



LOVING OUR NEIGHBORS

EQUITY AND QUALITY IN PUBLIC EDUCATION (K-12)



APPROVED BY THE 219TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)



2010

Fall 2010

Dear Members and Friends of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

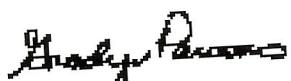
The 219th General Assembly adopted the resolution, "Loving Our Neighbors: Equity and Quality in Public Education," in exercise of its responsibility to help the whole church address matters of "social righteousness." As a social witness policy statement, it is presented for the guidance and edification of both church and society, and determines procedures and program for the ministries and staff of the General Assembly. It is recommended for consideration and study by sessions, presbyteries, and synods, and commended to the free Christian conscience of all congregations and members for prayerful study, dialogue, and action. This letter is partly to confirm that this social witness resolution satisfies the rules that govern the formation of social policy in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Free public education for all was instituted in Geneva as part of the overall reformation of society that was to accompany the reformation of the church. The spread of the Reformed tradition was influenced by the capacity of the church to produce educated ministers and members; the creation of many colleges and universities followed the growth of literacy at more primary levels, and with education came advances in many fields. The Scottish Enlightenment, for example, linked to the disproportionate number of inventors in that country during the late 18th and 19th centuries; Scotland also had four universities to England's two (albeit, a larger two). This bit of Presbyterian-related history may remind us how important education has been, and not only in the development and technological growth of the United States.

This report takes us into the current crisis in public education and helps us apply our traditional principles and values in the new context. As I read it, public education is a very segregated or re-segregated construct in the United States today. Further, this segregation is not only racial and ethnic but economic and often regional. Concentrations of low-performing schools are usually found in the inner cities, though rural schools often also face limits in funds and quality. The concentration on frequently tested "basics" often eliminates art, music and physical education—links to our broader culture and stimulus for young minds. Teachers and teachers' unions are blamed for weak performance on tests and lower graduation rates. Charter schools were touted as magic bullets—though other tests of those schools show us little, if any, overall gain, even with fewer special needs students.

The study team's recommendations come out of their wrestling professionally and faithfully with the situation, knowing that at least 84 percent of U.S. children will continue to depend upon the public schools. This report does not deny hard realities. It urges serious changes in funding and accountability patterns for changes in both equity and quality. And it "honor(s) the service of countless Presbyterian members, elders, and ministers on school boards and as school teachers and administrators." *May this report help our children find their fullest vocations.*

Yours in Christ,



Gradye Parsons, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly

Loving our Neighbors: Equity and Quality in Public Education (K-12)



Approved by the 219th General Assembly (2010)
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Developed by
The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP)
of the General Assembly Mission Council

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Loving Our Neighbors: Equity and Quality in Public Education (K–12)

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 219th General Assembly (2010) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approved the following recommendations brought by the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, in partnership with the Office of Child Advocacy, recommending that the 219th General Assembly (2010) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) do the following:

1. Approve the report, *Loving Our Neighbors: Equity and Quality in Public Education (K–12)*.
2. Receive the background rationale and appendixes (to be included in the Minutes).
3. Affirm the long-standing commitment of the PC(USA) to public education as an essential institution contributing to the common good in a democratic society by its commitment to equip all children to be effective citizens, capable of living full and meaningful lives and contributing to their society.
4. Approve the following measures to provide greater fairness and quality in public education:

For greater fairness in public education:

- a. Recommits the PC(USA) to the principle of equal educational opportunity for all children in the United States, different as each child may be, and affirms them all as our children, neighbors in our care.
- b. Calls upon our elected state and local officials to reform the way that public education is currently financed from an approach based largely on property taxes, which perpetuates and exacerbates class and/or racial disparities in poor, urban and rural school districts, to an approach that provides an equitable allocation of moneys to school systems according to the financial needs that schools require in order to attain agreed minimum standards in the provision of instructional inputs, qualified teachers, and physical facilities.
- c. Encourages Presbyterians and other citizens to assess how the trend toward re-segregation and socioeconomic class separation may impact their communities and to support measures that would reverse this trend, which disadvantages more than one-third of U.S. public school students, as documented in the achievement gaps that are associated with economic and racial segregation patterns.
- d. Opposes educational reforms that address achievement gaps by high-stakes testing and school restructuring without addressing underlying economic disparities in funding.
- e. Expresses our deep concern about the wide disparity between the percentage of racial ethnic students in public schools and the percentage of racial ethnic

educational leaders and teachers, which deprives these students of positive role models and cultural intermediaries.

f. Recognizes that while some families can choose alternatives such as home schooling, charter, and private schools, the vast majority (84 percent) of our children will, for the foreseeable future, continue to be educated in public schools. The privilege to choose an alternative for one's own child (and the privilege of exercising this right based on one's own resources) does not absolve anyone from the obligation to support financially the public schools that educate the majority of our society's members.

g. Encourages Presbyterians to evaluate existing and proposed charter schools in their communities to ensure that they do not violate workplace rights of staff and educators, and that they serve the same population as regular public schools, including English language learners and students of all abilities and disabilities; be subject to the same audits, teacher-certifications, and disclosure requirements as regular public schools, and not be run on a for-profit basis.

h. Urges school boards, legislatures, and charter schools to ensure that charter schools fulfill their original purpose of developing innovative and effective teaching for all students and to share such knowledge with public school systems in order to assure equity in education and advance the quality of education for all.

i. Affirms that justice requires all social institutions in our society, whether private or public, to honor the right of all persons, including public school educators, to organize to participate actively in decision-making that affects them.

j. Encourages school systems (and related libraries, recreational, and other developmental programs) to provide age-appropriate opportunities for student involvement in institutional governance as part of teaching-by-example of democratic values, so that students can participate constructively in decision-making that affects them.

For greater quality in public education:

k. Supports reforms consistent with the social fairness and holistic vision of human development that public education is to serve, understanding "quality" in part to mean exposure to art, music, sport, and humanities for all students (not simply those bound for college), to encourage critical thinking and moral development and not only test-determined proficiency in a restricted set of subjects.

l. Calls for and supports the enactment of legislation that addresses the documented opportunity gaps in education by ensuring that all children have a similar chance for good quality early childhood education, fully qualified teachers, equitable allocation of instructional resources, and a curriculum that will prepare them for further study, employment, and community service (including Head Start and pre-Head Start in light of their demonstrated benefits for student enrollment and attendance).

m. Maintains that in an increasingly pluralistic and multicultural environment a basic understanding of religion's cultural richness and historic importance should not be omitted from or slighted in the curriculum even as the difference between learning "about" religion and teaching faith is respected, and even when religious and cultural elements have been traditionally intertwined.

n. That books and resources in school and classroom libraries reflect said multiculturalism in content to ensure fair representation and encourage cross-cultural understanding.

o. Supports the development and retention of qualified and skilled teachers through competitive salary levels, continuing education opportunities, cultural orientation, disciplinary back-up, encouragement for creativity, and participation in administrative decision-making (including through union representation) that may affect their interests.

5. Calls upon Presbyterians to support public education through the following measures:

a. To take an active role in supporting public education institutions and organizations partnering with these schools in order to make sure that all children have an equal educational opportunity;

b. To honor the service of countless Presbyterian members, elders, and ministers on school boards and as school teachers and administrators;

c. To urge congregations to set aside a Sunday at the beginning of the school year to celebrate public education, especially teachers, and to recognize students entering and/or returning to school;

d. To continue cooperation in research and witness with ecumenical partners whose positions are consistent with our church's position that all children have the right to an opportunity to access a quality and affordable public education; and

e. To affirm the importance of the active participation of families in the education and development of children in their care.

6. Direct the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly and the appropriate ministry areas of the General Assembly Mission Council (GAMC) to do the following:

a. Post this resolution on the Office of the General Assembly (OGA) website, and provide copies of this resolution electronically and in limited publication for distribution to public and school officials as well as to church study classes.

b. Develop and/or provide appropriate study materials for individual and congregational use to stimulate dialogue and action on the concerns identified in *Loving Our Neighbors: Equity and Quality in Public Education (K-12)*.

c. Urge the General Assembly Mission Council (GAMC) to include an emphasis on public education in the *Presbyterian Planning Calendar*.

7. Direct the Presbyterian Washington Office of Public Witness and other appropriate entities of the General Assembly to communicate to the president of the United States and members of the U.S. Congress that:

a. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) considers education to be a basic human right (*Minutes*, 1996, Part I, p. 532);

b. The 219th General Assembly (2010) declares its support for an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that affirms access to a quality public education

(K-12) as a basic human right essential to human development because it enhances capacities, improves opportunities, and widens the range of choices; and

c. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) supports the speedy ratification of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child.

8. Direct the Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations Office and other appropriate General Assembly entities to communicate to the United Nations and other international bodies the concurrence of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) with the UN Declaration on Human Rights that declares education to be a basic human right essential to human development because it enhances capacities, improves opportunities, and widens the range of choices.

Comment: The Assembly Committee on Social Justice Issues (A) advises that the assembly address issues of systemic factors that undermine children's education. These include:

- The destructive impact of generations of poverty that diminish expectations of success.
- The debilitating impact of socioeconomic conditions such as lead-paint poisoning, fetal alcohol syndrome, drug dependency, and nutritional deficiency.
- The lack of support for families trying to be involved in their children's education.
- The inapplicability of curriculum to the life-settings of those children.

