

EDUCATION WEEK

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An Open Letter to the Next President

One year from this coming week, the inauguration of the 44th president of the United States will take place in Washington. The following essay anticipates that event, and offers a perspective that may resonate in the unfolding presidential campaign.

Dear Madam or Mr. President:

Over the coming year, you will be laying out your positions on major issues relevant to the nation's needs and our collective future. I am writing to argue that none of these is more important than the education of our young. And no area is more in need of reconceptualization—a problem-solving reformulation—than education.

It is the most important issue because family, workforce, and economic well-being, national defense, domestic tranquility, and the maintenance and improvement of our democracy are all interrelated and all tied to the quality of our system(s) of education. It must be reconceptualized because traditional education is based on a wrong notion: a belief that academic-learning capacities are almost exclusively an outcome of genetically determined intelligence. And despite significant evidence to the contrary, there is still a pervasive assumption that such intelligence is largely responsible for school subject-matter mastery and eventual life success. These conceptual foundation blocks have contributed heavily to a school focus on curriculum, teaching, and assessment, and to related educator preparation, practice, and policy approaches and processes that, though inadequate, are complex and deeply entrenched, hence difficult to change.

Evidence from modern social, psychological, educational, and biological science indicates that the expression of individual intelligence is a product of the quality of interactions, from birth to maturity, between an individual and his or her environment. Early attachment and bonding, together with these multiple environmental interactions, enable caretakers to promote, or to limit, brain development and functioning, as well as to shape social-interactive, psycho-emotional, moral-ethical, linguistic, and cognitive-intellectual competencies. Because these developmental competencies are inextricably linked to academic achievement, young people who receive reasonably supportive interactions in reasonably good environments have the best chance of being successful in school and in life.

But many children do not have these favorable developmental circumstances. As a result, many are underprepared for school. Until 30 years ago, this was not a significant problem because most could work in the agricultural and industrial economies of the day with little education and meet all of their adult tasks and responsibilities. Today, however, the underdeveloped child must remain in school and attempt to acquire a college education or the equivalent.

School people, thinking and acting from traditional beliefs and structures, are rarely prepared to create a school culture and a system of relationship experiences that can overcome the ill effects of underdevelopment and give such students a good chance for school and life success. Students from the families, family networks, and schools that are most marginalized from the economic and social mainstream are denied, in disproportionate numbers, the opportunity to be successful.

The limited early success of such students and their teachers, and reactions to it, are the root causes of low-performing schools and the attendant demoralization, community dissatisfaction, and teacher turnover. This situation also fuels the emergence and disappearance of one quick fix after another. Without successful developmental experiences, students who could have been successful eventually contribute heavily to our school dropout rates and a list of health, behavior, safety, and other social and economic problems.

There is abundant direct and indirect evidence that students from all backgrounds can thrive in environments designed to promote their development. Given the compelling case for the developmental impact of constructive interactions between young people and the adults around them, and the fact that many school people are not adequately prepared to provide these interactions, the obvious place to begin a program aimed at effecting school improvement is in the preparation and support of future and practicing educators.

Forty years ago, the Yale Child Study Center began to apply the principles of child and adolescent development to all aspects of students' lives in two inner-city elementary schools in New Haven, Conn. These were schools known to have the lowest levels of achievement and the most difficult behavior challenges in the city. We helped their staff members identify nine program elements that generated most of the problems, and then developed nine activities and guidelines designed to help them create a positive school culture. That positive culture, in turn, made possible interactions among students, staff members, and parents that promoted greater levels of development, new modes of behavior, and increased learning.

Eventually, impressive academic and behavior gains were made, and we at the center began disseminating the model, which we called the School Development Program, to a growing list of schools that now totals more than 1,000. The patterns of success and failure in these schools, and the challenges of

sustainability and scale, point to structural problems of schooling more than people problems. Yet we tend to blame the people.

In general, we found that schools and systems achieved success in line with their buy-in to the program and their application of child and adolescent development principles to all aspects of schooling. It is our impression that many practitioners cannot "buy in" because they are being asked to do in practice something no one prepared them to do in preservice or in-service activities. The most common complaint we hear from teachers and administrators in our training academies is that they should have been provided in their preparation programs the knowledge and skills needed to create school cultures that promote student development. This would have made promoting development a part of their professional identity, a part of what it means to be an educator.

Preparatory programs must empower preservice and practicing educators to see themselves in this role and to perform this important function for their students. No other intervention in education can be as effective for this workforce, and no area requires more attention to appropriate preparation. Yet many knowledgeable people are convinced that preparatory institutions cannot and will not change to accommodate this new emphasis. They can, and they must.

This is where your leadership over the next four to eight years, Madam or Mr. President, could help our education system become the best in the world. Recognizing that education is primarily a state responsibility, you should work first with the governors, their chief state school officers, departments of education, and other policy and practice leaders to do the following:

1. Reconceptualize the task of the school in our society and the methods that we should use in fulfilling it, based on the best current knowledge about how young people develop and learn.
2. Develop funding arrangements that reward preparatory institutions that enable their graduates to apply principles of child and adolescent development to teaching and learning in the classroom.
3. Create teams of proven experts who can provide support for the changes needed to preparatory programs and school systems.
4. Enable higher education institutions and school districts to work together more successfully, rather than maintaining their own "silos" of experience and influence.
5. Begin this effort with a program that is open to all, but weighted toward communities that demonstrate a commitment to helping students develop in a way that promotes not only their academic achievement, but also their

preparation for meeting adult tasks and responsibilities. Do not create a massive federal and/or state(s) program. And don't promise a quick fix.

There is precedent for using a systemic-change approach based on good theory and scientific evidence. At the turn of the 20th century, Congress created the agricultural Cooperative Extension System to put science-based help on the ground for farmers, and to overcome the resistance to new methods fueled by tradition and policy. America eventually became the breadbasket of the world.

American education, too, can be an example for the world-a model for preparing all young people to participate in the economic life of the country, become successful family and community members, and help protect and promote peace and democracy.