

An Urgent Message on Education to the Presidential Candidates from Public School Parents across the United States

September 7, 2008

Dear Senators Obama and McCain:

We would like to congratulate you on your nominations for President. As public school parents and other stakeholders, we want to bring to your attention the critical need to improve the opportunities of millions of children throughout the country who attend markedly inferior schools that deny them an adequate chance to succeed.

We have read your education positions and believe that the concerns we raise and the proposals we suggest would help focus and strengthen your plans for improving our nation's schools.

In recent weeks, two different statements have been released by advocates, academics and elected officials, with very different perspectives about how to improve our nation's public schools, particularly for poor and minority students.

The first statement by the Education Equality Project called for even more high stakes testing, merit pay for teachers, competition, and charter schools, and pointed to the teachers unions as the major obstacles in achieving success.

We would call this approach NCLB on steroids. Rather than improving our schools, more high stakes testing and merit pay based on standardized test scores will likely further punish our neediest students, diminishing their educational experience and leading to even more teacher turnover, test prep, narrowing of the curriculum, and less time and effort given to authentic learning in their schools. It will also contribute to more test score inflation, meaning that their scores will no longer provide reliable evidence of their actual level of achievement.

The other new coalition of academics and advocates argued for "a bolder, broader approach" to education. They say that although some educational programs should be supported, without major investments in health care and reducing poverty, it is wrong to ask schools alone to significantly narrow the achievement gap between ethnic and racial groups or improve outcomes for our neediest students.

Although we believe that as a society we should be doing more to expand healthcare and reduce income inequality, we also believe that this perspective significantly understates the potential for dramatic improvements, particularly in those schools that most minority and high-poverty students attend, and the need for critical reforms to enhance their chance of success.

The following are the improvements that we believe are necessary and would change the lives of literally millions of children throughout our country.

1. Safe and uncrowded schools with more counselors: Many of our students, particularly in urban areas, attend overcrowded schools in near third world conditions, contributing to a variety of disciplinary problems that make it difficult for them to learn, leading to more violence and higher dropout rates. In addition to less crowding, these schools often require many more guidance counselors; in many, there is only one counselor for six hundred or more students.
2. Smaller classes: Despite the abundant research that conclusively demonstrates that smaller

classes can significantly narrow the achievement gap, poor and minority students continue to attend schools with much larger classes on average than those in wealthier districts, and thus are deprived of the individual attention they need to succeed. Small classes in all grades K-12 have been linked to more classroom engagement, more time on task, higher levels of achievement, and lower dropout rates. Moreover, in national surveys, educators throughout the country overwhelmingly say that reducing class size would be the most effective way to improve the quality of teaching in our public schools.

3. Adequate resources and teacher support to assure that all students receive a rich, well-rounded curriculum including the arts, physical education and project-based learning in a curriculum connected to their own lives and culture, with progress evaluated by high-quality, appropriate assessment tools that are primarily classroom-based.
4. More parental involvement: Studies show that the more involved parents are at the school level, the better the outcomes for students. And yet the top-down, corporate approach to school governance currently used in cities throughout the country such as Chicago and New York has consistently and systematically worked to eliminate the ability of parents to have a real voice in decision-making and thus to be true partners at the school and district level.

Competition, including charter schools and vouchers, has not and will not lead to a significantly better or more equitable public school system, just as it has not brought us better access to health care. In fact, the continued proliferation of charter and other schools requiring interviews and/or application processes risks creating wider disparities between the haves and have-nots; and what is often advertised as increased parental choice actually means the ability of such schools to exclude our neediest students. ***The last thing our nation needs is a "trickle down" educational system.***

As a nation we have an overarching moral imperative to provide all our children with the same educational opportunities that our more advantaged public and private school students take for granted, including the right to attend a safe and uncrowded school with smaller class sizes, a rich, high-quality curriculum, and more parental involvement.

Until these goals have been achieved, we cannot and should not give up on the potential of schools to transform lives.

We urge you to recognize this imperative, and if elected president, do everything in your power to ensure that every child who grows up in this country has the opportunity to attend the sort of school he or she needs for a better chance to learn and succeed.

Yours,

Leonie Haimson
Executive Director, Class Size Matters
New York, NY

Julie Woestehoff
Executive Director, Parents United for Responsible Education
Chicago, IL

7 signature pages follow....

Louisa Acosta
New York City public school teacher
New York, NY

Ann Agranoff
Teacher, Queensborough Community College
Mother, former PTA president of the Renaissance Charter School
New York, NY

Gary L. Anderson
Professor, Steinhardt School of Education at New York University
New York, NY

Kathleen R. Anderson
Chicago, IL

Diane Aoki
Parent and teacher activist
Hawaii

Jaime S. Austria
Parent
Member, New York City Opera and American Ballet Theater Orchestras
New York, NY

Wanda S. Ballentine
Former English teacher
Eagan, MN

Beth Bernett
PA co-president, School Leadership Team member, co-chair Multiple Assessment Committee,
School of the Future
New York, NY

Doris Porto (Brosnan)
Doctoral Candidate International Educational Development
Teachers College, Columbia University
New York, NY

Ann Chitwood
Business owner, former teacher and voter
Brooklyn, NY

Deirdre Cipolla
Parent, P.S. 187
New York, NY

Richard Cornelius
Parent
Keene, NH

Sabrina Craig
Local School Council Parent Representative
Drummond Montessori Magnet School
Chicago, IL

