

Educators Must Rally for Reform

Politicians don't have the answers that schools need, Mr. Kastle writes. It's time for educators to stop indulging in self-blame and to lead in education reform.

By Kenneth D. Kastle



As a lifelong public educator, my reaction to Giboney's Manifesto is, quite simply, it's about time. It is about time that we have a clear, articulate, and well-documented critique of the two-decades-plus scapegoating of the education profession, scapegoating that reached its zenith with the enactment of the most disastrous piece of federal education legislation in our nation's history, the No Child Left Behind Act.

For proof that our politicians have failed our nation's public schools, take a critical look at their positions on public education.

John McCain's web site (www.johnmccain.com/Informing/Issues) calls his position on education "Excellence, Choice, and Competition in American Education." McCain mounts no criticism of NCLB and says that schools will improve only if they are made to *compete* for students and if parents are offered the *choice* of their children's schools. In another swipe at

the nation's schools, McCain states he will "pursue reforms that address the underlying cultural problems in our education system — a system that still seeks to avoid genuine accountability and responsibility for producing well-educated children." In other words, McCain's position differs little from that of the current President Bush and avoids addressing any economic causes for many students' inability to take full advantage of the education offered to them.

Barack Obama's proposals on education (<http://barackobama.com/issues/pdf/PreK-12EducationFactSheet.pdf>) do not echo McCain's critique, but they also do not go far enough in challenging the status quo. Obama states: "The goal of the law [NCLB] was the right one, but unfulfilled funding promises, inadequate implementation by the Education Department and shortcomings in the design of the law have limited its effectiveness and undercut its support." His myriad proposals for early childhood and public elementary and secondary education include plenty of good ideas. But, as Giboney states, these ideas amount only to technical remedies that miss the main point. Such remedies will have no impact on the quality of public education until the insidious effects of poverty and social class in our nation are resolved. As

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Giboney says about educators, Obama is still “treating NCLB as a technical and political problem rather than as a grave threat to democracy.”

Nowhere in his issues briefs does Obama connect social class and poverty in our country with children’s ability to achieve at the desired levels in our public schools. In fact, his issues briefs treat the two issues separately.

Where is the “Change We Can Believe In?” Where are the proposals for bold actions that would match the soaring rhetoric of “let us reach for what we know is possible. A nation healed. A world repaired. An America that believes again?”¹

These candidates — with their own intelligence and experiences, the collective intelligences and experiences of their staffs and advisors, and the millions of dollars at their disposal — should have better ideas for realizing the intellectual and democratic ideals for public education.

FIGHT INFERIORITY COMPLEX

For more than 20 years, public educators have developed a professional inferiority complex and a strong sense of hopelessness. After all, the dominant message over those years, including from some within the profession, has been that educators have caused the declining quality in public schools. Educators have failed and continue to fail our nation and its children. They caused the decline in our nation’s economic competitiveness. Educators have placed our nation at risk. Sadly, this critique of the education profession has been trumpeted for so long and by so many that it is accepted uncritically as fact. Saddest of all is that, when educators are told often and by many that there are low expectations for them, they begin to believe it and act like it.

Regardless of which candidate is elected president, we are likely to hear the messages that educators cannot be trusted to decide the why, what, and how of learning for children — their own profession. The education profession still will not have a seat at the table where the national conversation about the purposes of public schooling are held and decisions are made. In fact, the profession has not even been allowed in the room where these decisions are made.

Individual classroom teachers don’t need Giboney’s Manifesto to tell them that they have been stripped of their professional identity and respect. They know on a daily basis that they are forced to do things in their classrooms that violate everything they

believe is right for the education of the young. They are now required to function as automatons as they present scripted lessons, follow pacing schedules, narrow the curriculum to those few areas tested on the state assessments, and, in general, limit their professional lives to activities that could be performed by teaching machines or computer programs.

Giboney’s Manifesto should be a rallying cry for the profession. He has articulated the reasons why public education failed to achieve John Dewey’s in-

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tellectual and democratic ideals and also proposed a rationale for a revolution. As Thomas Jefferson wrote in the *Declaration of Independence*, “when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce [the people] under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.”

Enough is enough. It is time for a revolution. The profession must cease cowering in the face of the nation’s politicians and corporate elite. Educators must stand up forcefully for what the profession believes is best for children.

The unions and professional associations have abandoned those they purport to serve, leaving educators unprotected and at the mercy of those whose purposes for public education are for anything but the common good. Members of the nation’s two teachers unions must seize this moment to pressure their union leaders to lead the revolution.

The profession needs to pay close attention to Giboney’s Manifesto because his substantive, well-reasoned, and well-supported critique, as well as his practical recommendations for correcting this unacceptable state of the affairs, can serve as the call to start a professional revolution to rescue our nation’s public schools from bondage to the corporate and political worlds and to reclaim them for the good of all.

Above all, now is the time for us to regain our professional voice, not for our own benefit but for the benefit of the children whom we have sworn to serve.

1. www.barackobama.com/pdf/ObamaBlueprintForChange.pdf, page 5. 

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