

Teachers' Letters to Obama September, 2010

Dear Member of Congress,

Last fall this group was formed to transmit the wisdom and understanding of America's classroom teachers to President Obama and Secretary of Education Duncan. Now that Congress is considering reauthorization of ESEA, we wish to share this with you as well. For too long, education policy has been shaped far from the realities of our classrooms, and in ways that treat us as obstacles rather than allies and potential agents of change. We are here to offer our best ideas, and we hope you will take the time to hear us.

In extensive discussions we have arrived at seven principles that we offer as guides. They are:

Principle 1: End Test Abuse

We Believe: Meaningful education reform must embrace a range of assessments. The RTTT emphasis on high-stakes standardized testing necessarily reduces the education of our students to "test prep" focused on passing multiple-choice tests of unproven reliability. We oppose the use of so-called "merit pay" based on standardized test scores.

Principle 2: Hold Teachers Accountable Through Meaningful Evaluations

We Believe: Teachers must be held accountable through rigorous in-classroom evaluations by trained evaluators. Schools must hold teachers to high and meaningful standards of performance.

Principle 3: Build Teacher Collaboration

We Believe: Teachers must work collaboratively to improve pedagogy and create thoughtful curriculum. Basing teacher evaluation on standardized tests is a pseudo-accountability strategy that divides teachers as a result of variables beyond their control and misconstrues how best to motivate them. Teachers must share in the process of defining their own work and accountability should never be arbitrary or divisive.

Principle 4: Schools Work Best When Teachers are Empowered

We Believe: Teachers become invested in their work when they are given the opportunity to participate in school-wide decision-making and to be creative and thoughtful in their classrooms. Many public schools work well and are resources to guide us in the improvement of all schools.

Principle 5: Support Public Schools

We Believe: Our public school systems must be fully funded. Charter schools must be held accountable to the same regulatory oversight and should not be inequitably funded at the expense of our most challenged public schools.

Principle 6: Students Should Love School!

We Believe: Any vision of effective education reform must assume that skills be taught in a way that induces critical thinking, encourages curiosity, inspires the imagination, and emphasizes discussion. Music, art and technology are an essential part of this vision. Students should love learning; feel empowered by their educations, and should not experience schooling as something punitive.

Principle 7: Schools Need to be Strengthened, Not Punished

We Believe: Improvement or "turn-around" programs for struggling schools must be flexible and participatory. Teachers, students, and community members need to be involved in discussions and problem-solving. Moreover, we do not believe the current four options are adequate and recommend instead the strategies in the Strengthening Our Schools proposal now before Congress.

Here are letters collected this summer from the 2,800 members of our group, organized according to these seven principles.

Principle 1: End Test Abuse

Dear President Obama, Secretary Duncan and Members of Congress:

Several members of our Teachers' Letters to Obama (TLO) group of educators recently had the honor of sharing with Secretary Duncan our concerns with the direction of federal education reform's Race to the Top initiative. I was one of them—or rather, was scheduled to be, as the conversation was cut short.

Following that, in various publications were reports of Department of Education assertions that teachers support RTTT. This claim is expressly contrary to the position statement we issued, nor does it reflect the sentiments of thousands of teachers who have reported corresponding with you, Mr. President.

Some clarification is necessary.

Meaningful education reform must embrace a range of assessments. The RTTT emphasis on high-stakes standardized testing necessarily reduces the education of our students to "test prep" focused on passing multiple-choice tests of unproven reliability. We oppose the use of so-called "merit pay" based on standardized test scores.

Please allow me to use an example, John C. Fremont High School, in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Fremont is located in South-central Los Angeles, exactly 2 miles east of the flashpoint of the L.A. Riots. Plagued by low-test scores, the average teacher lasts there less than three years. The average principal lasts 23 months—by contrast the average Roman Emperor survived in office 5.5 years.

We are a school undergoing “reconstitution.” Much has been cast aside, including what has helped raise test scores enough to get the school removed from the California worst schools list. The reason? A School Improvement Grant (SIG). It is a grant, to the tune of \$2 million for three years. SIX MILLION DOLLARS.

What would you do for six million dollars? What would you do for a piece of that? We’re starting to see what some would do.

This is about merit pay. There are strings attached, yes, strings we are being made aware of. But make no mistake about it. This is about merit pay.

I have many misgivings about merit pay. There are differences in students; some have problems we can only guess at and do not come here to learn; for some, it is a haven from home, and for others it is another battlefield. And the argument can be made to separate the wheat from the chaff, to put it in its cruelest sense. Then call it tracking.

So some teachers will be given the achievers, will hold their students up and say, "My kids are just like yours." But they are not.

I'm staring at my grades, still noticing that 50% of my students are 9Rs (to use the latest designation). That's what I started the year with. I supposed that's better than when we went wall-to-wall Small Learning Communities (SLCs) at Fremont, then I had 58% 9Rs (often we call them 9+s, to signify they do not have enough credits to move on to the 10th grade), as did several of the other SLCs on the same track (by contrast, another SLC ended up with 10% 9Rs, which I was told was "luck of the draw"). During the second grading

period this semester, 68 out of 169 earned "Fs." Am I a failure as a teacher? I hit different learning styles; bring in realia (suits of armor I've made. Historical clothing/jewelry/coins) and music, was told by the previous principal that by laying out each unit on the board so that the kids knew exactly how to assemble their notebooks, organize their materials, and not get lost, that I was doing too much for them--spoon-feeding them. Another current AP laughs that I "over-plan." (Still working that one out.) I provide ways to replace lost work and provide supplementary materials and extra-credit (I differentiate on that) at the schools website on my pages. Yet, I have 40% of my students who failed at the first 4-week grading period of the second semester.

So, am I a failure as a teacher?

Will it fair to base my pay on my students' grades, having 50% 9Rs, while another teacher might have 10% 9Rs? By the way, the school also has 37% English Language Learners and over 10% designated as Special Needs. Will that be a type of tracking? So "loser kids" get a "loser teacher", eh?

And then there is another problem. Teachers come into the profession often lacking materials and lesson plans. True, they develop some during student teaching, but there's a big difference between someone at the beginning of their first year and a 27-year veteran like me. What have we always done? Shared what we have. I have rarely met a teacher who treats a lesson he or she created as copyrighted material. We give it away. These lessons we do are not state secrets—nothing personal.

I hear APs (Assistant Principals) prattle about sharing "best practices." What do they think we do all day? Crack jokes, drink coffee and surf the web? Many of my materials are on-line (see fremonths.org and look up my name for examples), so that they cannot only be accessed by kids, but by other teachers. In fact, there are other teachers at other schools--and in other districts--who were told about the site and have used what I have put together. Members of the Social Studies department joke how often I act like some missionary and brandish my portable drive at student teachers, new teachers, and veterans to share what I have.

But why should I share anything when every teacher is a competitor for merit pay? Why train your competition? Is that not like cutting your own throat? Or is it like digging your own grave? Or is the counter-argument that competition will strive to make me better than the person I just trained and showed all my tricks to?

And that cuts to the core. What we do each and every day is share. We share our knowledge and experience and bits of wisdom we've gleaned along the way with our colleagues and with our students.

I thought about dismantling the pages at fremonths.org, not because I no longer wish to share my work. I thought about taking them down because I did not want to watch the administration do that.

But I believe that this is a symbol of what I have accomplished here at Fremont in 16 years—and builds upon my years at Edison Junior High/Middle School and my years at Norco and Corona High Schools—and my student teaching, where I first took my mentor's notes and modified them for my personality; there's a little bit of Ms. Nancy Martin of Gladstone High School, Azusa Unified, in there. Like Isaac Newton, I am standing on the shoulders of giants. I will not yield to the siren call of merit pay, and begin viewing each and every one of my co-workers as a threat to every dollar I might earn. This is not The Law of the Jungle. This is The War on Ignorance. Some of us fight for other things than money. But some believe that the corporate or business model holds all the answers. To institute merit pay will be to institute educational apartheid. Where will you stand?

Charles V. Olynyk
Social Studies teacher

Dear President Obama, Secretary of Education Duncan and Members of Congress,

I am a Math Recovery Intervention Specialist with the Amarillo Independent School District. I have a Bachelor of Science Degree in Elementary Education with a Kindergarten Endorsement. I graduated from West Texas State University in 1990.

I am also a parent of three boys ages 13, 11 and 8 years old. My children have attended both private and public schools in Texas. I have also taught in both private and public schools in Texas.

As a professional educator, I know without a doubt, standardized test are not a valid means of assessment.

As a mother of three children, I know without a doubt, standardized test are not a valid means of assessment.

Standardized test only measure one particular mode of learning. There are so many different areas of learning and multiple types of intelligences. Unfortunately, standardized test can only measure one type of intelligence and one area of learning.

Standardized test narrow the curriculum and force children to fit into a very narrow mold.

Teachers are forced to teach to the test, therefore, leaving out so many important concepts and important learning experiences.

Some of the worse teachers can produce the best test scores. Actually, it takes less teaching skills to produce good test scores because teaching to the test requires no creativity at all.

Some of the best teachers, many times, have the lowest test scores. This could be as a result of some disadvantaged students in the class. Better yet, many teachers teach the way research says is best for student learning and long-term success in life - therefore, those test scores would be lower. I appreciate these types of teachers because they put the needs of their students over their own selfish ambitions of getting good ratings.

All students are different. All children have unique gifts, talents, abilities and skills. They also have different needs and weaknesses. These areas can never be assessed on a standardized multiple choice test.