Cathy Dale
Local School Council Candidate
Member of Board, PURE
Chicago, IL

John de Beck
Vice President, San Diego Board of Education
San Diego, CA

David Demnitz
Teacher, Dobbs Ferry; parent, District 2
New York, NY

Annette Evans
Parent, NYC Lab Middle School, District 2
New York, NY

Pete Farruggio, PhD.
22 years of bilingual teaching experience in low income schools
Assistant Professor, Curriculum & Instruction
College of Education, Univ of Texas Pan American
Edinburg, TX

Victoria Franzese
PTA Recording Secretary, PS 334
New York, NY

Karen Eve Friedland
Teaching Artist, parent
Brooklyn, NY

Lavinia Galatis
Community Education Council Vice President, District 30

Queens, New York

Arthur Goldstein
ESL Teacher, Francis Lewis High School
Adjunct Lecturer, Queens College
New York

LaJoyce R. Hall
Parent, former LSC member, Murray Language Academy
Chicago, IL

Martin Halacy
Lake View High School Teacher (Chicago Public Schools - 32 years)
LSC Member 1989-93
Chicago, IL

Patricia Hamilton
Schmid School LSC Chairperson
Chicago, IL

Britt Hamre
Asst. Professor, Teachers College, Columbia University
New York, NY

Roxanne Hill
Parent
Brooklyn, NY

Dr. Susan Hirsch
Loyola University Chicago
Former LSC parent member, Whitney Young H.S.
Chicago, IL

Lawrence M. Hoffman, Ph.D.
Milwaukee, WI

Diane Kaese
Active parent, NYC public and private schools.
New York, NY

Rachel Kaplan
Parent, teacher, Bank Street Head Start East
New York, NY

Jennifer Krueger
Parent, PS 290 and Salk School of Science

New York, NY

Bryna Levin
Midtown West, PS 212 and East Side Middle, Manhattan
New York, NY

Jane Ludlam
Parent, District 3, MS 54/Booker T. Washington Middle School
New York, NY

Deborah Meier
senior scholar, NYU
former principal of K-12 public schools in NYC
MacArthur Fellow

Belkis Morales-Bermeo
Parent, District 24 and 30
Queens, NY

Yvette Moustaffa
Parent, District 21
Brooklyn, NY

Celia Oyler, Ph.D.
Director Elementary Inclusive Program
Curriculum and Teaching
Teachers College, Columbia University
New York, NY

Lynne Phillips
Former PTA co-President PS84
Manhattan NYC pre-school teacher 20 years
New York, NY

Nella Pramberger
Parent, PS 6, Manhattan
New York, NY

Molly Quinn
Professor, Teachers College, Columbia University
New York, NY

Ellen Raider
Independent Commission on Public Education
New York, NY

Derek R. Randel
Stopping School Violence LLC

Dr. Judith Reed
Education Department
Keene State College
Parent
Keene, NH

Karen Gray Ruelle
Parent, Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School
New York, NY

Nancy Sall, Ed.D.
Lecturer, Teachers College, Columbia University
Parent, Nyack Public Schools, Nyack NY

Tina Schiller
Parent, PS 234 Overcrowding Committee, Manhattan
New York, NY

Teri Schlesinger
Parent, Louis Armstrong Middle School and Forest Hills High School
Queens, New York

Norman Scott
Retired NYC teacher, editor Education Notes
New York, NY

Mary Silver
Member, Community Education Council, District 2
New York, NY

Madeleine Sinor
Parent PS41
New York, NY

Paul E. Sjordal
Former director of youth development at the South-East Asia Center, Chicago
Naperville IL

Lizabeth Sostre
Former teacher and administrator for 30 years, District 3, Manhattan
New York, NY

Bonnie Steinsnyder
Parent, PS 29, Cobble Hill
Brooklyn, NY

Lynne Y. Strieb
Philadelphia Teachers' Learning Cooperative
Retired first grade teacher
Philadelphia, PA

Bert Strieb
LaSalle University
Philadelphia, PA

Melissa Sundqvist
National Board Certified Kindergarten Teacher
San Jose, Costa Rica

Catherine Teegarden
Parent & former PTA president, PS 107
Brooklyn, NY

Marnie Tetzlaff
Parent, P.S. 154, District 15
Brooklyn, NY

Michelle Trigo
Community LSC member, Hitch Elementary School
Chicago, IL

Marian Trupiano
Parent, District 15
Brooklyn, NY

The Rev. Larry E. Turpin
United Church of Hyde Park
Chicago, IL

Sarah Vanderwicken
Former local school council member
Chicago, IL

Judi Ventress
Concerned parent and teacher
New York, NY

Wendy Warren
Teacher
Columbia Falls, MT

Sheila Wesonga
Former President, Kenwood Academy Local School Council
Current President, Kenwood NCLB Parent Advisory Council
Chicago, IL

John Wetherhold
Parent
New York, NY

Jondi Whitis
Parent
Brooklyn, NY

Jill Wohl
Local School Council Officer
Inter-American Magnet School
Chicago, IL

George Wood
Principal, Federal Hocking Middle and High School
Stewart, OH

Julie Woodward
Teacher, Bronx and United Federation of Teachers delegate
New York, NY

Neal Wrightson
Director, Children's Community School
Pasadena, CA

Katherine Zezula
Education student, University of Michigan/Flint
Swartz Creek, MI