

Vision Statement on Educational Leadership for the District of Columbia

Editorial writers who speculate on what is wanted in a school board chief should not stop with just calling for added skills in the collegial conciliation of policy disputes. The greater need is for an advocate of higher values in public education around whom all elements of our city can rally for a radical shift toward quality learning. **The new School Board Chief must lead a new Crusade for Children.**¹

With the superintendent already successfully engaged in retooling and connecting the dots within the system, the School Board now needs to look beyond the dots to energize public opinion about emerging technologies, commercial trends, and new workforce requirements that demand priority attention in the face of growing global competition.

While there will always be room to advocate classroom experimentation outside the system, for the mainstream of our population, real access to self improvement will only come through quality **public** education as a fundamental right. As the universal enabler, education is the foundation of voting, governing, earning a living, retaining the fruits of one's labor, and the enlightened enjoyment of culture through self development.

This has been recognized from the founding days of 1785, when the Nation adopted the Northwest Ordinance to provide public land for schools. Then the continuum runs through to the 1860s Land Grant College Acts, to the GI Bills and National Defense Education Acts of the 1950s and '60s, and to the creation of a federal Education Department in the 1970s. And unique bipartisan support for today's *No Child Left Behind Act* is based on the hope of establishing, for the first time, observable national standards for local educational adequacy. This broad

¹ Bill Raspberry declared in his noted *Washington Post* syndicated column of February 18, 1994, "We need a crusade to save our children--a crusade as powerful and as broad based as the 1960s crusade for civil rights. We need a new movement."

spectrum of support came from unlikely allies, variously concerned with national defense, international competitiveness in global markets, and with the manpower demands of the increasingly technological economy, including those dedicated to fairness for the historically neglected.

These same interests are at work at the local level in Washington DC. Mobilizing and harmonizing these forces is the urgent priority if we are to realize a level educational playing field. This is where leadership is most needed. Sadly, such new thinking for real change has been lost on Washington officials, who are still preoccupied with the matters of parent/teacher/union/ administration and school board/city council and mayoral wrangling.

Now, with the prospect of a billion dollars for school capital rehabilitation and improvements, and hundreds of millions of dollars from baseball revenues for a new city community college and other educational upgrades, it is urgent that the new School Board President elevate DC's educational leadership into the 21st Century. We simply cannot afford to squander these once in a lifetime and badly needed new resources in misdirection and confusion. These opportunities require result-oriented external auditing of all expenditures to assure accountability and compliance with Board mandates and priorities. After all, a windfall would be a terrible thing to waste!

The United States ranks 49th in the world in literacy and 28th in math of the 40 advanced countries. **A recent report shows that of the Nation's large cities, Washington DC schools are lagging in quality in spite of its above average per pupil expenditures.** In the 1990s, Europe surpassed the US as the largest producer of scientific literature and the European Union, India and China are today for the first time leading the US in the vital number of science and engineering graduates. Like it or not, these facts signal an educational deterioration that begins at the primary grade levels and permeates the educational ladder. **A campaign must mobilize the city to the impending internal threat to civil society and the growing impact of external market forces.**

In the capitol city of this great nation, it is alarming--both to the most liberal and the most conservative among us--that a third of DC's adults are functionally illiterate. This underscores the statistical correlation of illiteracy with high prison populations as a curable disease. And this is not a new phenomenon, it is a chronic problem. It is particularly unacceptable because our metropolitan area boasts one of the Nation's highest overall rates of college graduates and advanced degree holders, as well as parallel workforce requirements.

The unfortunate reality is that DC is the hole in the regional donut of a burgeoning high-tech IT industry. Only an aggressive effort to eliminate fossilized traditions in education can fill the hole. We need a nimble technological commitment and mobilization of education resources to assure educational relevance for the protection of both civic equality and competitive self-preservation. We must liberate public education from its existing complex of legislative and budgetary fiefdoms. We need a new model of smart learning institutions without artificial and self-defeating conflicts among vested interests. This is much bigger than the preoccupation with particular school closings and mergers.