Executive Summary

This report discusses the challenges to public education posed by growing economic divisions and new demographic realities in our society. It is the church's first report on public education in more than twenty-three years and is therefore timely, if not overdue. Intervening years have witnessed a rising gap in educational opportunity between adequate- and limited-income families, growing concentrations of African American and Hispanic students in inner-city schools, increasing difficulty of applying targeted or affirmative action remedies in light of Supreme Court decisions, and increasing use of competitive incentives to boost school performance. In short, inequities grow, and educational quality suffers. The purpose of public education has always been entwined with the purpose of the country, to serve as a beacon of hope and opportunity while extending the promise of fair treatment for all.

This study examines the multiple economic, racial and ethnic, and social disparities that weigh down our current education efforts and impede them from fulfilling this role. The study acknowledges the negative national consequences of an emerging dual track education system—one privileged, one not—and calls for reforms and reinvestment in public education (K-12) in order to offer all children similar opportunities to develop their talents to the fullest and become constructive citizens. From the perspective of the Reformed tradition, with its longstanding commitment to expanding educational access, the study celebrates the value of sharing educational approaches while building a common democratic ethos in our society. Charter schools, for example, are a product of the frustration that people feel with the shortcomings of the current system and their desire to experiment with alternative approaches. Yet the privilege,

based in economic status, to choose an educational alternative for one's own child does not absolve anyone from the obligation to support the public schools that educate the vast majority of our nation's children. Indeed, this report is founded on the assumption that every child has the right to equity and quality in education and that it is the responsibility of the whole church to protect and preserve this right for all children, in accordance with Jesus' call to us to understand all in need as our neighbors, and in support of Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Recommendations pay attention to the basics of teacher pay, retention strategies, and ways of building community support. They affirm that acting as neighbor means making sure that all children have access to up-to-date textbooks and adequately equipped computer labs, to well-qualified teachers who understand them and know how to address their needs, to curricula that educate in the arts as well as the language arts, in social sciences as well as the sciences, and in health and physical education as well as academics. Acting as neighbor also means attending school board and PTA meetings, volunteering to tutor and mentor, and being informed on local and national education issues.

Rationale

I. Introduction

This report and its recommendations are in response to the following referral:

Item 09-06. The Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns (ACREC) Recommends That the 218th General Assembly (2008) Direct the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, in Partnership with the Office of Child Advocacy and in Consultation with the Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns, to Create a Resolution Team to Study the Church's Policies on Public Education in Relationship to the Issues of Desegregation, Affirmative Action, Faith-Based Initiatives, Home Schooling, Charter Schools, and the No Child Left Behind Law, with Attention to Class as well as Race; Making Appropriate Recommendations That Would Be Presented to the 219th General Assembly (2010), and, if Appropriate, Subsequently Preparing a Study Guide for Individual and Congregational Use (Minutes, 2008, Part I, pp. 53, 55, 865).

The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP), in partnership with the Office of Child Advocacy and in consultation with the Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns (ACREC), appointed a Public Education Work Group to draft a report responding to this referral. This group was asked to present its report at the committee's meeting in January 2010. The work group was composed of the following: a retired public elementary teacher; college and university professors; persons with expertise in the areas of affirmative action, immigration, cultural competence, and the No Child Left Behind law; ordained and lay; and persons from diverse racial and ethnic and gender backgrounds. The members appointed to the group included: Alan A. Aja, David R. Brown, Christine M. Darden, Esperanza Guajardo, E. Magalene McClarrin, Jeffrey D. Swain, Ivy Yee-Sakamoto, Jenny Thagard, and Josefina Tinajero. Thagard and Tinajero withdrew from the committee because of other commitments.

Belinda M. Curry, associate for Policy Development and Interpretation for the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP), and Martha Bettis Gee, associate for Child Advocacy of the Compassion Peace, and Justice ministry area, provided staff support to the group.

II. Biblical and Theological Context in Support of Public Education

A. Love Your Neighbor

“Which commandment of the law is greatest?” The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record the account of this question being posed to Jesus (Mt. 22:34–40; Mk. 12:28–34; Lk. 10:25–28, NRSV). While the context of the question is slightly different in each gospel, Jesus does not back away from the challenge. In two cases, he responds with what we now know as the two great commandments: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ . . . ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Mt. 22:37, NRSV). In Luke, the lawyer who is testing him offers the two great commandments and Jesus affirms the lawyer’s wise response.

The two great commandments are the standard against which everything is measured. The biblical text is unequivocal about their importance. In Matthew, Jesus says that “on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Mt. 22:40, NRSV). In Mark, Jesus says, “There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mk. 12:31b). Luke’s account moves from the authority of these commandments to how they impact those who hear them and do what they say: “[If you] do this . . . you will live” (Lk. 10:28). Jesus connects these two commandments inextricably. Why? We cannot love God and mistreat those we see every day. Loving one’s neighbor—with all its ramifications—is a reflection of our love for the Lord. In the context of daily life, we must exercise our faith in our actions toward our neighbors. To put it bluntly, the mandate to love trumps everything.

Love must be acted out without bias and with the sole thought that such behavior pleases the Lord. When one analyzes, for example, the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30–37, it is clear that loving our neighbors as ourselves must take us out of our comfort zone and even into the realm of risking ourselves to help others. This parable above all others demonstrates that we are called to commit ourselves and our resources to helping our neighbors, for we are to consider their needs as important as we consider our own.

B. Remembering the Least of These

Who is our neighbor? Jesus clearly calls us to see everyone as neighbor, and to act as neighbor to all. The gospel also directs our attention in a particular way to those on the margins of society. Jesus challenges his followers to have a special concern for those he calls “the least of these” (Mt. 25:40, 45). We are called to recognize the image of God in marginalized persons and groups, those who are often invisible or left behind—to recognize the image of God in the faces of the homeless, the recent immigrant, the undocumented worker, and in those who are wounded and beaten back by systemic patterns of racism, classism, and sexism. The call to love our neighbor as ourselves challenges us to confront the evidence of racism and inequality in our public schools. We are called to be a voice for those with no voice, those left behind by certain education reforms and by the privatization of public schools.

C. All the Heart and Mind

The first of the two great commandments is a call to love God with heart, soul, strength, and mind. Mind in this text has a particular meaning. It does not mean the seat of the personality or the whole person as it often does in biblical texts. The word translated as mind means thinking or reflecting, a more specifically intellectual activity than we find elsewhere. Learning and intellectual activity are ways we love God. Some people of faith are concerned that public

education in our increasingly secular context may undermine faith. Some seek to alter curriculum to reflect their religious worldview. But any attempt to use public education to teach one particular religious worldview is a failure to love and respect the neighbor who has a different religious viewpoint or who has rejected any religious viewpoint. Teaching a religious world view as normative is the work of faith communities, not public institutions.

D. *It Is Good*

In the opening words of the Hebrew Bible, God looked out at all that was created and called it good. The words of the psalmist echo the affirmation that “the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it” (Ps. 24:1). The continued growth of human knowledge does not diminish a sense of wonder at the goodness of creation. Indeed, education helps the human creature to appreciate the wonder and intricacy of the created world. Too often the goals of educational reform are focused on economic realities, on teaching toward employment, and as training for the work force. Quality public schools are essential to our society’s efforts to overcome poverty and address social inequality, but education is about more than vocational training. Quality public schools offer a holistic education, one that equips our children to live both meaningful and productive lives. A quality public school that allows students to develop their potential is a place where they learn to think critically and become effective citizens, where they gain an appreciation for the sweep of human history and for the arts. Public schools are one place where children and young people can learn about their own bodies, how to be healthy and stay fit.

In inviting students to consider the world they inherit and their place in it, a quality public education is a form of stewardship. Such educational experiences invite the participant to a sense of wonder and accomplishment, empowering the student to make a difference in the world, to shape a life of meaning and purpose and to look at the heavens and earth and echo the words spoken at the end of creation, “it [is] good” (Gen.1:25).

III. Our Reformed Heritage

Beginning with John Calvin’s support of free schools, people of the Reformed tradition have always affirmed the value of education and its potential to transform lives and systems. The Reformers considered public education essential—first of all, so that the populace might be literate and thus able to read the Bible (leading to support for primary education); and, secondly, that persons might read Scripture with understanding (and thus the Reformers’ support for higher education). Our Reformed tradition further asserts that “... privatism, which seeks exemption from the conditions prevailing in a society and refuses to participate in a creative way in the social milieu, is incompatible with God’s intention for our lives. [Our tradition] affirms that growth toward self-determining, responsible, committed persons, concerned for the freedom and stability of their society, is best fostered in the pluralistic and ideologically open setting of public education. This role of the public schools must be consistently maintained and openly defended when necessary by citizens and by school personnel” (*A Call to Church Involvement in the Renewal of Public Education, Minutes*, 1987, Part I, p. 481).

IV. Recent History of General Assembly Actions

Jesus’ vision of an abundant life (Jn. 10:10) is for all God’s children. Quality public schools give us the best chance to empower the most students to embrace an abundant life in community. Historically, Presbyterians have affirmed access to a free public education as one key component in the inclusion of all in the abundant life.

A. *The Church and Children*

With the approval of a *Commissioners' Resolution: On Children's Rights* in (1990), the PC(USA) adopted a rights-based approach to looking at the needs of the most vulnerable of the vulnerable, children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, one of the most widely accepted of the human rights conventions, posits a free public education as not just desirable for the few, but a basic human right of all children. Later the General Assembly reaffirmed the church's commitment to the ratification of the convention in its *Resolution on Children* (*Minutes*, 1997, Part I, pp. 44, 534–48); and in its *Resolution on the United Nations Assembly on the Child: The Future of the Child in the 21st Century* (*Minutes*, 2001, Part I, pp. 56, 288–92).