My own three children are each unique. My oldest son struggle with standardized test yet has gifts and talents beyond measure- but those are not recognized in school. My middle son makes perfect test scores and never has to even study. He also has gifts and talents but those are stifled because his is brought down to the standard of his classmates. My youngest son will experience his first standardized test next year in 3rd grade. He is full of unique gifts and talents. I pray his teacher will not place too much value on his test score because I do not want him to be squeezed into the narrow mold with his classmates. His gifts and talents can never be measured on a multiple-choice test. He should rise above a test and not be held to its standard and waste all year preparing for it.

My own children are just like the students I teach. All are smart in different ways. The tests only prevent their gifts, talents and skills to be reached to their full potential.

Please allow, train and require teachers to teach the way research says is best for student learning and long-term success.

High-stakes testing has been the worse thing that has ever happened to education in Texas.

My main goal as a teacher is to bring success to all students and prevent them from going to prison, getting on welfare, committing suicide, becoming addicted to drugs, turning to violence and crime. It breaks my heart to watch how the system of this political testing game prevents so many students from being all they can be because they are labeled as failures just because they may not fit into the narrow mold of learning which is mandatory with the pressure of teachers to produce high standardized test scores.

Please stop the political game of test scores and train all teachers to teach in a way to meet the individual needs of all students.

Thank you,
KayDonna Wolfcale
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Dear Congressman Moore,

Teachers and students need your support and help. Eight years of No Child Left Behind has narrowed the curriculum, shifted the focus of schools away from student learning to rote memorization and has stripped schools of the things that ignite student's curiosity and drive to excel. We thought President Obama supported the end to this, but through the Department of Education's Blueprint for Success, I have concluded that it is "business as usual"...our kids cannot endure eight more years of this mindless and heartless kind of schooling.

As a teacher of middle school science and math students, I beg you to stand in opposition to DOE's Blueprint until it is revised. Those revisions must include a firm commitment to educating the whole child...returning the arts and other non-tested subjects to our schools as well as curriculum/instruction that makes kids use critical thinking and problem solving. The Blueprint is nothing more than smoke and mirrors...it sounds as if it supportive of student learning but it actually just continues to push high stakes testing and draconian punishments for schools that struggle with high-need populations.

Narrowing the curriculum down to math and reading doesn't help our children want to come to school and it doesn't help them to grow up to be the scientists, mathematicians, thinkers, lawyers and engineers we'll need. It only makes them good at bubbling in answers to the lowest levels of learning possible. Our country is better than this...and our kids deserve more than this boring, dull and outdated educational model. It didn't work in Chicago when Secretary Duncan tried it and it won't work now.

Is every school working well? No. But the solution to those problems is not to dismantle the whole system. I think the Blueprint should allow states and localities to solve these problems as they are the best equipped, closest to the communities that are affected and have the biggest interests in fixing the problem. I also think the Blueprint has to provide bold solutions to the underlying economic and societal problems that are typically associated with struggling schools...it's too easy to blame the teachers. It is not that simple. The federal government is not the best source for fixing the schools....I think you'll agree that Washington DC

knows little about what goes on in Kansas.

Help me defeat the political forces that want to continue the ideas of No Child Left Behind...the Blueprint is not different. Teachers and students across Kansas will forever be in your debt.

Marsha Ratzel

Dear President Obama, Secretary of Education Duncan and Members of Congress,

Students should demonstrate their knowledge of subjects taught. However, the students should be able to demonstrate their learning through written tests, or projects, or experiences. Students could create art or music projects that demonstrate learning. Students could use tasks completed at a place of employment to demonstrate learning.

Special education students should be able to use their classroom test-taking modifications on other tests.

The current system of testing is so ineffective and inaccurate that some students can even pass a test and still not have their scores count. Currently, only a small percentage (3%) of special education test scores can count as passing. Any special education students who pass the test above this percentage have to have their scores counted as below satisfactory.

Only the growth model should be used.

Beth Bley

Dear President Obama, Secretary of Education Duncan and Members of Congress,

If we can be admonished by evaluators for not engaging students with multiple learning methods, does it not make sense to EVALUATE the performance of our students for those multiple learning methods?

In the class, I use a wide variety of tools. When asked what my educational philosophy was, I'd reply (because I could never keep all that crap straight in my head anyway and could never remember the names blah blah), "I'm eclectic in my approach." Good word. Turned out to be more accurate than I realized.

I teach history. I make suits of armor, and get costumes made, and even get down to making the shoes for the time period. Some would call that realia, others, manipulatives, others, artifacts. I call it my stuff (others names, too, as I haul my 42 pound chainmail shirt up and down the stairs). That's for visual learners. I play music for whatever time period we're covering and have a "Now Playing" board, so the kids identify music (besides, after a while, they like the music). I use lots of colors and graphic organizers and show pictures. I have them write essays.

And I take them further than they were. The average student at my former school, Fremont High, reads FOUR years behind grade level. That is the AVERAGE and that is how they come to me.

So we do a lot of writing. I go backwards. Others say, if they read well, they'll write. As a published writer (stories and poetry--about 400 poems in literary magazines), I go the other way: if they become comfortable enough to write, they'll be more comfortable reading. So we decode primary sources together--lots of handholding there--as well as other reading.

But the bigger emphasis is on writing. I don't grade for grammar or spelling; the computer will humiliate them plenty on that score and it will improve. I grade for ideas. As they learn to express ideas, as they grow more comfortable, that confidence will lead them to not be shattered when I say, "A better way to write that would be to..." And for me, I take the student at the level they come in at and move them further along, so that they've either learned new skills or insights or improved the ones they've got.

Isn't that why we're doing this?

And if a student really has a problem writing, sometimes I'll ask them to explain it to me to show me "mastery." And that can work. Maybe that comes from having a degree in anthropology. Maybe it comes from trying to read Ukrainian and Russian and struggling through the Cyrillic alphabet and then once I have the characters figured out, then trying to pronounce the word so I can figure out what it is.

Like I said, I'm eclectic. Shouldn't we be evaluating the kids that way?

Chuck Olynyk

Yes, why are teachers and students judged on multiple choice test scores when this is a skill they will not need that much of in the future? Writing, knowledge of how to interact with other cultures, speaking and presentation skills -these are the skills they will need.

Yet in the school I taught at which was just a few miles from Los Angeles' Chinatown and Little Tokyo the Latino and black students are economically and racially segregated. Why? We could easily have integrated, economically diverse schools if we set standards for behavior high enough and provided a well-rounded education. But what middle class family will send their child to a school where manicuring is a major elective? Where there is no job base? Yet those responsible for the conditions egg on the dismissal and punishment of teachers. And the apathetic public does nothing.

Barbara Stam

There once was a little girl who was excited to begin school. She was an "at risk" child. She did not have many clothes or toys or much food. However, her parents read to her every day. She was excited to learn to read and to learn more about the adventures in the books that were read to her.

She eagerly started off to school. In the preschool class she asked her teacher what would happen if one side of the square ended up longer than the others. The teacher did not answer the question. She seemed unhappy that the child asked the question. The teacher told the girl that the lesson was about squares and to pay closer attention.

The teacher read an exciting book about teddy bears. The students got to color a giant teddy bear. The girl thought of her only stuffed animal at home. It was her precious teddy bear, given to her at a very young age. The girl loved this teddy bear. She colored her teddy bear to match her teddy bear at home, blue with pink paws. The teacher told the girl to pay better attention to the assignment. The children laughed at the girl. The students on the bus ride home laughed at the girl and her picture of a blue teddy bear. The girl went home crying. Her dad told her he loved her teddy bear picture and that she could color her teddy bear any color she wanted.

The girl wondered and thought and had many questions about things she learned at school and about the books read to her. She learned to read the books. She also learned to read the teachers. The teachers did not like questions. The teachers wanted assignments done with a specific format. The girl became very good at

repeating facts back to the teacher. She became very good at doing assignments exactly how the teacher wanted them done. She kept her questions to herself. She became a master of taking multiple choice tests. All of her teachers said she was an excellent student.

The girl grew up and decided she wanted to be a teacher. She went to college. The college professors told her to create fun and interesting lessons. At last she was free to be creative and to ask questions. She became a teacher who allowed her students to be creative and ask questions. If the teacher did not have the answers, the students and the teachers searched for the answers in a variety of materials. The students and the teacher had so much fun and learned so much. The students demonstrated their mastery of skills through creative projects that encouraged the students to use their knowledge of skills to be creative. The students learned the subject matter and related it to current events. The students learned through the arts and technology. All of the supervisors of the grown up girl, now teacher, said she was an excellent teacher.

Then came “THE TESTS”. “THE TESTS” dictated which skills were taught at which time of the year. This limited the grown up girl, now a first grade teacher, to focusing on teaching skills and trying to relate them to what was going on in the world instead of allowing students to learn about the world and then using this knowledge to learn skills. Still the teacher and students found creative ways to have fun and learn. Still the students learned many skills and the students did well on “THE TESTS”. Still all of the supervisors of the teacher said she was an excellent teacher.

Then came “SCRIPTED LESSONS”. The teacher was “trained” to read a lesson plan book to students. The teacher was taught to only read the words in the teaching guides. If a student had a question, the teacher was to look for the answer in a special section in the back of the book. The teacher asked what would happen if a child asked a question that was not listed in the book. The teacher was told that if that happened, the teacher would have to tell the student that she would answer his question later. The teacher should then call the book company for the answer. The teacher questioned this logic. The trainer obviously did not like questions. The teacher did not use the “SCRIPTED LESSONS” in her class. She kept on teaching creatively. Her students kept on passing “THE TESTS”. The supervisors reprimanded her for allowing students to talk and walk around the room while working on learning projects. The supervisors did not like the teacher to use the arts and technology as creative teaching tools. The supervisor said the teacher should pay closer attention to the trainers and that she was not a good teacher. The teacher struggled with what to do next. She could become that good little girl that did all of the assignments exactly as she was told. This would please her supervisors. Or she could question the logic of teaching to the tests and using scripted lessons. Her dad told her he loved her classroom the way it was and he was proud that she was teaching creatively. She believed her dad.

