as many elements to successful practice as engineering, law, architecture, or any knowledge based profession. When teaching expertise is strong in a school, combined with a carefully crafted motivational environment, children's learning accelerates even in the most devastated and disadvantaged neighborhoods. If they stay in the school long enough, students catch up to and in some cases surpass their suburban peers. It is not true that poverty creates insuperable deficits for disadvantaged children.¹

Thus experiencing good teaching is a fundamental civil right in a country that prizes the ability to rise through merit and hard work. The present level of inequality in teaching is totally unacceptable. It condemns a quarter of our population to lower class status. It creates a self-perpetuating condition of elite and under-classes based on access to the knowledge and skill required to succeed in a 21st century economy.

Let me put this in perspective. Our government doesn't guarantee health care to children. It doesn't guarantee a minimum income. It doesn't even guarantee clean water. But a good education is the right most consistent with our heritage – freedom and equality of opportunity.

There are many places to look if one wants to see inequality in America, but none more blatant or more costly to the nation than the hugely unequal teaching children receive. We do, indeed, have many thousands of highly dedicated and skilled educators working in the most disadvantaged districts, heroes of commitment and endurance. But as an educational consultant who works in inner city as well as suburban school districts, I have 40 years of first hand experience bearing witness to the huge gap between the expertise and the favorable working conditions of teachers and leaders who work with children of poverty vs. teachers of affluent children. This gap is not the teachers' fault. We have weak policies, dysfunctional personnel systems, and misappropriated resources that create this gap and make schools for children of poverty revolving doors of teachers who leave before they accumulate the sophisticated expertise that good teaching requires.² And make no mistake, the knowledge for good teaching is far more extensive and multifaceted than we have acknowledged. This inequality strikes at the heart of democracy and freedom.

¹ For evidence of this claim, see *John Adams' Promise*, Research for Better Teaching, Inc. and Teachers 21, Acton MA, 2005; available on www.RBTeach.com

² 50% of new teachers in urban settings leave in their first 5 years.

The No Child Left Behind Law started from an equal opportunity point of view. It had the right rhetoric because it called for a “highly qualified teacher” in every classroom. But there are no provisions in the law that aim to elevate the actual expertise of American educators in any way. This is eminently fixable.

To give our children equal opportunity for a good life, our national and state governments need to be committed to programs that create teachers with high levels of expertise everywhere. This commitment to equal opportunity needs to show up in all the specific operational systems that influence what teachers know, believe and can do. In these operational systems we would see high standards, accountability, and support for knowledge-based practice. The systems are: 1) teacher preparation, 2) licensing, 3) hiring, 4) induction, 5) evaluation, 6) professional development, 7) recertification, 8) working conditions, 9) salaries, and 10) career ladders.

All those systems, all ten of them, are subject to government influence through funding, regulation, oversight, sanctions, incentives and long term policy commitment. It is the job of government to ensure its power is brought to bear for the interests of all its citizens equally to bring good teaching to all children.

So let us make this the rallying cry:

- Reawaken the generous spirit of this country and our historical commitment to equal opportunity.
- Generate action, funding, commitment, and persistence from legislators and government agencies to protect our children’s fair chance at a good life through good teaching of the skills they need.
- Level the playing field by giving all our children, especially our most disadvantaged children, teachers with high levels of expertise.

Jon Saphier