A landmark action of the 205th General Assembly (1993) was the approval of *A Vision for Children and the Church*. As the statement affirms, “all children have the right to be children; and all children are not just tomorrow, they are today” (*Minutes*, 1993, Part I, p. 644). By extension, the church affirms that children have the right to be educated today in order to reach their full potential tomorrow. Other key actions on behalf of children were the designation of 2000–2001 as The Year of the Child and 2001–2011 as the Decade of the Child.

An overture *On Supporting Efforts to Ensure the Health, Education, and Well-Being of Every Child in This Nation* called upon Presbyterians “to support . . . efforts to ensure that every child in this rich nation of ours has . . . access to an adequate public education that will allow the full expression of each child’s gifts” (*Minutes*, 2000, Part I, p. 467).

B. *The Church and Public Education*

In 1987, the reunited church adopted *A Call to Church Involvement in the Renewal of Public Education* calling Presbyterians “to join others in their communities—to provide public schools that will secure for all children an education that develops their capacities to serve as creative and responsible persons in the common life and—to mobilize the resources available in each community—home, church, community organizations (both public and private)—that will support public schools and share in achieving the necessary education of children and youth (*Minutes*, 1987, Part I, pp. 479–80).

The 204th General Assembly (1992) reaffirmed the church’s commitment to public education for all, not just for an elite few and its “vigorous support of and commitment to the American system of public education available to all children” (*Minutes*, 1992, Part I, p. 886).

By General Assembly action, 1998 was designated as The Year of Emphasis on Education (*Minutes*, 1994, Part I, pp. 45, 296), calling for a broad range of initiatives and actions related to several forms of education, including public education. The 207th General Assembly (1995) underscored our historic commitment as articulated in *A Call to Church Involvement in the Renewal of Public Education*, reaffirming “the church’s position to support a public education of high quality for all children; encourage[ing] Presbyterians to learn more about their public schools . . . to pray for our schools and encourage learning and dialogue about public education . . . (*Minutes*, 1995, Part I, p. 60).

Through its approval of the policy on *Hope for a Global Future: Toward Just and Sustainable Human Development*, the 208th General Assembly (1996) affirmed once again a rights-based approach to education for all. That assembly declared “Education is a basic human

right and is essential to human development because it enhances human capacities, improves opportunities, and widens the range of choices' (*Minutes*, 1996, Part I, p. 532). The 210th General Assembly (1998) underscored our commitment "... to an educational ministry to those children placed most at risk in our society, specifically, urban inner-city [children]" (*Minutes*, 1998, Part I, p. 652).

General Assemblies through the years have also spoken to the impact of alternatives to public education. Assemblies in both former streams of the church opposed tuition tax credits. The General Assembly has voiced concern for evaluating the effect on witness to society of government faith-based initiatives. The 217th General Assembly (2006) directed staff to "assess the effects on Christian witness to society of government faith-based initiatives and other vehicles by which Presbyterian churches ... closely affiliated with congregations accept moneys from government bodies, with particular attention to contracts affecting public education ..." (*Minutes*, 2006, Part I, p. 878).

C. *Disparities in the Culture and in Public Education*

Dating from the time of the *Brown v Board of Education* U.S. Supreme Court Decision in 1954, many General Assemblies of the predecessor bodies have sought to be a faithful witness in the face of the intractable realities that arise out of racism and classism, speaking out in support of desegregation and busing to achieve racially integrated education and in opposition to racial discrimination and tokenism in the public schools. In 1971, the General Assembly declared itself disturbed by the "number of private academies established primarily to circumvent compliance with federal laws regarding a unified public school system ... [and called on Presbyterians] to support and strengthen in every way possible the unified, racially inclusive public school systems . . ." (*Minutes*, PCUS, 1971, Part I, p. 95).

The 207th General Assembly (1995) called for the church to "reaffirm its commitment to affirmative action as a means of ... undoing historical and institutional effects of discrimination based on age, disability, marital status, race, or gender" (*Minutes*, 1995, Part I, p. 55).

The 211th General Assembly (1999) of the reunited church approved a resolution recommending "that all governing bodies of the PC(USA) support ... the work of ... entities fighting for quality, desegregated education for Black children and everyone else, throughout these United States ..." (*Minutes*, 1999, Part I, p. 77). The 211th General Assembly (1999) also approved the policy on *Building Community Among Strangers* calling on the church "to cross barriers that divide people and build bridges to connect people within the church and in society" (*Minutes*, 1999, Part I, p. 414).

In its action *On Improved Education for African American and Other Students Placed At-Risk for an Excellent Education*, the 216th General Assembly (2004) affirmed "That Presbyterians be called upon to confront the stubborn continuance of racial prejudice, particularly the persistence of societal attitudes that discourage academic achievement among economically disadvantaged and children of color students and others at risk" (*Minutes*, 2004, Part I, p. 43).

In *A Social Creed for the Twenty-First Century and the Recognition of the Centennial of the "Social Creed of the Churches 1908*, the 218th General Assembly (2008) challenged Presbyterians to live by a universal list of social, economic, and environmental tenets, including calling them to work for "High quality public education for all ..." (*Minutes*, 2008, Part I, p. 925).

V. The History of Public Education in the United States

From the early days of the nation, public education has played a vital role in American democratic society. In the 1830s, the push for public education gained momentum when reformers like Horace Mann promoted the notion of the common school, publicly funded, locally governed, and offering a common curriculum to all students. In addition to preparing young people for productive work and fulfilling lives, public education has also been expected to accomplish certain collective missions aimed at promoting the common good. These include, among others, preparing youth to become responsible citizens, forging a common culture from a nation of immigrants, and reducing inequalities in American society.

Although access to public schools had become universal by the early twentieth century, the education provided by these schools was far from equal. Schools for African American children were segregated and generally substandard. Schools serving the urban and rural poor often operated in dilapidated facilities with underqualified teachers, overcrowded classrooms, and limited resources. Faced with these realities, reformers turned their attention from access to equity. The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* U.S. Supreme Court ruling declared that separate schools were inherently unequal, initiating thirty years of efforts to integrate schools so that all children would receive a quality education.

Proactive initiatives to implement court-ordered school integration in order to improve the performance of racial ethnic students have diminished considerably since the late 1980s, when Supreme Court decisions began to release communities from these requirements, ruling that cross-district plans were unlawful. Some school systems across the nation have begun using socioeconomic status to balance school enrollments. The rise of school choice, charter schools, and urban school districts with 100 percent racial ethnic school populations have resulted in few options for affirmative action to integrate many of these schools.

As this brief history suggests, American public schools have been expected to fulfill certain public missions that go beyond the purely academic purposes. These public missions can be characterized by six main themes¹:

- to provide universal access to free education;
- to guarantee equal opportunities for all children;
- to unify a diverse population;
- to prepare people for citizenship in a democratic society;
- to prepare people to become economically self-sufficient; and
- to improve social conditions.

In recent years, however, some of these public-spirited missions of education have been neglected and are in danger of being abandoned. Most current efforts to reform public education have focused on increasing students' academic achievement—without a doubt, a central purpose of schooling. But the reasons given for improving achievement often stress individual or private economic benefits (such as preparing youth for good jobs in a global economy), rather than public benefits (such as preparing youth for active citizenship in a healthy democratic society).

VI. The Current Context of Public Education

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, many challenges in the current context impact public education.

A. Demographic Trends

1. Trends in the Nation

The United States is experiencing the second largest flow of immigration since the European waves of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Beginning with the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 that eliminated immigration quotas favoring those of European origin and replaced them with family and skill-based preferences, the law unintentionally led to an influx of mostly Latin American and Asian immigrants, as well as those from lesser-developed regions of the world.² While Latino and Asian groups have a history that goes back to the inception of the country, their populations in the U.S. are now increasing as a result of rising birth and immigration rates. Although discussions of demographics in the U.S. have long overemphasized the relationships between Whites and Blacks, despite significant demographic diversity from the nation's earliest days, this is no longer possible in a context of substantial and growing cultural and linguistic diversity.

As highlighted in Table 1, demographic shifts reveal an exponential increase in U.S. racial ethnic populations over time, with African Americans/Black (non-Latinos), Hispanic Latinos (of any race), and Asian-Pacific Islander groups growing, while the population of Whites continues to decline gradually. Demographic predictions are that not only will Whites no longer be the majority population in the United States by 2042, but in several states the Latino population will surpass the White population much sooner. In a growing number of states, Latinos are the largest racial ethnic group, recently surpassing the number of African Americans in states such as Iowa in the Midwest and Maine in the northeast and in far western Washington and Oregon.³ This statistical trend must be viewed with caution given that Latinos can be of any “race” depending on the group’s African, European, Indigenous, or even occasionally Asian roots. For instance, it is unclear how many Black Latinos (Latin Americans with either visible or known African ancestry) are in the United States, nor are demographers clear about the racial identity of those who self-report as “Other.”⁴

The Asian population is also growing exponentially. The latest figures illustrate that Asians comprise 11 percent of the U.S. population and 66.2 percent are immigrants (foreign-born).⁵ However, it must be noted that much like Hispanic or Latino, the term Asian refers to individuals whose origin could be one of a long list of countries representing many cultures and languages divided by thousands of miles of geography. While all Asian countries are represented in the colorful U.S. mosaic, immigration policy often favors immigrants from select countries. Contrary to popular belief and much like Latin American immigrants, Asian groups have differing needs, concerns, and educational levels, depending on their histories, context of arrival, skills, and other factors. New demographic trends also show an increase in minority populations in regions like the south and central United States, where Latinos are among the fastest growing minority groups. A 2004 study showed increases anywhere from 200–500 percent in the Latino population in states like North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Georgia since 1990.