-Beth Bley

Principle 2: Hold Teachers Accountable Through Meaningful Evaluations

Dear Congress,

Yes. Teachers must be held accountable. But it cannot fairly be done through use of test scores alone. Even Value Added measures have faults. Yes, test scores could be one part of the evaluation- but teachers, just like children, need to be looked and evaluated more holistically. We need evaluators who are highly knowledgeable of teaching strategies, and impartial evaluators. If a teacher is found not to be effective, instead of simply firing the teacher, support needs to be put in place. Everyone goes into teaching because they want to make a difference. Help the ones who want to teach become better. And help them early in their career so that they can become strong teachers.

Heather Poland

7th/8th grade English teacher
San Diego, CA

No profession will thrive or achieve its potential, if the practitioners are not held to high and meaningful standards. That is why states maintain certification procedures to become members of professions and officials to monitor professionals. This is true in Washington State and I'm proud to say that the protocol used in Washington State is modeled after the protocol that was used in my district for many years, prior to adoption by the state.

Here in Washington State, we have a rigorous evaluation protocol that requires at least two 30-minute in-classroom observations by an evaluating supervisor, usually the principal or vice principal. Teacher must set goals for each year and discuss those goals with their evaluator at the beginning of the school year. Prior to each of the classroom observations, teacher and principal discuss what will be going on in class and how that relates to the goals of the teacher and those of the district. After the classroom observation, another discussion will analyze what took place, what was good and what could have been better. With two such observations in the school year, the evaluator can get a sense of which teachers may warrant further observations and which have demonstrated proficiency and need not further observation that year. That allows the evaluator to focus the rest of his/her attention on those needing more observation. At the end of the year, there's a summative evaluation conference. Strengths and weaknesses are discussed and thought is given to next year's goals. Some of these summative evaluations must be held before a contractually specified date, in case non-renewal (discharge) or probationary status for next year is at issue. The rest may take place anytime before the end of the year, as it is presumed those teachers will be back.

I've always maintained that evaluators (administrators) should go into classes unannounced, as well. Only then can it be determined to a certainty that what was seen during a scheduled observation is truly reflective of what could be seen on "any given day". I worked for eight principals, all of whom were, at one time or another, my evaluator. Two of them were women and the best of the lot. Two were men who were quite good. All four showed up in my classroom unannounced at times and I encouraged them to continue the practice. All four of them had thorough personal protocols they used for observations and I rarely attended a post observation discussion with any of them in which I didn't get some good pointers. That's the relationship that should exist, when evaluating educators.

Four of the principals for whom I worked were not very good at managing that protocol. Several rarely appeared in my room, failed to do more than provide lip service to the protocol when in the classroom and left shortly after arriving. Those observations and evaluations did not obey the protocol, but none of that should reflect badly on the teachers. They have neither control nor influence on such matters.

A rigorous in-classroom evaluation by trained evaluators is a must for our schools and the improvement of our educational institutions. It's far more important than test scores and it actually addresses issues within the control of teachers.

-Ken Mortland

Dear Members of Congress,

We teachers want rigorous evaluations as much as all the stakeholders in American public education. These evaluations would, once and for all, show the excellent job teachers are doing and have always done.

My own evaluation (in Washington state) consists of a beginning goal setting conference, two observations - fall and spring, one language arts and one math (I am an elementary special education teacher) with pre and

post conferences for each evaluation and an end of year conference looking at my goals and how well I accomplished them, as well as beginning to look at next year's goals.

In addition to that system, I would like to recommend a couple of other ideas. My very first principal required all of us to create a 'Year at a Glance', which was designed to get us thinking about interdisciplinary teaching. We all had to rough out what we were planning on teaching in each week or month of the year and to mention ways we would be linking various subjects as we working with our students.

Another suggestion I would add to any effective evaluation is a look at how I structure my classroom and my student's daily schedule. While you might not realize it, the classroom set up tells you a great deal about what a teacher understands about his or her students and how they learn. A good daily schedule plans for routines that help ensure student success. A good special ed teacher knows that routines, structure and classroom spaces influence learning on a variety of levels. A document explaining and analyzing you classroom structures and routines could be included in your 'year at a glance' annual document.

Last, I advocate for the use of student portfolios in lieu of standardized testing to measure student learning. Each student's portfolio could include baseline, midline and mastery content in all 6 subject areas, which would be a compilation of student writing and projects along with curriculum based subject matter tests and student self reflection. Once the idea of portfolios are embraced it would not be difficult to establish the criteria for good portfolios which would be an accurate reflection of what students accomplished during the year.

Districts could hire evaluators who could be trained (former classroom teachers?) in assessing these results. Good teachers could be identified through these methods as well as having their very good techniques shared with colleagues who might need support in certain areas.

The money spent on standardized testing - writing, printing, scoring and analyzing - could be much better spent on focusing on good classroom instruction, at the local level and the methods could be used to assist all teachers to improve their performance.

The final measure of good performance really falls to districts as a whole. Which high schools offer enough credits for rigorous instruction and college or trade school enrollment? How many students are graduating? How many are in AP or IB courses? What kinds of support do districts offer for struggling learners at all levels? Many times the things that cause school failure are not the fault of individual teachers but of system wide failure - things beyond a teacher's control. Districts and administrators need to help us in the accomplishment of the goal of having every child ready for career or college when they graduate from high school.

-Sandee Palmquist

Dear Members of Congress,

We used to have a saying at my grad school (Bread Loaf School of English) that as teachers "we inhabit the consequences of our work." Our society does reflect, for better or worse, and to unknown degrees, the results of teachers' work. This point is especially resonant for those of us who live and teach in small, close-knit, or rural communities. We live with the consequences of our work daily. There is general agreement today on the inextricable link between quality teaching and student academic achievement. A growing body of research confirms that what teachers know and are able to do makes the crucial difference in what students learn. Acknowledgement of this fact, as well as our obligation to the public trust has led to the increased

need for accurate and effective ways of evaluating what teachers actually do (or should do) that will have the greatest influence on student learning.

An accurate and fair evaluation of my professional performance would have to be not a single, annual act, but rather the result of a well-designed, pedagogically sound process. That process should include:

- Analysis of my preparations and rationales for the teaching techniques used in my classroom;
- Multiple observations by skilled evaluators (which would have to include other teachers, preferably in my subject area) of my implementation of those techniques with variety of students and topics, including debriefing discussions with me for at least some of those observations;
- Review of my development and use of formative and summative assessments of student work, and how I used the data from those assessments to make adjustments in my teaching for specific students;
- Feedback from students both formal (state and classroom assessment results, subsequent performance of students in courses, college, or career) and informal (surveys, teacher evaluations) on the impact of my performance on their academic progress;
- Consideration of my efforts to pursue and use appropriate professional development through both mandatory offerings at my place of employment, and those I seek at my own expense or time (this would include PD obtained through web, social networking, etc.);
- Feedback from parents on how well I worked with them (or attempted to); informing and involving them in their children's learning;
- Commentary (preferably with documentation) from my building level administrator(s) on my participation as part of the school-wide educational team towards the school mission, as well as more general employment performances (attendance, paperwork, other assigned duties)
- A self-evaluation in which I reflect upon my strengths and weaknesses as an educational professional, and my plans for addressing those areas of weakness.

This is not a quick, cheap, nor easy process. Moreover, such thorough evaluation is rarely done well at individual building or district levels--which has great bearing on the gaps we see in student achievement. The need to obtain such a true and fair evaluation of my teaching was my primary motivation for seeking National Board Certification. This type of high quality evaluation not only helps teachers currently in schools to get better; it gives those who are considering teaching a more accurate target as they prepare for the profession. Also, it is critically important that teachers be involved in the development, design, and implementation of whatever evaluation process a district may choose.

In contrast, the Administration's Blueprint for ESEA Reauthorization, states should develop their definitions of teacher quality "based in significant [emphasis mine] part on student growth and also include other measures, such as classroom observations of practice" (14). This push has given rise to evaluation plans that put as much as 50% weight on student test scores, and rushed districts like D.C. to roll-out these hobbled together evaluation programs with which neither administrators nor teachers have had sufficient training or experience. Such unsound theatrics may raise grant scores, but they do not serve students or communities well. We must resist the illogical argument that doing anything is better than settling for the status quo. Trading one ineffective system for another is not progress.

Secretary Duncan and others in the Administration have often given high praise to the National Board as a model of how to both identify and promote high quality teaching. I find it baffling, therefore, that at the same time, he has praised those who misuse student test data in a misguided attempt to identify and punish ineffective teachers and/or failing schools. We need a consistent message and, more important, a consistent and truly forward-moving policy. Successful students and great schools require a critical mass of highly accomplished teachers whose work is valued and encouraged.

I urge the Congress to listen more closely to the voices of teachers, parents, and students and reshape this aspect of the Administration's education reform proposal.

-Renee Moore

Principle 3: Build Teacher Collaboration

As long as the focus of No Child Left Behind is on the reading and math scores of a school, in an assessment of the effectiveness of the school, children fall through the cracks. If the primary focus is on the performance of the school and not whether children are learning then teachers are put into a position where their efforts are to prepare children to get through a test and not on whether they are learning... and in so doing they are contributing to a "pseudo-accountability strategy" of teacher evaluation.

I served on the Board of Trustees of the Frederick Douglass Charter School in Roslindale, MA. The Board of Education evaluated the effectiveness of the school based on its students' performance on the MCAS reading and math exams. To use the "school's performance" on these exams did not truly assess what teachers were doing to effect learning among its students. To retain its accreditation the school had to achieve a high level of performance in the first three years of its existence. To restate-the standardized tests did not effectively assess the progress of its students in those three years, nor the curriculum selected by the faculty, or their effectiveness as teachers. During the hearings conducted by the Board of Higher Education (Massachusetts), the decision was made to revoke the accreditation of the school, and the school closed.