The United States as a founding signatory to the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1945, has already endorsed such principles of guaranteed access to education as set forth in Article 26, Section (1), namely:

- *Everyone has the right to education.
- *Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages.
- *Elementary education shall be compulsory.
- *Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit

But as with all such grand protocols, these precepts are left to be implemented through local legislation and executive action. **Accordingly the**

time has come to engage the whole people of the District of Columbia to act locally while thinking globally. Education is an entitlement that is tantamount to all of the rights we enjoy as citizens. This is not the time for business as usual.

The phrase, "We the People of the United States" is the opening authorization of the U.S. Constitution and makes it clear why no inferior level of policy discussion and debate can or will suffice. Under this fundamental precept, all legitimate public power is derived from the people! **Therefore the serious steps required to guarantee an equal opportunity to a quality education as a fundamental right needs endorsement by all the people of our city. This means going beyond parent/teacher and politician/union dialogues to include business, media, professional, religious, civic, labor, nonprofit, youth and university participation in public consensus building.** And the voluntary resources of these private stake holders need to be put where their mouths have been in unrelenting criticism of the *status quo*. Only a cooperative effort with "all hands on deck" will succeed.

In calling for such a sweeping commitment we do not intend to diminish or deny the policy and fiscal complexity, conflicts, ambiguities, compromises, improbabilities, inconveniences, and evolutionary requirements inherent in reworking DC's system of elementary and secondary schools. Rather we need transparency in each of these arenas of colliding interests so we can ensure that we touch every corner of our city, east and west of the river, as well as east and west of park. And while this unique rethinking process unfolds, we must not lose sight of, nor lessen the energy for, short-term reforms capable of near term incremental advances. The longest walk always begins with the ground under foot.

Achievable progress should not wait in anticipation of a grand systemic shift. Incremental experiments must also be tried. Indeed massive strategic mistakes can only be avoided when reforms are first informed by hands-on, tactically successful models. The charter schools, for example, can offer an invaluable resource for comparative research, rather than represent a harmful

source of competition. Ultimately, legislative and policy reforms are more feasible when derived from principles that have been successfully used, before being scaled up to systemwide applications.

In calling for a community-wide mobilization on education, we can not be so naive as to ignore would-be detractors or their powerful forces of opposition. **Instead we must rely on the power of the people and their desire for real change.**

A School Board Chief must convince opinion makers of the urgency of finding alternatives to our impending educational disaster, not just for those who have been left behind or those with a directly vested interest, but for the City and the Nation as a whole. Our family pathologies cannot become our societal pathology. **All children are our children.** And civilized values of all sorts have to be taught across the board before they will be defended and loved in a free society. This is the standard of leadership needed for the school board.

Not all long-standing differences of principle and priorities in education will disappear overnight in a magical paradigm shift. While we may not reconcile the lions and the lambs, we can impress upon them all the dangers of an encroaching educational forest fire that threatens to consume all of us with equal indifference. **In keeping with proud tradition of bottom-up democracy, all elements of both altruism and self-interest must be invited to the table because they each find the status quo intolerable and know in their heart of hearts that their future will only be improved by embarking on a rational new direction.**

It is imperative that the new Board President not allow the campaign for education reform to become the property of any politician or party. Nor can it belong to a professional interest group, a particular class, a single ward, nor those with the loudest voices. **The campaign must be launched as a civic imperative that touches all sectors of public and private interests.**

Finally, it is required that the new President of the Board of Education lead

a campaign for educational policy reform to assure the end of the arbitrary denial as well as negligent oversight of all those bundled civil and human rights as well as civil duties and obligations dependent on the quality of public education. In answer to the question what should be wanted in a school board chief, the leadership for such a movement should be the first criterion.

The above was prepared by Timothy L. Jenkins, a former president of the University of the District of Columbia, in response to the *Washington Post's* request for comments on its editorial of March 21, 2006.