Table 1-Statistical Summary of U.S. Population by Race and Ethnicity, 1990–2008

U.S. Population by Race and Ethnicity	White (Non-Latino)	African American/Black (Non-Latino)	Hispanic-Latinos (of any “race”)	Asian-Pacific Islanders	Other (includes Native Americans)
1990	75.6	11.7	9.0	2.8	0.8
2000	69.1	12.3	12.5	3.6	2.8
2008	66.0	14.0	15.0	5.0	1.5
% Change 1990–2008	-9.4%	+2.3	+6.0	+2.2	+0.7

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000, American Factfinder, Summary Files. Pew Hispanic Center, Reports, 2009.

2. Trends Among School-aged Children

Public education is the primary means by which we educate the majority of children.⁶ No other institution is presently capable of providing an educational experience for the majority of our children. According to the 2007 figures, elementary and secondary school enrollment in the United States is estimated at approximately 51 million, with approximately 1.5 million (2.9 percent) involved in home schooling; 5.9 million (11 percent) enrolled in private schools; and about 1.5 million (2.9 percent) enrolled in charter schools.⁷ Forty-two percent of the students in public education are from racial ethnic backgrounds, many from economically challenged homes.⁸ As Table 2 illustrates, the demographic trends in the nation are also reflected in public school enrollment figures.

Table 2-Statistical Summary of Public School Enrollment Figures by Race and Ethnicity, 1996–2006.

Public School Enrollment (Latest Figures)	Whites (Non-Latinos)	African Americans/Black (Non-Latino)	Latino-Hispanic	Asian-Pacific Islanders (Non-Latino)	Native American-Indian
1996	64.2	16.9	14.0	3.8	1.1
2006	56.6	17.1	20.5	4.7	1.2
% Change (1996–2006)	-7.6%	+0.2	+6.5	+0.9	+0.1

Source: Table 41. Percentage of Enrollment in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools, by Race/Ethnicity and State or Jurisdiction: Fall 1996 and Fall 2006. Digest of Education Statistics, 2008 Tables and Figures).

B. *The Impact of Diversity*

Today, at least one in five students has one foreign-born parent.⁹ Conventional wisdom with respect to European immigrants was that students, including the second generation, struggled socially in school in comparison with the third generation, but over time were expected to catch up. There is debate about the extent of social adaptation among immigrant students, with

the growing consensus being that there is no monolithic path to full integration. Successful adaptation as measured via educational outcomes may depend largely on the context of the reception of one's parents on their arrival, whether they belong to a historically oppressed group and what kinds of structural barriers exist, as well as what kinds of programs are in place.

1. Linguistic Diversity

The linguistic diversity of the United States is also reflected in our schools. From 1979 to 2007 the number of children and youth between the ages of five and seventeen who spoke a language other than English at home increased from 3.8 to 10.8 million, from 9 percent to 20.4 percent of the population in this age range. Of the population of English learners, 75 percent spoke Spanish, 12 percent spoke an Asian or Pacific Islander language, 10 percent spoke another Indo-European language, and 3 percent spoke a language categorized as "other."¹⁰ The total number of English language learners represents more than 350 languages.

Many interrelated out-of-school factors will shape the academic performance of English learners, including parental education levels, family income, parents' English-language proficiency, mother's marital status at the time of birth, and whether there are one or two parents in the home. In addition to the risk factors for academic underachievement, there are strengths and assets the English learner can bring to achieve academic success. For instance, children of immigrants may have greater support from two parents, siblings, and a grandparent or other relative than native English-speaking peers.¹¹

Effective strategies for teaching English learners have been well researched and documented. However, there is an implementation gap between what works and what is commonly done in classrooms across the United States.¹² The growing population of English learners often suffers in school districts that either ignore their needs or provide inadequate support; meanwhile, they engage in double the work of native English speakers.¹³ Simply put, the technology exists for teachers to teach English learners effectively, but the fact that most teachers do not perceive a need to adapt their teaching practices to meet the needs of their English learners decreases the likelihood that the academic achievement of these students will improve.

2. Socioeconomic Diversity

The majority of racial ethnic students who attend public schools in urban centers, as well as students in rural areas, are affected by the socioeconomic status into which they were born. After WWII, the U.S. industrial base that had been located in cities of the northeast and Midwest began to disperse into suburban and rural areas with the help of federal highway construction. Since the 1970s, the U.S. has seen many of its manufacturing jobs move to foreign shores leaving closed factories across the landscape. Less educated workers in all areas who once were able to support families on manufacturing wages can no longer find such employment. Once flourishing cities have been left bereft of a sufficient tax base, from either income or property, by which to support necessary social services as city populations experience high unemployment and grow ever more poor and in need of such services.¹⁴ Of the one hundred largest cities in the U.S. in 2007, fourteen had a poverty rate over 30 percent and another forty-eight had a poverty rate between 20 percent and 30 percent—depression level figures.¹⁵

Scholars agree that poverty is one of the most intractable problems facing public education: the higher the rate of poverty, the lower the level of student achievement.¹⁶ The correlation between the socioeconomic level of students' families and their academic

achievement has been documented since the 1960s. In fact, according to Gary Orfield, a U.C.L.A. education professor, and Susan Eaton, a research director at Harvard Law, the powerful effect of the socioeconomic makeup of a student body on academic achievement has become “one of the most consistent findings in research on education.”¹⁷ All low-income students fare worse in academic achievement when they attend schools populated primarily by other low-income students. The evidence has led some school districts to try income-based integration. Since the publication of his seminal work *Savage Inequalities* (1991), Jonathan Kozol, and many others, have challenged the nation to acknowledge that poverty must be addressed if education is to become equal.

3. Religious Diversity

In a survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, more than 75 percent of respondents identified themselves as Christian. However, a large percentage of respondents (28 percent) no longer belong to the religion in which they were raised, illustrating the high level of fluidity in affiliations. Newly arriving immigrants bring with them the diversity of the world’s religions, especially Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism.¹⁸ Many cultures do not separate their cultural and religious experiences but see them as one and the same. The public education system is challenged to be more sensitive to the notion that just as we have many languages, we also have many religious points of view. Respect for the richness of these traditions requires a review and reordering of teaching practices, historical points of view, and curricula to broaden the worldview of students to match the growing complexity of U.S. and global populations.

C. Desegregation and Re-Segregation

In *Schools More Separate: Consequences of a Decade of Resegregation* (2001), one of the most comprehensive studies of re-segregation, Gary Orfield of The Civil Rights Project asserts that de-segregation was never fully achieved. Orfield observes that in the 1980s urban schools became largely minority, non-White, poor, and highly segregated. He attributes this to the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974), which rejected busing from cities to suburbs. School integration reached its peak in areas of the south that were under court order to desegregate. Maximum integration occurred in small towns, rural areas, and where city and suburban schools were combined into a single district. Since several U.S. Supreme Court rulings were followed by the rapid exit of Whites into suburban areas, public schools in cities all over the country have a student population that is overwhelmingly racial ethnic and low-income. By 2007, 44 percent of public school students were considered to be part of a racial or ethnic minority group.¹⁹ Many areas have aggressively pursued dismissal of their integration orders and today only three hundred school districts operate under mandatory desegregation orders.²⁰

A limited number of the nation’s school districts, roughly one thousand, employ voluntary integration efforts to curb re-segregation, considering race when assigning students to schools. A major road block to this approach was erected by the U.S. Supreme Court in their 2007 decision of *Parents Involved in Community Schools vs. Seattle School District No. 1*.²¹ Voluntary school integration plans in Seattle and Jefferson County, Kentucky, were struck down because they were partly race based and judged to violate the Equal Protection clause of the United States Constitution. Several districts are now establishing school assignment plans based on socioeconomic status in the expectation that racial integration will also occur.²² Some (i.e. Wake County, North Carolina; and Jefferson County, Kentucky) have implemented volunteer school assignment programs that limit the percentage of free or reduced lunch students (a metric relating

to family income). This approach brings about both socioeconomic integration as well as racial ethnic integration. At the same time, it avoids violating the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that school assignments cannot be made on the basis of race. If integration should be revived as a goal to bring about educational equity, legal scholars believe that the barrier of law could be overcome, but that the real issue would be the attitude of parents and families toward integration.²³

The reversal of the trend of increased integration coincides closely with the reversal of the trend of increasing scores for Black students in math and reading (as reported by the National Association for Educational Progress (NAEP)). Many studies have shown that Black students perform better in integrated environments,²⁴ possibly because of better teachers and more parental involvement.

D. *Accountability and High-Stakes Testing*

There is nearly unanimous agreement that the public school system is in need of reform, yet the debate about reform generally centers on accountability as measured by test scores, the single aspect on which current reform efforts are most clearly focused.

The most notable contribution to high stakes testing is the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, usually referred to as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This federal legislation is built on the assumption that the culture of the educational system needs to be changed to address educational inadequacies. The act calls for each state to set minimum standards of academic achievement, to measure student progress against those standards, and to hold students accountable for meeting them.

Every state has developed or adopted its own testing program in reading and mathematics and must show continual progress on its test scores until 2014 when every student is expected to show proficiency at his or her grade level. Schools that do not show progress each year (average yearly progress, or AYP) are labeled as failing, eventually being sanctioned, with a variety of remedies put in place. Sanctions progress as the school continues to fail to achieve AYP, ending with schools subject to a restructuring (which could include replacing staff, instituting new curriculum, regulating the facility directly through the state, and even closing the school and reopening it as a charter school).²⁵ Schools not only must report the progress of each of their subgroups, but each group must show continual progress.