Each of the seven principles are very important. Principle 3 is essential in that teachers need to be empowered to do what they have been trained to do; what they are passionate about doing, and that is to help young people to learn. Teachers should be able to do this without artificial assessment schemes hanging over their heads. As Anthony Cody articulates: Teachers must share in the process of defining their own work and accountability should never be arbitrary or divisive.

Milton L. Butts Jr.

Dear Mr. President, Secretary Duncan and members of Congress,

As a National Board certified teacher, a former classroom teacher of over 35 years, and a current teacher leader in a number of online communities of practice, I strongly encourage you to seriously consider an alternative direction as you address the issue of improving teacher practice to support student learning. The current trend of using test scores to evaluate teacher practice and improve instruction, in my opinion, is divisive, counterproductive, competitive and unsubstantiated by research.

There are many and varied studies indicating that teachers --who collaborate around their practice, who share a deep commitment to understanding learning and improving practice in communities, who develop collegial relationships and dispositions, who engage in difficult and meaningful conversations around learning, who take risks in implementing new strategies to improve learning, who continuously reflect on those changes and as a community develop a sense of collective efficacy-- will develop a knowledge of practice that leads to systemic change and better learning for all students.

In Finland, for example, teachers are provided weekly time to collaborate around questions of learning, they collaboratively develop curriculum from a lean set of national standards that meets the needs of their

students. They work collectively to improve teaching practice and the country has seen positive systemic changes in instruction and learning for students.

I have had the privilege to participate as a leader and co learner in a number of online communities of practice and witness firsthand the power of teacher collaboration in improving learning. I urge you to open conversations with teachers and researchers around this topic and to support and implement policies for teacher collaboration that can lead to transformation in instruction and greater learning for all students.

For our children,
Lani Ritter Hall

Principle 4: Schools Work Best When Teachers are Empowered

Dear President Obama, Mr. Duncan, and Congressmen,

During my 20+ years of teaching, I have had the privilege of working together with many outstanding and creative teachers. These are the teachers that all the parents want for their children because they are able to reach their students with a variety of interesting and (dare I say it) fun lessons. Over the last 8 years these creative lessons have disappeared more and more as my colleagues and I have felt increasing pressure to conform to one way of teaching that focuses completely on skills and assessment. Content knowledge such as science and history is frequently sacrificed in favor of test preparation on reading, math, and test-taking skills.

In our district, teachers at each grade level are expected to teach the same things, in the same way, at the same time. We are given pacing charts that tell us what pages we should be covering each day. The result is boring lessons that cause the students to hate school and choose to do nothing, and the teachers are rapidly burning out because of the stress. I came to the realization this past year that, although I truly love teaching, I hate my job, and many of my fellow teachers feel the same way.

We teachers are all highly trained professionals who are no longer allowed to do what we feel is best for our students. NCLB has taken our profession away from us by making the country believe that teachers are bad if an arbitrarily chosen percentage of their students don't test out at grade level. Let's be realistic here. It is not possible for 100% of all students to perform on grade level in all subjects based on a single test. There are a variety of reasons why students might not meet grade level requirements, which vary from low cognitive ability to lack of willingness to try to simple test anxiety. I know of a 3rd grader who broke down in tears at the prospect of taking the state test because the pressure was so great. If that student doesn't do well on the test, does that make his teacher bad? Is a doctor bad if one of his patients dies? Is a lawyer bad if she loses a case? Are doctors and lawyers told that every case must be treated in exactly the same manner? The answer to these questions is a resounding NO!

People are all different and the professionals they consult are expected to take these differences into account when deciding on a course of action. Yet teachers are being told what to do, how to do it, when to do it, and (by the way) we should also differentiate to meet individual needs. Then when our school fails to meet AYP, we are told that we are bad teachers. We need to be given our profession back. If you truly want students to learn, stop punishing the professionals who are trying to teach them. Allow us to do our jobs by replacing this law that focuses on arbitrary goals, high stakes testing, and punishment for failure with a law that helps schools to help their students grow in both skills AND content knowledge.

-Margie Skandera Adkins

Dear President Obama,

Teachers' Letters to Obama has drafted seven principles that should guide education reform. I am most concerned with Principle 4.

It is as follows: Schools Work Best When Teachers are Empowered, We Believe: Teachers become invested in their work when they are given the opportunity to participate in school-wide decision-making and to be creative and thoughtful in their classrooms. Many public schools work well and are resources to guide us in the improvement of all schools.

Miami-Dade County Public Schools has failed to embrace that core principle as they have taken the following actions that not only excluded teachers but dealt many and unwarranted punitive blow. Between the 13th and 14th of August, MDCPS teachers were notified they were to undergo an involuntary transfer from the 19 schools that are a part of the newly established Transformation Region. According to the MDCPS/UTC contract this is in accordance with Article XII, Section 8; which allows for a superintendent to transfer employees if it is for the good of the district. They were instructed to report to the district office on Monday, August 16 to learn of their reassignment. All 19 schools in the Transformation Region are predominately black with a majority black staff. Disproportionately African American females have been given involuntary transfers.

The transfers are said to be in accordance with the state and federal guidelines spelled out in the Differentiated Accountability model and the Blueprint. Intervene schools, chronic D and F schools, are to do one of the following:

- Turnaround: Replace the principal and rehire no more than 50 percent of the staff.
- Restart: Place a school under the management of a charter school operator, a charter management organization, or an education management organization.
- School closure: Close a school and enroll its students in a higher-achieving school.
- Transformation: Replace the principal and take steps to increase teacher and school leader effectiveness through instructional reforms, increased learning time, and improved operational flexibility.

United Teachers of Dade informed teachers that involuntary transfers were to take place, and the reassignments were to be based on data. Those teachers, who over a three-year period did not meet the goal percentage of 65% of their students making learning gains, were to be reassigned. Those that had met learning gains were to remain in place. Also, it was stated that nothing could be done to stop the district in executing this action.

Listed are the problems that have manifested as damaging, punitive, and in violation of contractual, state, and federal regulations:

- Many of the teachers reassigned met the accountability goal.
- Many of the teachers that have remained in place have not.
- Many of the teachers reassigned have been sent to schools more than 25 miles from their homes placing undue hardship with punitive commutes with little time to prepare for them.
- The principals were not reassigned and choose subjective criteria instead of objective data.
- Age discrimination and or retaliation have resulted in those closest to or at the top of the pay scale and those education activists critical of the DA model have been given the hardship commutes.
- Schools, such as Northwestern High, which achieved a C grade, were forced to undergo the turnaround effort even though such dismantling makes it difficult to continue to realize growth.
- Very few non-blacks and non-females were affected by these transfers.

While noble in its endeavor to improve the quality of education in underperforming urban, high poverty, community schools, the Differentiated Accountability Model, as legislated by NCLB, the Blueprint and Florida state legislation, is a failure. It fails to foster intellectual and social growth, two necessary components of public education. It results in an unequal and compromised education for urban, high poverty students. Additionally, it disproportionately results in unequal working conditions for a disproportionate amount of African American educators, as it creates a work environment that violates negotiated contracts for staff, resulting in the following: unfair and unwarranted reprisals and demotions for staff, more work without more financial remuneration, the blocking of transfers for those seeking lateral or ascension career moves and the proliferation of involuntary transfers that take on a punitive and non-productive hue damaging to the employee and the students that populate these schools. As you can see, it clearly fails to empower teachers.

Sincerely,
Ceresta Smith, NBCT

The education system under NCLB often does not allow teachers to determine what is best for their own students. Teachers can be creative and still raise test scores, but in order for teachers to do so, the education system must support this type of teaching. Good teachers know what will work and what it will take to solve some of the problems in education. Too often, unfortunately, teachers are not involved in the decision-making process and are not empowered to do what they think is best for their students. Too often administrators are given the power by their districts to dictate what happens in a classroom in an effort to raise test scores. When this happens without teacher input, everyone suffers.

I was an English teacher for thirty-eight years in California, and I retired early because I could no longer teach effectively given the focus on multiple-choice standards tests at my high school. During my career I worked with thirteen different principals because my district believed in moving administrators from school to school. I taught first in junior high and then at the high school level. For the last twenty-six years of my career, I taught at a high school in Southern California, a school with high-test scores. In addition to teaching English, I advised a peer-counseling group for eight years, was the yearbook advisor for thirty-two years and was the activities director for sixteen years. For the last eleven years of my teaching career, my English assignment was in an interdisciplinary English/World History program for sophomore students. I had and still have a passion for teaching and for helping students learn. My students' test scores were at the top of the scores of students at the school, but my methods differed from those prescribed by the principal.

My class was based on critical thinking and writing. Students worked independently and collaboratively to apply the knowledge they gained in the classroom to their school assignments and to the outside world. They learned to view issues from history, literature and life from different perspectives. For example, in completing a unit on the beginning of democracy in the world, they had to design and complete a project that would make a positive difference in the world, research and write about a person who was making a difference in the world, learn about how democracies work, and read Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury to look at the consequences of taking books and critical thinking out of a society. All of the tests for this class were essay tests with students being asked to use what they had learned to support their essay thesis with specific details. Unfortunately, this type of program did not fit the plan of the principal.

What happened to end my career was the increased emphasis on test scores to the point that classroom tests had to be multiple-choice assessments. I was no longer allowed to focus on writing skills or critical thinking. I was told what to teach, how to teach, and when to teach it. I was threatened with a change of teaching assignment and change of classroom if I continued to teach using the methods I thought were best for my students. When I no longer had the power to teach effectively to prepare my students for the future, I made the difficult decision to retire early. When teachers are told what to do and are not a part of the process of

improving a school, morale drops. When a number that represents a school's achievement on a standards multiple-choice test becomes more important than caring about students, teachers learn to survive in the system. When this happens, it is the students who ultimately lose.

Sincerely,

Judy Herrick

Principle 5: Support Public Schools

I've taught in both a public school and a charter school. My observations are as follows:

One of the main selling points for charter schools is that they:

- a) boast of smaller class sizes or a smaller student-teacher ratio
- b) boast that they have highly qualified teachers
- c) boast that they have newer, more up-to-date equipment and facilities

Smaller Class Sizes:

I take issue with a number of these selling points. One major issue I've seen with charter schools is this dichotomy of small class sizes. The problem is that the drawing point is smaller class sizes, but these smaller class sizes mean fewer pupils. Fewer pupils mean less funding. So charter schools must struggle to attract more students to maintain their funding. In Michigan, I've witnessed these efforts play out in a number of ways including not funding special education and Title 1 programs and teachers as they should in efforts to save money, accepting more students than they can house for "count day" in order to get funding and then counting on those parents who are dissatisfied with the overcrowding to pull students out, allowing violent and problem students to stay in the school when they clearly need to be removed, and freezing teacher pay and benefits.

If there is a real commitment to charter schools, this dichotomy must be addressed by taking a second look at how charter schools are funded.

The intersection of Highly Qualified Teachers, Charter Schools and Merit Pay:

As it stands now, the schools that are in most need of improvement are the ones where it is difficult to recruit or keep teachers. This is especially true in Michigan, where you will most often find charter schools in the communities that are the most depressed. Many of the students in charter schools qualify for free and reduced lunch (in the charter school where I taught, 80% of the students in my school qualified). There were issues with gangs, drugs, teen pregnancy, undiagnosed learning and behavioral disorders and misdiagnosed developmental problems. Despite all this, our kids learned. I give credit to the highly motivated teachers at the school and the fact that it was a relatively stable staff -- most staff members stayed for the entire school year, and we had a high retention rate of staff from year to year.

However, our school was the exception rather than the rule. It's difficult to keep teachers in schools like mine because they are underfunded, and lack resources, therefore they are understaffed. Schools make up this lack in staffing by either cramming students into established classes, or by hiring a string of substitute teachers who are often not qualified teachers. This sets students even further behind on state standards for whichever teacher will have them the next year. Twice as much ground needs to be covered in half the time next year.

If teacher pay is to be tied to how well my students perform on a test, why on earth would any sane teacher agree to teach in such a community at such a school as mine? State tests tell us that these students are the ones who most need experienced teachers, and yet what they will get instead – indeed what many are already getting – are new, green teachers. Or worse, a parade of different substitute and unqualified, unlicensed teachers.

If there is a real commitment to charter schools, then legislators should also reconsider merit pay. In the end, I believe it will hurt the students who need the most help from experienced teachers.

If there is a real commitment to raising student achievement, then we need to look at how we tackle the trifecta of large class sizes, staffing issues, and the effect of socioeconomic factors on failing schools.

Newer Facilities etc.

Let's just be honest, this idea of charter schools having newer facilities is a joke here in Michigan. As the public schools are closed left, right and center, charter schools step in to the facilities recently vacated by public schools. They buy the books, the equipment etc. When I taught at a charter school a few years ago, I was teaching from a textbook that was published in 1980 -- the year I was born. These books were purchased from Detroit public schools, as that district deemed them too old and had replaced them with newer books. My charter school was effectively getting the hand-me-downs. Paid for twice, with public funds (once by DPS, again by the charter school organization).

I've seen charter schools set up shop in trailers, old shop fronts, old office suites, a former storage facility and in buildings recently vacated by the local public school. Often these buildings are ill suited for educational use due to lack of proper equipment or because the buildings are not up to code and possibly unsafe.

I think this speaks to a funding issue, but also to an oversight issue. How are these charters renewed over and over again in the face of these safety and suitability issues?

Wrap-up:

Instead of relying on the private sector to provide public services (because, goodness knows, the private sector has done such a bang-up job of that recently). Why not invest in our public schools and our charter schools to make these, often bogus, selling points true statements?

If these are the selling points that parents and even the administration find to be such positives, then why not invest in our schools to make them a reality instead of the farce they are now in too many public and charter schools? Are we committed to raising student achievement or not? Let's put our money where our mouths are.

My apologies for being so long-winded...

-Heather Banks

It's the depths of the Depression, and participants in a dance marathon are pitted against each other in a desperate race for prize money that is eventually revealed to be largely illusional. On realizing the hopelessness of both the contest, and her life, the main character, Gloria, tells her partner, Robert, that she'd be better off dead, trying to convince him to shoot her and put her out of her misery. After all, they shoot horses, don't they? - Synopsis of "They Shoot Horses Don't They?"

Americans love competition. It appeals to our basic natures and intuitively fits in with many of our national myths about equality of opportunity and bootstrapping. But, forcing low-performing schools in our poorest neighborhoods for "fight" each other for money we know they need is wrong. It's wrong morally. It's wrong ethically. It's also bad policy.

We know underperforming schools have not gotten the money they need. ESEA (the Elementary and Secondary Education Act) in the Bush/NCLB (No Child Left Behind) era was never fully funded. There are those that will pretend that money is not needed for significant reform, but let's look at the facts. Successful charter schools get donations, and reform efforts like those in New York City cost money. It has ever been so that because we all want something for nothing, schools seldom get what they need, let alone what they want.

Money under NCLB was not enough, but was spread around "evenly" through formulas, etc. RttT (Race to the Top) changes a critical part of the old system by forcing states to compete with each other. Given the desperate straits most states are in financially, this has not been pretty. States have rapidly, and with little investigation, adopted new standards (creating "national" standards, something that used to be seen as both politically and legally impossible). They have thrown out teacher tenure, and tied teacher pay to their students' performance on tests. They've subverted existing federal grant programs in a desperate attempt to make themselves more "attractive" to the grant readers. The whole thing has the desperate air of that dance marathon in the depths of the Depression referenced above. Is Delaware really any more in need of extra funding for its schools than Mississippi? Does Rhode Island have a more compelling need than Colorado? How bad will it get? Let me share my story.

As part of RttT, the US Department of Education has expanded and changed the SIG, or School Improvement Grant program. Those funds are critical in states like mine, California, where "local district officials have "signed onto" RttT, by implementing legislation to meet with the grant application requirements, but have not been awarded SIG monies administered by the state.. States can use the SIG funds to help pay for the "reform" of schools designated as "persistently failing" under RttT rules (rules that states have to follow, even if they don't win the RttT grants). The most famous example of this was Central Falls High School in Rhode Island, which was a single school district, which resulted in all the teachers being "fired" by the superintendent when they couldn't get an agreement about the reform with the union. The school I have worked at for the last three years, Oak Ridge Elementary, was designated as such this spring. Once you have that designation, the school district can then apply for SIG funds for their Persistently Failing schools (Tier 1) and other schools designated as failing (Tier 2 and Tier 3). My district's grant was disqualified by the state. LAUSD "lost" because their application included only Tier 1 schools.

So, we now have the prospect of doing a whole school reform at six district schools (3 elementary, 2 middle, and 1 high school) with no additional monies from the state and the feds. The state has not just expectations but requirements for our reform; requirements (like changing curriculum and instructions models, increasing the school day, etc.) that don't come for free, but they aren't willing to pay for it. Just like with RttT, the state will "offer" another round of SIG grants next June to apply for. But, you have to wonder why we need to make the case for a reform the state says is not just necessary, but required? This is NOT the place for competition, this is the place for sober planning and execution, and a solid funding-base to carry reforms out.

It's becoming clearer that there may be among the supporters of this scheme would would like schools like mine to be put out of their misery, and shut down or turned over to charter organizations, but if that is the answer to the question of low-performing, low-income schools, you have to wonder about not just the qualifications but the basic intelligence of the person giving that answer. The feds are holding states hostage, and forcing them to change decades of labor law that aren't just about "protecting" teachers, but made teaching a profession. The reforms being proposed have a poor track record of improving student

achievement, but do a great job of undermining teachers, disrupting communities, and leaving kids high and dry. It's time to say "no" to this type of fake reform, and man-up and fully fund public education. It's the right thing to do.

Alice Mercer

Gallop Poll results suggest that public ratings of local schools are near the top of their 38 year range. They also suggest that, while the public will support educational reform efforts within the public school system, they will not support efforts to build alternative systems.

In 1974, 48 % of the public gave schools in their community an A or B. In 2006, the figure was 49%. In 1994, 66% of the public gave their eldest child's school an A or B. In 2006, the figure was 64%. It seems there is no decline in support for public schools. Ratings remain high and remarkably stable.

The data makes it clear to me that reliance upon a policy centered around non-public charter schools to initiate and/or carry out educational reform is not supported by the public. Therefore, the focus of RTTT, and its criteria of support for charter schools, is misplaced.

How much more unpopular will this focus on a charter school concept be, as it begins to drain away funding for existing public schools. How much more unpopular will this concept be, as the public learns that charter schools are routinely exempted from the rules and regulations that are enforced on public schools.

Education reform that builds an elite system of private, under regulated, sometime for profit charter schools will exacerbate the problems of public schools, not resolve them.

Thank you for your time and consideration

Ken Mortland

Principle 6: Students Should Love School!