The law's supporters point to what they call the "soft bigotry of low expectations."²⁶ They assert that by disaggregating test scores for the subgroups in a school, for example, those of racial ethnic groups, various income levels, English language learners, or those with disabilities, for perhaps the first time, attention is focused on those children in underserved populations who can get lost when a school's average score is the only number reported.

The law's goals are laudatory, designed to address the inequities experienced by the most vulnerable children. The underlying assumptions on which NCLB rests are also exemplary: that all children can learn, that as citizens we have a moral responsibility to attend to a quality education for all, and that standards need to be put in place and systems held accountable. But the assumption that accountability to high standards can be adequately measured using one mechanism, primarily a standardized test, bears more examination. Most educators agree that standardized tests do indeed provide one reliable measure of achievement—but only one. When the stakes are as high as they are in NCLB, the use of one measure, however good, becomes

problematic. A second difficulty with NCLB is that the law does not address the profound educational funding inequalities that plague our nation.²⁷

Test scores alone are a limited criterion for measuring the success of education. In his book, *Why Schools?*, Mike Rose argues that we have strayed from the original purpose of schools—that from the beginning we have expected our schools to teach more than skills and subject matter, notably a sense of civic duty and moral behavior. Rose argues that during this century, society has turned to public schools to address many needs that in the past were met by families, churches, employers, and volunteer groups. “Schools are even called on to address broad social and economic problems that the country has not addressed … deindustrialization, immigration, chronic poverty—and now increased globalized economy.”²⁸ Rose asserts that the economic drive for performance has led to policies that are “thin on the ethical, social and imaginative dimensions of human experience.” We have forgotten that we are not just economic beings, but civic and moral beings as well.

According to *New York Times* columnist David Brooks,²⁹ economists think of human capital as the skills and knowledge that people need to get jobs to drive the economy. Brooks argues that educational reform has failed because it has failed to address the other underlying components of human capital. Other forms of capital—cultural, social, moral, cognitive, and aspirational—have been ignored. These dimensions of human capacity may not be measured with standardized tests.

Other voices stress that our democracy depends on civic participation. In *Democracy at Risk: The Need for a New Federal Policy in Education*,³⁰ the authors stress that our country’s “civic participation gap” mirrors the “education gap”—therefore putting our very form of government at risk. They assert that federal engagement in educational policy on a large scale was premised on the democratic agenda that our public schools were to fulfill—that every child would be given the tools necessary to make equal participation in our society more than just a promise.

E. Achievement Gap or Opportunity Gap?

Since April 2009, the Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has released several reports assessing the state of educational achievement in the United States. The federal legislation included a requirement that all fourth and eighth graders be assessed by the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) test in mathematics, reading, and science to measure progress in improving achievement levels and in closing achievement gaps between races. There are additional reports that the nation’s prekindergarten students are not ready for school and discouraging indications that the United States is falling further and further behind other nations, both developed and developing, in student achievement, even as we spend more resources than virtually any other nation.³¹

Yet there is a growing movement to refocus the debate on educational reform. Beneath the achievement gap, as measured by tests that has captured the nation’s attention, is a pervasive opportunity gap caused by the inequitable distribution of resources. To address this gap, the Schott Foundation calls for Congress to ensure that all children have an opportunity to learn that includes a quality early childhood education, highly qualified teachers, a curriculum that will prepare them for college, work and community, and equitable instructional resources.³²

1. Quality Early Childhood Education

There is wide consensus that school readiness leads to school success. Research suggests that children's outcomes in school are remarkably stable after the first few years of school and that interventions are most successful when they are early in a child's school career. Many studies point to the success of the transition to school as a critical factor in success. A quality preschool or child-care experience predicts the ease of adjustment to kindergarten, enhances competencies, strengthens social and self-regulatory skills, and reduces the likelihood of negative outcomes like grade retention.³³ Yet, according to the Children's Defense Fund, only about 3 percent of eligible children are enrolled in Early Head Start and only one-half to one-third of children eligible for Head Start are enrolled.³⁴ All children need access to high quality early childhood education.

2. Highly Qualified Teachers

Teacher quality is critical to the success of students in public education.³⁵ A teacher's knowledge, teaching skills, and dedication dramatically affect students' achievement and very often their future. Under often difficult circumstances, teachers are doing extraordinary work to open the doors to lifelong learning. But the complex and difficult context of today's public schools exacts a heavy toll on many teachers.

While there are many dedicated, hardworking teachers working to instill skills and a love for learning in their students, there is an alarming rate of teacher attrition with growing shortages in the content areas of mathematics, science, counseling, reading, and special education. During the 2003–04 school year, 8 percent of teachers changed professions and 8 percent changed schools. Teachers named a variety of factors contributing to attrition or job changes, including testing and accountability mandates in NCLB, too little support, student discipline, under-funded programs, lack of influence and respect, and insufficient pay.

Today, far too many young teachers are leaving the field within their first five years. Teachers in content-specific areas like mathematics and science are lured to higher-paying positions in corporate America and government. Teacher attrition costs the education system approximately \$7 billion every year to recruit, employ, and prepare replacement teachers. Each year, large percentages of out-of-field teachers are hired to teach classes in mathematics, science, language arts, reading, special education, and English for speakers of other languages. In many cases, students taught by out-of-field teachers do not progress as they should in the required subject area.

Experienced teachers and teachers with higher degrees often are attracted to newer schools in the suburbs where they are offered higher salaries and have more support from parents and more resources. Inexperienced and out-of-field teachers are frequently placed in urban schools with racial ethnic or low-income students where conditions are challenging and resources limited. Such schools often employ scripted learning systems where teachers are told what to say and when to say it with every lesson. Often based on military training systems, these rote lessons are directed to those areas that will be tested in the end-of-year standardized tests.³⁶ Such scripted learning systems stifle the creativity of the highly qualified teachers urban schools need and are an additional factor that pushes them into transfers.

Teach For America is a program where young graduates from top universities teach for two to three years in urban situations where finding quality teachers has been difficult. Teach For America teachers work in thirty cities across the United States. School systems like New

Orleans, where more than half of the schools are charter schools, rely heavily on Teach For America to supply teachers every year. Though these teachers are generally very bright, they undergo only a short program for learning to teach and work with students. By their third or fourth year, many leave teaching for other careers or go into administration.

With the increasingly diverse student population, the ratio of racial ethnic educators and educational leaders is also an issue. In 2004, a national summit on diversity in our nation's teaching force voiced concern about the demographic disparity between educators and their students and the negative impact on the quality of education for all children.³⁷ African American teachers account for the lowest percentage of the U.S. teacher workforce since 1971. In addition, only 25 percent of that work force is male.³⁸

3. A Curriculum That Prepares Students for College, Work, and Community

All students need a rigorous, wide-ranging curriculum that covers more than just the basic skills in order to prepare them for college. Yet, despite the emphasis on math and reading, Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) data released in the summer of 2009 showed overall average scores in mathematics and reading dropping, with the worst reading score since 1994, and an increasing gap between scores of lower performing racial ethnic students and white or Asian students. Scores of Asian students in mathematics continue to rise, a finding that does not appear to correlate with family income levels.³⁹ Overall, as with other standardized national tests, SAT scores increased as family income increased and as family education level increased. But fewer than half of the 2009 high school graduates take the SAT. A second study released by the Iowa-based ACT test, reported that only one quarter of the students who took the ACT had the skills to succeed in college. Though some of these results perhaps point to a growing diversity of students taking these college admission tests, many feel that preparation in school is certainly a factor in the test scores that result.

Test results are not the only indicator of the level of preparation of high school graduates. But if these results point to deficiencies in higher-achieving college bound students, they also call into question how prepared all high school students are for the work and community involvement that contribute to a meaningful life. Access to a high quality curriculum is the right of all children. Students in low-income areas need access to higher-level coursework, such as Advanced Placement (AP) courses as well as courses in the arts and humanities, and school counselors who encourage them to aspire to further education beyond high school.

4. Equitable Resources

Currently, all fifty states have constitutional provisions for free public education. The primary source of school funding is local property taxes, with some funds provided by the states and a small amount of designated federal funds. This funding mechanism has resulted in high property taxes and low funding per student in areas that have low property values and lower tax rates and high funding-per-student in areas with high property values. This has led to vast disparities in per pupil funding between states and between districts within states. The inequity in per-pupil funding within states led to a 1971 California Supreme Court ruling that use of local property taxes to finance primary education was a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the state constitution. Since 1971, advocates in almost all of the fifty states have filed suit claiming that unequal financing of public schools violates various state constitutions. Equity in funding suits continued in 2009 around the United States.⁴⁰ In 1973 in its decision on *Rodriguez v. San Antonio Schools*, the U.S. Supreme Court rejected the concept that education was a right

guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. Because many cases filed on the basis of equity have failed, suits are now based on educational adequacy.

States generally focus on two aspects of equity: vertical equity and adequacy equity. Vertical equity recognizes that legitimate differences occur among children and that some need additional educational services. Districts base funding decisions on assigning a greater weight to those students. Adequacy equity is funding adequate to allow each student to achieve some minimum level of achievement. States have also sought to compensate for the differences in districts' abilities to raise the revenue for schools. A foundation program sets an expenditure per pupil that allows a minimum quality education for each pupil. This formula, used by many states, results in targeting more state education funds on a per pupil basis while taking into account the taxable wealth of each locality.⁴¹ Some states such as Virginia, however, do not penalize those districts choosing to make an extra local effort to go beyond the basics. A 2004 analysis of the support of public education for all states by the Education Trust showed state education support percentages ranging from 83.9 percent for New Mexico to 38.2 percent for Nebraska. Analysis showed that states providing the lowest percentage toward education funding had the largest per-pupil funding gaps between their high-poverty and low-poverty districts.⁴² The 2009 Superintendent's Annual Report for Virginia shows that Arlington County, a suburb of Washington, D.C., spent \$18,449 per student, while Amelia County in the rural part of Virginia spent \$8,583 per student.