Dear Secretary Duncan and Congressmen:

Life will be different for our students as they cross the threshold of high school into the vast world beyond our boundaries. Whether immediate college entry or delayed, vocational training, or military service, our students need to be armed with the skills necessary to survive the unyielding onslaught of information they face moment to moment. This paradigm shift, for our students, does not even take into account their cultural swing to cell phones, texting, social networking, blogging, Internet access, iPods, apps, and widgets, or the fact that PDA doesn't refer to kissing in the hallways any more, but to a Personal Digital Assistant. Our students are published authors on Wikipedia, Twitter, and blogs; film producers, actors, and directors on YouTube, and musicians creating and recording in their own personal computer studios located in their bedrooms and basements. No wonder they're different. But what we need to ask is: are we? Most importantly, how can we change as individual teachers or systematically to reflect this kaleidoscopic world? Being able to read and write is not enough when students are not only being shaped by the onslaught of text

and images but also shaping others by what they create and contribute. It has become imperative that not only the academic elite be allowed access to the higher level thinking skills that will ensure college success but that all of our students be equipped with those skills which are now needed for survival as well as success in any venue.

So how do we continue? By arming our teachers with the information and knowledge they need to successfully integrate these higher-level thinking skills into their classrooms, practice the self-reflection and personal growth we will expect from students, and respond to the rapidly ever-changing world around us. We need to make the 'end goal' common knowledge across grade levels so teachers at all levels know the desired outcomes and skills of the students graduating our institutions.

Critical thinking has been identified as one of the requisite survival skills of the 21st century. Therefore, as educators, we need to teach students to think critically; gather information, evaluate worth, ponder implications, imagine solutions, and reflect on new ideas or alternate outcomes. According to Richard Hersh, "the kind of learning we need stimulates the imagination and teaches how to construct meaning and make disparate information coherent." We must intentionally instruct our youth, not to merely read or passively absorb the words they see but rather, to effectively 'chew up', dissect, and reassemble the information they consume—question, challenge, comment, reflect—and become an active participant and contributor to the process, partnering with the originator.

This year in my district, we, as teachers, started to critically reflect on this emerging process; we noticed several positive changes in students. Both the tenth and eleventh grade English teachers noticed growth in our incoming students:

Their awareness of diction and syntax, as well as their willingness to take risks and attempt to analyze the author's purpose is refreshing. We're not there yet, but we are beginning to see the fledgling fruits of the process with a lot less plot summary and students really starting to stretch and work their 'brain muscle' before they engage in speaking or writing.

They also evidenced this trend last year on the ninth and tenth grade final exams: It wasn't until the end of the year that we could see all the little pieces we had been working on, fall into place. For some students it created an almost complete puzzle picture, for others the 'edge pieces' were in place and they had the rest to fill in as they developed more skills. But the ultimate test occurred this year in a high school self-contained special education English class. When students began to learn how to 'close read', think about what they were reading, respond and interact with the text, one student put down her head and refused. "I don't want to" she admonished her teacher, "I'll never use this stuff." "Untrue" her teacher responded to this expectant teen mom, "You may not choose to read this kind of literature after high school but you will use these skills everyday whether selecting a car seat for your soon-to-be-arriving baby, deciding on your first car or which bank to apply for a mortgage; you will need to be able to pay attention to the details you read and hear, discover the similarities and differences, incorporate new information, evaluate fact from fiction, assess the tone, and make an educated decision—that is what we are practicing." She picked up her head and started participating.

So the lesson? Real learning takes time; there is no 'quick fix'. We need to open a dialogue that is solution driven. Determine what students need to learn and then develop the assessments that will meet those goals. According to Lorraine A. Ozar, Ph.D. at the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness at Loyola University in Chicago: What you "test" is what you get. The more significant the learning, the more varied and integrated the assessment must be. If you don't "test" it, you [most likely] won't get it. If you want transfer to real-life, you must build it into how students show learning.

This is the fundamental idea put forth in the theory of backward design for assessments. Developing this type of assessment is a commitment of time, energy, and resources but once teachers are trained to effectively work together as critical thinkers, sharing ideas, building on a variety of information, using evidence; they will be equipped to create classroom assessments that reflect the intended outcomes of their instruction, including the now embedded critical thinking skills-a winning combination for the children of our nation.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Colleen McDonald, NBCT
Cambridge Central School District
Cambridge, New York

Dear President Obama, Secretary Duncan, and Members of Congress,

I would like to give you an example of the type of damage that NCLB has done to education. Years ago I used to lead a program in my school that I called "Living History." It was semester long and involved all the 5th grade students in my school. This program exposed the students to guest speakers who are well known experts in their fields. Students learned research, reading, writing, and speaking skills. They were allowed to use their creativity and imagination to create display boards and skits that were performed at a National Historic Site. They incorporated art, music, and drama into their presentations. In short, this program was an example of everything that is good about teaching and learning. It created excitement and enthusiasm in the students and was a learning experience they would remember for the rest of their lives.

Three years ago, because of administrative pressure to spend less time on social studies, which isn't tested, and more time teaching and assessing reading skills, I decided to end the program. It was a huge loss to students who now find reading, writing, and what little social studies we are able to squeeze into our curriculum "boring."

With each passing year as we teachers try harder and harder to prepare our students to do well on those high stakes tests, I find that the students care less and less about learning. The excitement and love of learning is gone. It's been replaced with the drudgery and dread of skill drilling and testing. In addition, as student motivation has gone down, inappropriate behavior has risen. This causes teachers to spend more time on discipline, giving them less time to spend on teaching anything beyond the basic core curriculum.

What you need to do is to put educational decisions back into the hands of the people who know best what the students need, the teachers. Stop punishing schools that fail to meet the unrealistic goals of NCLB. It is true that all students can learn, but they will never, ever all learn in the same way and at the same pace. Please stop the insanity and let schools return to being places of education, not test preparation.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Margaret Adkins
Springfield School District 186
Springfield, Illinois

Dear Secretary Duncan and Honorable Members of Congress,

Education is a matter of national security. It is the foundation of our democracy, the engine of the economy, and the means for every citizen to achieve his/her potential. As an experienced educator of 30 years, I would like to share my thoughts on this aspect of the Letters to Obama organization's manifesto.

A little on my background. I've spent the last 25 years teaching for San Francisco Unified Schools in three different high schools: one low-performing school that was reconstituted, one high achieving "small, necessary" high school targeted for African-American students; and a comprehensive high school with slightly above the mean test scores. I've taught all levels of English, drama, speech, journalism, video, and stage technology. I've served as: English department chair; Visual & Performing Arts department chair; mentor teacher, School Site Council chair, Union building committee member. Over the years, I've observed and seen what has worked, and what doesn't work. Here are my thoughts on why students need to enjoy school and feel empowered by it.

The way America entertains itself, finds information, and communicates has changed radically over the last 10 years. The basic way we educate has not fundamentally changed. What I have found works best to engage most students are project-based, group tasks, that require students to work through real world problems using a subject-specific process that involves gathering and evaluating appropriate materials; analyzing, generating, testing and proving hypotheses; and assembling a product that synthesizes what the group has learned for public display. Examples of these type of project include presentations to community boards and government organizations about community issues that have been explored by the group; public fairs and contests; plays and concerts; speech competitions; newspapers, magazines, on line publications; art exhibits; web sites; round table discussions. In these ways we empower students to take their work seriously, as it will be subject to public scrutiny; the community looks at teenagers as people to be taken seriously and not feared as troublemakers; and students feel part of the community. Empowered and inspired students will contribute positively to society.

What impedes this from happening is that it is hard to assess these elements of education. This is where the federal government should be leading and providing funding. With available technology, it is simple for each student to maintain a portfolio of work that demonstrates their experiences and knowledge. There needs to be ONE standardized test to determine if a student has the minimum skills to graduate from high school. It could be national or state, but limited to one or the other- not both, as is the case in California. These test scores would be part of the portfolio, as well as essays, records of experiments, videos of presentations, graphic displays of knowledge and analysis of work – that illustrate the student's successes and failures. Seniors would then have to present to a panel made up of teachers, parents, business people, and district officials to defend why he/she should be granted a diploma. Sure, this system would require more planning, time and organization – but it would result in students taking a much more active role in their graduation than they currently have. If the federal government backed a new form of assessment that was a guide, instead of an unfunded mandate, we might be able to start creating an educational system that created joyful learners.

The definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing over and over again and expect a different result. We've cut the education budget, increased graduation requirements, demanded more of teachers and vilified them as the culprits behind the miniscule progress we've made in public education. Let's take this opportunity to take the lead in developing an education system that trusts the people who are in the classroom doing the work. In my career, I've worked with maybe 5 teachers out of the hundreds I've served with that didn't belong in teaching. Looking at the attitudes from the feds and the state, it seems like only

one in 100 teachers is doing his job. Let's change the paradigm, create a more holistic assessment system that takes advantage of the technology, and trust teachers to create students who feel empowered and inspired by school.

Sincerely,

John Prosper
George Washington HS
San Francisco, Ca.

Dear Members of Congress,

Our children are suffering under NCLB/RTTT. I am dismayed with the changes in my school district and the changes in my nephew's (formerly great) school. Many teachers are buckling under tremendous pressure to 'teach to the test.' Too many children spend their days completing packets of worksheets instead of reading and discussing great books. They are learning math by rote instead of by understanding. Inquiry science, music and drama are disappearing. Teachers are less collaborative. Authentic assessment is going by the wayside. The sanctions for 'failure' on high stakes tests are just too frightening, so instead we fail our children by denying them a thoughtful, well-rounded education. Please help put an end to the Bush/Obama/Duncan failed stick-and-carrot approach to school reform. The high stakes attached to standardized tests are destroying public education.

Thank you,
Michelle New sum

STUDENTS SHOULD LOVE SCHOOL!

The way to make this happen is summed up in one word- flexibility.