The annual output for public education is approximately \$543 billion.⁴³ If we are to address the problems of public education, we cannot ignore that many of the decisions affecting it are driven by money. Low-income and racial ethnic children receive fewer dollars than do their white and/or lower income counterparts. The Education Trust reported that in most states, districts with high numbers of low-income and racial ethnic students receive substantially fewer state and local dollars per pupil than districts with fewer such students.⁴⁴ While the funding gap between high and low poverty districts has narrowed somewhat over the past several years in the nation as a whole, it has increased in nine states. In most cases, districts with high numbers of racial ethnic students also receive substantially fewer state and local dollars per pupil than do their counterparts with fewer racial ethnic students.

What this generally means is that racial ethnic students, particularly those who have high rates of poverty, receive insufficient funding to address their academic and social needs. Because they recognize that some children simply need more resources to be successful, critics of the state funding formulas fight for equity rather than equality.

F. *Alternative Approaches*

For a variety of reasons, families throughout the United States have sought alternative schooling choices. The two most prominent alternative options are charter schools and home schooling. Private schools are also an option available to some.

1. Charter Schools

A charter school is an independent, publicly funded school that typically operates separately from the district board of education. In effect, a charter school is a one-school public school district. A group of people—educators, parents, community leaders, educational entrepreneurs, or others—write the charter plan describing the school's guiding principles, governance structure, and applicable accountability measures. If the state (or approving agency) approves the charter, the charter is funded on a per pupil basis. In most cases charter schools

operate under an agreement between the approving body and the school.⁴⁵

The charter school movement has roots in a number of other education reform ideas, from alternative schools, to site-based management, magnet schools, public school choice, privatization, and community-parental empowerment. The term “charter” may have originated in the 1970s in New England. Albert Shanker, former president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), publicized the idea by suggesting that local boards could “charter” an entire school with union and teacher approval. In the late 1980s, Philadelphia started a number of schools-within-schools and called them “charters.” Some of them were schools of choice. The idea was further refined in Minnesota where charter schools were developed according to three basic values: opportunity, choice, and responsibility for results.⁴⁶ Forty states plus the District of Columbia currently have charter laws. New Orleans schools include the largest percentage of charter schools with 54 percent.

The movement owes its impetus to dissatisfaction with traditional public schools. Families with children of various special interests and needs, low income and minority families, those with limited English proficiency, and those in certain cultural enclaves sought out such schools in response to what they believed was indifference to the needs of their children or an inability of public schools to make tough decisions that would improve the educational opportunities for their children. In the case of some parents who are dissatisfied with the educational quality of their schools, improved educational opportunities such as smaller classes, higher standards and safety for their children take precedence over diversity.⁴⁷

Many of the concerns surrounding charter schools center on the fear that traditional public schools will suffer as children, teachers, and dollars flow out of traditional public schools and into charters. There are also concerns about which students are leaving and what that means for those left behind, the education received by the students enrolled in the 12.5 percent of charter schools that have failed,⁴⁸ and the 37 percent of charter schools that are performing significantly worse than their comparable public schools.⁴⁹

The charter school debate generally centers on one of three themes:

- Equity: Will charters alter access of all students to equal education opportunity?
- Quality: Will charters improve public education?
- Policy: Will differences between charters and public schools impact how we govern education?⁵⁰

Public purpose/public ownership and the formation of an educated citizenry are additional themes articulated by many respected educators.⁵¹

In the first widespread, systematic study of charter school performance results, findings are that 17 percent of charter schools are providing a superior education, 50 percent produce results no different than public schools, and 37 percent are providing an education significantly worse than public schools. There are significant state-by-state differences in the findings.⁵²

There are also concerns about whether some charters are in fact accessible to all students. Some schools require an application and an interview or a written parental agreement, enabling a student to be rejected either initially or later in the year. Some schools even require an admissions examination as opposed to an open lottery. Some charter schools have an open admissions policy through the September-enrollment-count-date, after which students can be

sent back to traditional public schools for various reasons. This enables the school to receive funds for the student, show a high enrollment for racial ethnic and free or reduced lunch students for the year, yet include only the remaining students in the performance test scores. Even the highly lauded SEED boarding charter school in Washington, D.C., which initially reported 100 percent college acceptance for its graduates, had failed to report that until recently the school had a 20 percent attrition rate each year—mostly black boys. A seventh grade class enrollment of seventy at SEED had dwindled to a senior class of twenty by graduation.⁵³

Clearly, state charter laws and state monitoring of charter schools are very unequal. There is a need to ensure that charter schools are required to serve the same populations as regular public schools, including English language learners and students with disabilities. As some charter schools employ teachers who do not have access to union protection, many are paid substandard wages. Charters should be required to address equity in their treatment of teachers and to be subject to the same audits and disclosure requirements as public schools.

In her “Witness for Justice Message” on October 26, 2009, Jan Resseger, minister for education for the United Church of Christ, observed:

Clearly there are many children, particularly urban and rural children, who have not been well served by their public schools. In a democracy like ours, whether the public schools can better serve all children is up to citizens. Can we, many of us living in the suburbs, find the political will adequately to fund public schools in poor communities?

And when alternatives like charters are proposed to help us Race to the Top, we need to ask ourselves as citizens whether we have a better chance of reaching the most vulnerable children through privatized management, or whether we are responsible for improving traditional public schools. The political philosopher Benjamin Barber makes the public choice: “Inequality is built into the market system ... Inequality is not incidental to privatization, it is its very premise.”⁵⁴

2. Home Schooling

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), homeschooled in the United States has grown from approximately 850,000 in 1999 to just over 1.5 million in 2007⁵⁵, or roughly 2.9 percent of the children in this country between the ages of five and seventeen who would be attending public or private schools. Of the students being homeschooled in 2007, 76.8 percent or 844 were white, 4 percent were black, 9.8 percent were Hispanic, and 9 percent were other. The percentages of homeschooled students by race have remained fairly consistent since 1999 for all races except black. In 1999, 9.9 percent of home school students were black, a percentage drop of more than one half.⁵⁶ Advocates continue to point to the success of home schooled children. Many have now completed college and are raising children of their own. Analysis of their community involvement indicates that homeschooling had no negative impact.

3. Private/Parochial Schools

Private schools are those that receive tuition. Sixty-eight percent of private schools are religiously affiliated. These enroll almost 80 percent of private school students. Almost half are Roman Catholic and another 20 percent are of other religious traditions. More than three-fourths of private school students are white.⁵⁷ In 2003–2004, the average tuition for parochial K–12 schools was \$5,700. The average tuition for non-sectarian K–12 schools was \$13,000.⁵⁸ Many families choose parochial schools because they desire their children to be educated in an explicitly religious context. Others are attracted to private schooling because they perceive that

their children can receive a superior education there. While private and parochial schools can be a viable choice for some who have the financial resources to pay tuition, for many families, especially for families who are poor, this choice remains out of reach. Private choices do not, however, absolve anyone in the church from responsibility to support and protect the right of all children to education, and for most, that will mean public education. Our call is to love our neighbor as ourselves—to act in such a way that all our neighbors' children have the same access to a quality education as that we desire for our own.

G. *Faith-Based Initiatives*

Faith-based initiatives refer to social service or mission programs for which churches accept government funding. Although the designation “faith-based initiatives” (FBI) is relatively new, in reality the practice has been in place for many years for such projects as homeless shelters and feeding programs. In the past these partnerships between government and faith communities have often served the common good. But such funding took on new significance with the launching by the Bush administration of a new emphasis called Faith-based and Community Initiatives. The Obama administration is continuing the initiative with Faith- Based and Neighborhood Partnership programs in a number of government agencies, including the Department of Education.⁵⁹

There are significant issues around the relationship between church and state that need careful exploration. In the 1988 policy on *God Alone Is Lord of the Conscience*, the General Assembly observed that religious programs and agencies should not be excluded from receiving such funds provided that conditions related to access, safety and licensure be met; that the service is administered without religious emphasis or content or religious preference or other discrimination in employment or purchase of services; and no public funds are used by religiously controlled organizations to acquire permanent title to real property. For a Presbyterian school to apply for “FBI” funding, for example, it would need to assess the impact of accepting these potential constraints on its core missions.

Churches can provide a multitude of services to support and extend the education of children, particularly those who are made most vulnerable by poverty, such as tutoring programs or one-on-one mentoring. Congregations should consider carefully both the positive and negative aspects of such partnerships. The overarching principles must be what contribute most to the health and wholeness of the children and families such programs are intended to serve and what is a faithful response to the God who calls us.

VII. Conclusion

The call to love our neighbor as ourselves is central to Christian faith and discipleship. Providing for a high quality public education for all children is a concrete expression of this love. When we allow public schools to fail, we turn away from the mandate to love our neighbor.

Acting as neighbor means ensuring that all children have the opportunity to go to school in the kind of positive and healthy environment that promotes learning and growth. It means making sure that all children have access to up-to-date textbooks and well-equipped computer labs, to high-quality teachers who know and address their needs, to curricula that educate in the arts as well as language arts, in social sciences as well as science, in health and physical education as well as math. Acting as neighbor means attending school board and PTSA meetings, volunteering to tutor and mentor, and paying attention to the stories in the news about public education. When we act as neighbor, we not only speak up for adequate funding, but we

demonstrate a willingness to back up our words with action. Loving our neighbor as ourselves means that we view all children as a gift of God, one for which we are called to be good stewards.

In the twenty-first century, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) can partner with others to transform the public education (K–12) system. As a church that has been committed to public education for decades, we only need to vigorously rededicate ourselves to what we have confessed and believed.

Appendix A

Suggested Resources

Presbyterian Church (U. S. A.) Resources—<http://www.pcusa.org/>:

The Office of Child Advocacy—<http://www.pcusa.org/publiceducation/>. This website includes a section on the PC(USA) and Public Education.

Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations Office—<http://www.pcusa.org/un/>. Monitors pending legislation before the United Nations General Assembly that may impact the lives of children and youths such as the Convention on the Right of the Child and trafficking issues.

Presbyterian Office of Public Witness in Washington, D. C. webpage—<http://www.pcusa.org/washington>. Responsible for domestic poverty concerns and can provide individuals and congregations with information on current public education legislation before the U.S. Congress.

Other Denominational and Ecumenical Resources:

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—<http://www.elca.org/>. In 2007, the Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA adopted a social statement on “Our Calling in Education.” That assembly stated that the ELCA “affirms and advocates for the equitable, sufficient, and effective funding of public schools.” To obtain a copy of “Our Calling in Education,” go to <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/Education.aspx>.

United Church of Christ (UCC)—<http://www.ucc.org>. The UCC’s public education webpage includes many helpful educational resources such as *The Church Speaks to Public Education Justice*. To learn more about these resources, go to <http://www.ucc.org/justice/public-education/>.

The United Methodist Church (UMC)—<http://www.umc.org>.

Gee, Martha Bettis. *I Dream of a School: Mission Study on Public Education: Youth Book with Leader's Guide*. New York: General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 2004.

Lymon, Mary Grace. *Public Education: Issues and Challenges*. New York: General Board of Global Ministries Missions, The United Methodist Church, 2004.

To learn about other educational resources published by the UMC, go to <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/missionstudies/publiceducation/bibliography/>.

National Council of Churches of Christ (NCCC-USA) <http://www.ncccusa.org/about/educationhome.html>. This site contains helpful resources developed by the Education and Leadership Ministries (ELM) program area of the NCCC(USA). One of the priorities of the NCCC(USA)’s ELM program is the promotion and support of high quality, comprehensive public education.

Books:

Delpit, Lisa and Joanne Kilgour Dowdy. *Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom*, New Edition.(Paperback). New York: The New Press, 2008.

Delpit, Lisa. *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. New York: New Press, Update Edition 2006. This book is a seminal text in how modern education lacks diversity in its teaching force. Delpit explains that non-minority teachers must make a conscious effort to understand the culture of their students that are sometimes vastly different from their own. Every culture has its own language; therefore, communication rather than a lack of intelligence in students is often responsible for the achievement gap. She explains that this cultural gap severely affects teaching and learning.

Dingerson, Leigh and Barbara Miner, Bob Peterson and Stephanie Walters, eds. *Keeping the Promise?: The Debate Over Charter Schools*. Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools in collaboration with The Center for Community Change, 2008.

Kohn, Alfie. *What Does it Mean to be Well Educated? And Other Essays on Standards, Grading, and Other Follies*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004. In this collection of essays Kohn takes on some of the most important topics in education in recent years. His central focus is on the real goals of schooling—a topic, he argues, that we systematically ignore while lavishing attention on misguided models of learning and motivation. From the title essay's challenge to conventional definitions of a good education to essays on testing and grading that tally the severe educational costs of overemphasizing a narrow conception of achievement, Kohn boldly builds on his earlier work and writes for a wide audience. He explores topics ranging from the destructiveness of praise to the inadequacy of American high schools, shows how traditional educational practices can spoil the value of newer and better approaches, and offers a provocative reflection on what 9/11 and its aftermath can mean for schools.

Kozol, Jonathan. *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*. New York Three Rivers Press, 2005. Kozol argues that the American public education system is still segregated. It will take a new civil rights movement to eradicate this problem, he argues.

Noguera, Pedro A. *City Schools and the American Dream*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2003. Noguera studies several urban school district and points to poverty, powerlessness, and cultural disparity as reasons why minority-majority school districts perform poorly. Above all, he shows that communities without money lack access to people of power who can affect change; therefore, those schools tend not to improve.

Reeves, Douglas B and Maureen McMahon. *Crusade in the Classroom: How George W. Bush's Education Reforms Will Affect Your Children, Our Schools*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001. This book offers an explanation of former President George W. Bush policies for school reform, a prediction of how these new programs will change our schools, and a resource to help parents understand their options.

Rose, Mike. *Why School?: Reclaiming Education for All of Us*. New York: The New Press, 2009.

Thernstrom, Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom. *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003. The racial gap in academic performance between whites and African Americans, on the one hand, and Latinos and blacks, on the other hand, is America's most urgent educational problem. Unequal skills and knowledge are the main sources of ongoing racial inequality, and racial inequality is America's great unfinished business. There are no good excuses for the perpetuation of long-standing inequalities, the Thernstroms argue. The problem can be solved, but conventional strategies will not work. Fundamental educational reform is needed. Carefully researched, accessibly written, and powerfully persuasive, this book offers both a close analysis of the current landscape and a blueprint for essential and overdue change.

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A Study Guide for Loving Our Neighbors: Equity and Quality in Public Education

Introduction to the Guide

The 219th General Assembly (2010) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) approved the report *Loving Our Neighbors: Equity and Quality in Public Education*. Through this policy, the church is called to reaffirm its historic commitment to public education and to the principle of equal educational opportunity for all children in the United States.

This guide outlines four sessions designed to introduce participants to the policy, with the intended outcome of moving Presbyterians to take action to improve access to a quality education for all children.

It is important that participants not only become more educated about the issues impacting public education today, but also that they learn more about their own community and how those issues are playing out in the local context. To that end, consider the activities that suggest inviting parents, teachers, school administrators, school board members, and children and youth who are experiencing the schools to be a part of the study. It is only when Presbyterians have the chance to familiarize themselves with real people whose lives are being impacted by the schools that they are able to make the issue their own and find ways to respond as disciples of Christ.

The Four Sessions

This study is designed for four sessions of approximately sixty minutes each. Additional activities are suggested for study groups who have up to ninety minutes for each session. If you will have more time to devote to the study, read over the additional activities and decide which ones will fit your group and your time frame. If your group has a shorter time frame, read over the suggested activities for each session and decide which ones to include. For example, in a shorter session, you may decide to simply open with prayer instead of the longer opening devotion time with scripture, prayer and hymn. Or you may focus on just one exploring activity.

Session 1: Loving the Neighbor Means Acting as Neighbor

Session 2: Loving the Neighbor Means Being Good Stewards

Session 3: Loving the Neighbor Means Loving as We Love Ourselves

Session 4: Loving the Neighbor Means Doing Justice

Assignment:

If possible, contact prospective participants in advance and get them copies of the policy paper. Ask them to read the following sections before the first session: “Biblical and Theological Context in Support of Public Education;” “The Current Context of Public Education;” The History of Public Education”; and “Our Reformed Heritage.”

Session 1

Loving the Neighbor Means Acting as Neighbor

Goals

To explore the biblical mandate to act as neighbor and its implications for how we respond as disciples with respect to the public education system

To examine the current context of public education and the impact of increasing diversity

To be introduced to six aims for public education

Preparation

- In advance of this session, read the entire policy paper. Make note of issues or points about which you may need more information.
- Plan to invite parents, teachers, administrators, school board members, and others with an interest or expertise in public education. Do some research about your own district's public schools. If possible, find out in which public schools the families in your congregation have children or young people, and which families have their children enrolled in an alternative---a private school, a magnet or a charter, or home schooling.
- On individual sheets of newsprint, print the six aims of public education from Section IV of the policy paper (p. 10): to provide universal access to free education; to guarantee equal opportunities for all children; to unify a diverse population; to prepare people for citizenship in a democratic society; to prepare people to become economically self-sufficient; to improve social conditions. Post these sheets on the walls around the room or on table tops. You'll need a red, green and black felt-tipped marker for each sheet.
- Locate the hymn "O For a World". It can be found in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, # 386.

Materials and Supplies

- Copies of the policy paper for each participant
- Newsprint
- Bibles
- Prepared sheets of newsprint and red, green and black felt-tipped markers (see preparation)
- Hymnals with the hymn "O For a World"

Opening (5 minutes)

1. *Read Scripture.*

Invite participants to listen as you read Matthew 22:34-40 aloud. Point out for the group that the Pharisees identify Jesus as Teacher when they direct their question to him.

2. *Pray Together.*

Pray the following prayer, or one of your own choosing:

God of the first century and of contemporary America, You speak your Word to us no less than to those who heard the words of that great Teacher, Jesus. The words of Jesus remind us that the commandment to love trumps everything. We are to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, with all our souls, and with all our strength, and with all our minds, and we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. Guide us now, stirring us to ponder how we might go beyond the speaking of these words to acting as neighbor to all our children and their families, in all their great diversity. Amen.

Exploring (20 minutes)

3. *Look at Connections.*

To get an idea of what connections participants have to the issue of public education, ask for a show of hands on the following:

- I am a parent of a child or teenager presently in a public school. . . a charter school . . . , a private school. . . being home schooled.
- I have adult children who attended a public school. . . a charter school. . . a private school. . . were home schooled.
- I have school- aged grandchildren.
- I am a public school teacher. . . a teacher in a charter school. . . in a private school
- I am a public school principal . . . administrator. . .
- I am a school board member. . .
- I respond in the affirmative to the question posed to the congregation at the Baptism of a child. . .