- Teachers need the flexibility to creatively teach.
- Students need flexibility to move through the curriculum at their own pace.
- Students need the flexibility to attend school at their convenience.
- Schools can be open a variety of times and days and provide a variety of classes, including online classes.
- Students need the flexibility to choose how to demonstrate their knowledge (music, art, writing, etc.)

- Students should have flexibility within lessons that are project based and related to the real world and matched to students' interests.
- School districts need to have the flexibility to meet the needs of their student populations and communities.

Beth Bley

Principle 7: Schools Need to be Strengthened, Not Punished

RTTT not based on research. Free market policies do not belong in education. Education is about a personal best – not a competition – as the bell curve does exist. Your turnaround policies are not research-based; rather they are directed and endorsed by the business roundtable. Hedge fund managers are now education reformers, and the neo-liberals are on board – all are profiting at the expense of public tax dollars and inner-city schools. Green Dot took over Locke High School in Los Angeles, and with a 15,000,000 investment they are able to provide services to students including small class sizes, psychologists, social workers, etc. that the defunded real public schools used to be able to provide ALL FOR A 10 POINT GAIN on the CST. Wow – destroy a community, push out the low performers (in this instance the gang members – which Green Dot is openly proud of), and give the administrative bosses a six digit salary is so worthwhile. 60% turnover of teachers is ridiculous AND they lauded it as firing the ineffective – yet the exit interviews stated that 40% left on their own, disgusted that they were not allowed to teach, only test prep.

Listen to Jonathan Kozol, Diane Ravitch, and Kenneth Libby. Teachers are not onboard with RTTT. Here's an article to get you started: <http://www.aolnews.com/brooklyn-school/article/opinion-dont-close-failing-schools-fix-them/19534446>

Carrie Jacobson

You are on the precipice of making decisions about low-performing schools that have the potential to destroy education for at least one generation of at-risk children. Punitive measures do not undo the specific obstacles these schools--my school--face. We are all invested in making progress in our schools. My fear--shared by many others--is that the DOE punitive threats are creating schools with less and less equal access for our poor and minority students. Without a doubt, these test-prep academies propelled by federal and state punitive mandates will ever broaden the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

Kathie Kienzle Marshall

Dear President Obama, Secretary Duncan and Members of Congress:

Several members of our Teachers' Letters to Obama (TLO) group of educators recently had the honor of sharing with Secretary Duncan our concerns with the direction of federal education reform's Race to the Top initiative. I was one of them—or rather, was scheduled to be, as the conversation was cut short.

Following that, in various publications were reports of Department of Education assertions that teachers support RTTT. This claim is expressly contrary to the position statement we issued, nor does it reflect the sentiments of thousands of teachers who have reported corresponding with you, Mr. President. Some clarification is in order.

Improvement or “turn-around” programs for struggling schools must be flexible and participatory. Teachers, students, and community members need to be involved in discussions and problem solving. Moreover, we do not believe the current four options are adequate and recommend instead the strategies in the Strengthening Our Schools proposal now before Congress.

I will speak directly to one attempt to “improve” a struggling school.

Until June 25 of this year, I taught World History at John C. Fremont High School in the Los Angeles Unified School District. While we were a school with a checkered past, (including having principals lasting an average of 23 months) we were a school on the move. Our test scores were on the rise, in fact had been for a number of years. We were not on the California list of worst schools because of said rise.

It can be attributed to dividing the 4600 students on a year-round calendar into thirteen Small Learning Communities, each with one counselor seeing to the needs of 400 students. Teachers shared the same kids. Problems could be spotted. Help could be given.

Additionally, from October through December, the Fremont faculty voted to collaborate with the Los Angeles Education Partnership (LAEP) to strengthen the SLCs and improve instruction and support for students. At the same time, Fremont finally developed a Single Plan created by teachers, parents and students. This was the first time that teachers wrote the single plan document rather than an administrator. It was the first time that the parent advisory councils at Fremont wrote out their recommendations and these were embedded in the single plan. The plan called for clear action steps to address the key focus areas such as ELA, Math, Graduation, Parent Engagement, and Attendance.

Yet, on December 9th, 2009, Superintendent Ramon Cortines designated us for “reconstitution”. That later became “restructuring.”. What I do know is that the principal did not have to reapply (because it was his first year), but the entire staff was told to reapply or be moved elsewhere; they were also reassured that most would have their jobs, as long as signed and agreed to a Memorandum of Understanding, which would assign additional duties to the returning staff. Teachers were also “invited” to joined “committees” to advise the restructuring/reconfiguration of Fremont High. You will please make note that the teacher input was to be of a purely “advisory” nature. Parents were to be informed and made a part of the process, as were students.

Yet a new structure for the school was developed without teacher input. The thirteen learning communities or SLCs were to become six Academies of 500 each, and three 9th Grade Centers of 600 students, served by a single counselor. I cannot stress enough that to increase the counselors’ caseloads by such percentages will prove detrimental to the students, whose education is to be improved by this folly. Add to this, in a school where the average 10th grade student misses 25-30 days out of a 162 day school year (year-round schools on our schedule have longer but fewer days than traditional schools), a block schedule, which was voted down by the faculty, is now being instituted; for those not involved in education professionally, each day missed by a student will actually impact them all the more severely.

In addition, the Superintendent said the parents and students would be informed. Yet a group of teachers were able to collect over 700 signatures of parents who lived nearby and who were not informed at all of changes at the school, nor input solicited.

Another factor has to be tossed in: while teachers were reassured by Superintendent Ramon Cortines, the Local District 7 Superintendent Dr. George McKenna III and the principal that most teachers would retain their jobs if only they were to reapply, it turns out that in order to obtain a School Improvement Grant (SIG), that Fremont could retain no more than 50% of the original faculty. Aside from the issue of just being plain underhanded, you will now have a faculty at a “struggling school” (which did not make the California worst schools list because of improvements in test scores), which has had the average teacher last less than three years and the average principal last 23 months, with 50% new staff. It should also be noted than many of the

positions for Fremont, which begins the school year on July 6th, remain unfilled or will be filled by long-term substitute teachers.

Getting rid of all the teachers or even half the teachers does little to address the deeper problems. The key is to personalize the learning, to develop relationships. I keep thinking of an anthropology book called "Small Is Beautiful," by Schumaker, which can be applied to those struggling schools. Isn't this the concept behind Small Learning Communities, to personalize education, the village raising a child, to cite the West African proverb? To be able to have (besides the smaller class sizes we all long for but will probably never appear) a group of teachers sharing a group of students (at the Mont, each SLC is about 400, which works for US) so that we know the problems of the kids and are able to plan for grade-level and vertical teaming, lowering the number of students who "slip through the cracks." One of the successes we had in the use of SLCs is what I call the Legacy Effect. Brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews and cousins learn to look forward to being in the same program, which builds success.

Extending the year won't do it, nor will an introduction of block scheduling, because these students already have a bad track record for attendance; the block schedule looks like a quick-fix to recover lost credits. Our faculty has also voted against it. So, short of reducing class sizes, I think this might be the best path. Growth and progress seem slow, but do you want to build quick and shoddy or for long-term? At this point, not only will there be a shortage of qualified teachers (isn't that what NCLB was about, to begin with?), but now I personally know juniors who have decided that they do not wish to sacrifice their educations to this grand experiment—and they have brothers and sisters... Many sophomores I know are following suit. The New Fremont will not only bleed qualified teachers, but the students we entered this profession to serve.

It is my hope that I put a human face on what is happening in the name of RTTT and school improvement. The "turn-around" program for Fremont High School has been neither flexible nor participatory. Teachers, students, and community members were not involved in discussions or problem solving. Let this travesty not repeat itself in other schools. Learn the lesson of Fremont High. I recommend you closely examine the strategies in the Strengthening Our Schools proposal now before Congress.

The future of our schools is in your hands.

Charles V. Olynyk

Social Studies Teacher

Los Angeles Unified School District

From Email:

Dear Secretary Duncan:

Reading the article in the Kansas City Star tonight, I had to write. I agree wholeheartedly with your comments regarding equality beginning in the classrooms of our nation. However, the DOE's Blueprint for Reform (and Race to the Top Grants) abandon the very children who desperately need to be educated--the E2Ls, the ... See More poverty stricken, homeless, disabled, etc.

The DOE's reforms & grants narrow the curriculum. The DOE's reforms & grants ensure teaching to the test and constant test prep. Wouldn't you, if your job, your salary, and your school's survival depended upon it?

The DOE's reforms are all predicated on very high stakes test scores from standardized tests. Why take a statistically proven failed initiative (NCLB) and use it as a foundation to launch new reforms? You have an opportunity to be the hero this country needs. You have the ability to stop these initiatives and regroup. Gain input from all levels of 'stakeholders' in the process, gain endorsement of a new plan; a plan in which all levels of stakeholders can take pride in developing and launching. Congresswoman Judy Chu's plan is a great first start. The DOE's proposed four (4) turnaround models will not work. Scrap them, start over.

The higher the stakes for standardized tests, the greater the failure of education. I know you want our nation's children to learn. I heard from your staff that you care deeply about children learning and succeeding in life. These reforms will fail these children.

The DOE's Blueprint for Reform merely ensures a society with lines drawn between the "haves" and the "have-nots". Even the hyped up charters aren't saving these children because admitting them to charters will drag their high stakes test scores down too. Please don't have some staffer write back to patronize me and insist what I wrote is not true. I know it is true. I live outside the Beltway!

Since it is necessary to pigeon hole everyone these days--I'm not red, nor blue. I never owned a union card. I am from corporate America with an MBA. I'm not a teacher, although I respect teachers tremendously. I've held numerous executive and leadership positions. No child of mine ever played soccer. I am a parent.

Mr. Duncan, what you say and what you do, seem to me to appear to be wholly separate. Perhaps there is a communication disconnect within the ranks of the Dept of Education and the States? Perhaps there is a communication disconnect between your office and that of the DOE Grants' Office? Whatever it is, it must be resolved.

I've watched your interviews, listened to you at the Governor's conference, read your speeches and articles such as this one in the Kansas City Star and the message is diametrically opposed to the actions of your office. I'm not alone in my thinking. I wouldn't waste time writing to you if I was.

Undertaking a massive organizational change of any kind requires clarity in communication as well as input from those you expect to become your "change agents" on the frontlines. Until this effort is stopped, examined, feedback incorporated, pilot tested, then launched properly, it will fail miserably.

The problem is, it will fail millions of children in this nation for yet another year. Public education is in shambles right now because of eight (8) years of NCLB; not because of a slew of incompetent teachers. Reforms were tossed at teachers repeatedly year after year and each time the stakes were raised higher.

This is not, as I am sure you are aware, some new product being launched on the marketplace, which can be tweaked, then hyped, until it finds its niche. These are children's lives, their futures, and communities' livelihoods all in jeopardy and all waiting for someone to stop this high-speed train crash.

Be please that hero, Mr. Duncan. You are a natural fit for a Superman costume! Race to the Top and those four turnaround models are career kryptonite.

Thanks for reading this in advance,

Very truly yours,
Rita Solnet

"The RTTT emphasis on high-stakes standardized testing necessarily reduces the education of our students to "test prep" focused on passing multiple-choice tests of unproven reliability. We oppose the use of so-called "merit pay" based on standardized test scores."

Developing assessments for learning (teacher and student) takes collaboration, trials, and time. Each time a classroom assessment is used it requires a conversation asking students to reflect upon their progress, mastery of skills and concepts. Frequently the best learning is the "struggle" combined with a student's critical thinking about the variables.

This is my 33rd year of teaching and some of my most exciting. I am a NBCT 2009 and it was an exciting process for professional development. In my early teacher preparation, I was never taught to involve students in their own learning and assessment. Through other "educators", teacher-led professional development, collaboration, and my desire to see my students embrace learning, I find myself in awe of what is possible and how willing children are to participate in their own learning. Yes, better classroom assessment has guided me for the last 10-12 years, but recently I find myself becoming angry knowing "high-stakes standardized testing...reduces the education of our students to "test prep". My students demonstrate growth every day and I celebrate with them, but some are not yet at standard...or...the test is not designed to show the beauty of their learning and contributions. Do you know how difficult it is to look at that child and say, "you failed to meet standard"; all your growth and hard work was not enough?

I would invite any member of Congress, Arne Duncan, or President Obama to experience a classroom where students work hard to fully participate in spite of the group's diverse reading, writing, economic, cultural, and family differences. Until you are in classrooms over extended time; until you know the makeup of thousands of classrooms; until you can create your own assessments for learning and differentiate your lessons for every child, how, I ask Congress, can you tie my teaching worth to a test, (even multiple tests) and pay me accordingly. You are on a course to destroy the love of learning for teachers and students. Please, avail yourselves to genuine dialogue with great teachers; assessment and accountability is just as important to us. We continue to strive in perfectly our craft. Don't play politics with education.

Secretary Duncan, you were given a gift recently and you didn't recognize it; Try again and listen next time.

Karen Kielbon

Dear Secretary Duncan:

Reading your comments in the Kansas City Star entitled, 'Education is Civil Rights Issue of Our Generation,' I simply had to write. ... See More

I agree wholeheartedly with your comments. However, the DOE's Blueprint for Reform and Race to the Top competitive grants abandon the very children who desperately need to be educated--those who are English language learners, the poverty stricken, homeless, autistic, disabled, etc.

The DOE's reform initiatives and criteria to 'win' grant money narrow the curriculum by its obsessive focus on standardized tests.

The DOE's reform initiatives and criteria to 'win' grants not only reinforce teaching to the test and constant test prep, but demand it.

If your salary, your livelihood, and your school's very survival depend on students' performance on one Reading and Math test, wouldn't you prioritize test prep above all else? Would you willingly risk your livelihood by agreeing to teach the most challenged students?

Further, does obsessively focused test prep on standardized tests simply negate any end result?

The DOE's reforms are all predicated on high stakes test scores from standardized tests. Why take a statistically proven failed initiative (NCLB) and use it as a foundation to launch new reforms?

Secretary Duncan, you have an opportunity to be the hero this country needs. You have the ability to stop these initiatives and regroup. Gain input from all levels of 'stakeholders' in the process; gain endorsement of a new plan--a plan in which all levels of stakeholders take pride in developing and launching.

Congresswoman Judy Chu's plan is a great first start. The DOE's proposed four (4) turnaround models will not work. Scrap them, start over. Closing public schools should not be an option.

The higher the stakes for standardized tests, the greater the failure of education. I know you want our nation's children to learn. Your staff relayed that you care deeply about children learning and succeeding in life. These proposed reforms will fail to educate children.

The DOE's Blueprint for Reform merely ensures a society with lines drawn between the "haves" and the "have-nots". Even the hyped up charters aren't saving these children. Many privatized charter schools won't admit 'hard to teach' students because it will drag their coveted high stakes test scores down too. Please don't tell me this is a myth. I know it is true. I live outside the Beltway!

Since it is necessary to pigeon hole everyone these days--I'm not red, nor blue. I never owned a union card. I am from corporate America with an MBA. I'm not a teacher, although I respect teachers tremendously. I've volunteered in schools 15 years. I've held numerous executive and leadership positions. No child of mine ever played soccer. I am a parent.

Mr. Duncan, what you say and what you do, seem to me to be conflicting. Perhaps there is a communication disconnect within the ranks of the Dept of Education and the States? Perhaps there is a communication disconnect between your office and that of the DOE Grants' Office? Whatever it is, it must be resolved. I've watched your interviews, listened to you at the Governor's conference, read your speeches and articles such as this one in the Kansas City Star and the message is diametrically opposed to the actions of your office. I'm not alone in my thinking. I wouldn't waste time writing to you if I was.

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The problem is, it will fail millions of children in this nation for yet another year. Public education is in shambles right now because of eight (8) years of NCLB; not because of a slew of incompetent teachers. Reforms were tossed at teachers repeatedly year after year and each time the stakes were raised higher. Teachers seem to be under attack when many are already leaving the profession. Retention rate of qualified, seasoned teachers must be an even greater problem than ever before in our history.

This is not, as I am sure you are aware, some new product being launched in the marketplace, which can be tweaked, then hyped, until it finds its niche. These are children's lives, their futures, and communities' livelihoods all in jeopardy and all waiting for someone to stop this high-speed train crash.

Be please that hero, Mr. Duncan. You are a natural fit for a Superman costume! Race to the Top and those

four turnaround models are career kryptonite.

Very truly yours,
Rita M. Solnet

Dear President Obama,

I am the father of five and have been a teacher for thirteen years. While becoming a parent required no prior experience and no degree or certificate of any type, I am allowed to make decisions that affect the most intimate details of my children's lives. As a teacher, on the other hand, my four year degree, experience as a student teacher, substitute teacher, and now a full-time teacher plus my state-issued certificate that requires me to constantly further my education, allows me no input into the decisions made concerning our nation's education system.

While you were running for office, many teachers supported your vision of change and voted for you so that you could implement positive changes that would improve American education specifically, and American society in general. I now ask that you support teachers by allowing our vision of change to be included in your discussions of how to improve our nation's education system. To leave us out of the process is, in essence, telling us and the rest of America that the experience, expertise, and dedication of America's educators is not to be valued or respected.

Mr. President, please don't send that message. There are far too many people who respect you and believe in you who, by example, will adopt that same opinion. Instead, send a positive message to Americans that its educators are well-trained, dedicated individuals willing to work with whoever may be involved to ensure that the future leaders of America won't have to answer the questions about why our education system is failing, but will instead be able to, with heads held high, answer the question of how, when it comes to education, we have become the example for the rest of the world to follow.

Sincerely,

Christopher D. Janotta
Illinois

The results of the most recent PDK/GALLUP poll indicates the American public's support of Pres. Obama's education policy is down across the board. Whether you're talking to Democrats (70%-62%), Republicans (17%-11%), or Independents (40%-33%), the results reflect a significant across the board decline. Some of the other findings give us insight into why this is the case.

“Overwhelmingly, Americans favor keeping a poorly performing school in their community open with existing teachers and principals, while providing comprehensive outside support (54%, Table 1, page 4). This finding is consistent across political affiliation, age, level of education, region of the country, and other demographics.” This makes it clear that the current efforts to improve education by radical surgery, firing teachers or principals or closing schools, are not popular with the people (aka voters). Continued pursuit of these radical policies will likely generate continued decline in the president's ratings.

“Americans believe the most important national education program should be improving the quality of teaching (44%). Developing demanding standards (24%), creating better tests (11%), and improving the nation's lowest-performing schools (20%) were rated significantly lower.” (Percentages from Table 3, page 4.) Table 2 of the report makes it clear that Americans see a much smaller role for the federal government than the president in setting policies for paying teachers, for setting standards, for deciding what should be

taught, and (least of all) for holding schools accountable. Again, continued pursuit of these radical federal policies will like generate continued decline in the president's ratings.

Finally, "American opinion of NCLB is unchanged from last year, and overall remains unfavorable, as less than one in four Americans believe NCLB has helped their local schools."

If you have not already seen this year's poll report, you can find it at <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/poll.htm>

Thank you for your time, consideration, and service to America.

Ken Mortland

Teachers Letters to Obama is a Facebook group of more than 2800 educators from across the nation. Please visit our group site to participate in discussions and learn with us about ways to improve our schools.