Remind the group that regardless of their recent experience or connection to public schools in their community, when they respond to the question at a child's Baptism about guiding and nurturing that child in the Christian faith, it is a promise to nurture the whole child. The life situations that impact a child's development cannot be separated from his or her formation in the Christian faith. The commitment we make at Baptism extends to caring about whatever experiences are shaping a child, and includes the public schools that close to 90 percent of children in this country attend.

4. *Examine The Mandate to Love the Neighbor.*

Invite participants to pair up. In each pair, ask one person to read Matthew 22:34-40 and one to read Mark 12:28-34. Also ask them to scan the information in the first three paragraphs under Section II, "Biblical and Theological Context in Support of Public Education" in the policy

paper. After reading their assigned passage and the information in the paper, ask participants to discuss the following with their partner:

- **How does Jesus state the First Commandment in the passage you read? Are there differences between Matthew's and Mark's rendering of the commandment?**
- **What does it mean to love your neighbor in the same way that you love yourself?**

Tell the group that Luke's account places the question about the Greatest Commandment in a different setting. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Luke 10:25-29. Jesus here pairs the mandate of the Shema to love God with the admonition in Lev. 19:18 to love the neighbor. Point out that Jesus was not the first to pair the Great Commandment with the commandment to love the neighbor as yourself—it occurs often in other ancient Jewish teachings on the Law. Ask someone else to continue by reading aloud the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:30-37, inviting the group to listen for what each character in the story does.

Discuss:

- **What does the wounded man do? The priest? The Levite?**

Have someone read verses 33-35 again. Then ask the group to name the action verbs in the verses as you list them on newsprint.

Ask:

- **Do you think the priest and the Levite got close enough to really see the wounded man? Why or why not? What was the potential risk to these men in ministering to the wounded man?** (it is worth noting that both were descending from Jerusalem where the Temple was located to Jericho, not the other way around, so there was no risk of being unable to perform the priestly duties because of rendering themselves unclean)
- **How does Jesus reframe the question at the end of this story?**

Point out that the Samaritan was the last person Jesus' Jewish listeners would have expected to respond to the needs of the wounded man, for in their context "neighbor" would have been assumed to have been another Jew. Yet the Samaritan not only had compassion, he acted.

Ask:

- **How are we responding to the current situation we find ourselves in concerning the state of public education? Would you say we get close enough to the situation to really see what is happening? If we do not have children in the public schools or are otherwise not connected in some way to the schools, in what ways do we distance ourselves from what is happening there? Do we turn aside, as the Levite and the priest did? Why?**
- **What does it mean to act as neighbor to the fifty million children in the public school system and their family members, to teachers and administrators and school board members?**

5. Unpacking the Current Context.

Ask the group to recall their own school experiences. How much diversity was present in their schools, and what kind? racial? cultural? linguistic? socio-economic? Did group members attend integrated schools?

Point out for the group that since the time of common schools (1830-1880), bringing people from a variety of cultures and language groups into the American mainstream has been one of the primary goals of public education. Around the turn of the twentieth century, immigrants flooded into the United States. In 1907 alone, authorities recorded the arrival of more than 1,200,000 newcomers. The movement to assimilate and Americanize these foreigners took on new urgency in the schools, where teachers were not only expected to teach English, but to instill American customs, manners and mores. It was during this era that the image of the melting pot gained currency.

Note that the policy paper tells us that we are presently experiencing the second largest influx of immigrants after the European waves of immigrants. Ask the group to look at the charts under “Trends in the Nation” (pp. 11-12) and “Trends Among School-aged Children” (p. 12). Discuss the following:

- **What do you note are the significant changes in the U.S. population with respect to race and ethnicity over the past two decades? How does that compare with the changes in public school enrollment?**

- **What states or regions are experiencing the greatest growth in Latino/Latina/Hispanic and Asian population? Is our state/region experiencing this trend?**

If you have participants with a close connection to the public schools, ask for their observations about whether the schools they know have an increased number of children of color or of children whose first language is something other than English.

6. Look at Elements of Diversity.

Divide the group into the three smaller working groups, and assign to each group one of the three elements of diversity discussed in the policy paper. Ask each group to discuss their topic with others in the group, focusing the discussion in the following ways:

- Briefly summarizing the information in their section
- Highlighting two or three facts they found surprising or that were new information
- Posing questions that need more information or need further research.

After allowing each work group a few minutes to do their work, invite each one to report out to the total group. Then discuss:

- **Which elements of diversity do you see represented in our community’s schools?**

- **How does this diversity--or how could it-- enrich the education of all public school students?**
- **Based on what you heard from the other groups, can you identify some key places where an aspect of diversity represents a significant challenge?**

Responding (30 minutes)

7. Respond to Six Aims of Public Education.

Refer the group to the (p. 7) sections of the study paper, “The History of Public Education,” “Our Reformed Heritage.” Remind participants that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s historical commitment to education, grounded in the views of John Calvin, led our predecessor denominations to establish schools for marginalized groups who did not have access to education. Even the Sunday school movement had roots in the promotion of literacy. Ask participants to name historical events that seem to them particularly significant to the development of public schools. Ask them to scan the section on recent General Assembly actions on children and public education, and to note policies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that seem to provide significant undergirding to responding to the issues of public education.

Ask someone to read aloud the last paragraph immediately preceding the section, “The Current Context of Public Education.” Note that most of us would agree that academic achievement is a primary function of schooling. Traditionally, though, there have been six other aims of public education, all directed at undergirding the common good. Point out the six newsprint sheets on which you printed the six aims from the study paper, and pose the question: Should these be aims of public education today? Ask the group to self-select one of the aims sheets as a starting point. They move from sheet to sheet, using a black marker to indicate a “yes” or “no response to that question. In addition, they can print questions they may have about a particular aim with a red marker and comments or observations with a green marker. As they move around, encourage them to read and respond in writing to the comments and questions of others.

In the total group, invite participants to name comments they found compelling, or questions they may have that need further exploration. Discuss:

- **Should these be the aims of public education today? How do they support the common good?**
- **How is public education fulfilling these functions? What stands in the way of achieving any one of them?**

8. Debate Desegregation/Resegregation.

Divide the group into two smaller groups by numbering off by twos or by some other arbitrary way of forming two groups. Assign one of the following propositions to each group:

- **Resolved: Racial integration, while never fully achieved, is a worthy goal to pursue that will benefit children of all racial groups**

- **Resolved: Socio-economic integration is a more realistic goal to pursue in order to increase diversity in our schools, and will benefit children of all socio-economic groups**

Ask groups to use the information in the policy paper under the section, “Desegregation and Re-Segregation” (p.14) to prepare arguments to support their proposition. After allowing a few minutes for groups to prepare, invite each group to make its presentation. Debrief, discussing the pros and cons of either form of integration. Also discuss the following:

- **Gary Orfield argues that due to the Supreme Court’s ruling on school busing, re-segregation has occurred in our schools, with urban areas being overwhelmingly racial-ethnic and low-income. Based on your own experience and what you have read, would you agree or disagree with Orfield’s conclusions?**
- **How do you respond to the following quote?**
“If integration should be revived as a goal to bring about educational equity, legal scholars believe that the barriers of law could be overcome, but that the real issue would be the attitude of parents and families.”

Closing (5 minutes)

Sing a Hymn.

As a closing prayer, sing together “O For a World” (*The Presbyterian Hymnal*, #386)

Additional Activities

Explore Memories of Our School Days. In advance of the session, print the following open-ended prompt on a sheet of newsprint; “One memory I have of my school days is. . .” Invite participants to respond to the prompt as they enter. During the session, invite volunteers to share what they wrote. Then ask:

- **What do you remember learning in school? What experiences were the basis of that learning?**
- **Who shaped your school experiences? From whom you remember learning something important?**

Invite the group to keep these experiences of schooling in mind, remembering that what and how we were educated ourselves can shed some light on the kind of education today’s children deserve.

Explore Images of Diversity in Scripture. Invite two volunteers to read aloud Genesis 11:1-10 and Acts 2:1-12. Note for participants that these two passages can be read as metaphors for contrasting views of diversity. In the Tower of Babel, one people with one language is divided and scattered because of pride in their sense of power. God confuses their language, causing them to be unable to understand one another. In the story of the Pentecost, through the movement

of the Spirit the community embraces the spectrum of languages and cultures and is able to understand one another in the midst of great diversity. Ask participants to consider the contemporary context of the nation and of our system of public education, noting that how we handle the increasing diversity of our population is a critical issue. Discuss: How can we deal with our differences in ways that avoid being divided and scattered by them? How can we embrace our diversity as well as finding a common sense of purpose?

Identify Stumbling Blocks. Read aloud Matthew 18:1-7. Invite the group to reflect on what stumbling blocks related to the increasing diversity of the population stand in the way of children in our public schools today. Then ask the group to look again at the six aims of public education from the policy paper that are posted on newsprint. Give each participant several self-stick notes and a pen. Ask them to consider what stumbling blocks stand in the way of achieving any one of these aims and to print them on separate self-stick notes, attaching them to the appropriate aim.

Assignments

For the next session, ask the group to read the portions of the policy paper under the heading “Accountability and High-Stakes Testing” (p. 15) and, “Achievement Gap or Opportunity Gap?” (p. 16). Also, remind participants that the national conversation about high-stakes standardized tests as the primary criterion used to assess success or failure in schools is continually changing, particularly since the deadline of 2014 for moving every child and every school to achieving Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) is nearing. Ask them to peruse their local newspaper, news magazines or sources of news on the Internet for articles about how the schools in your district are doing, which schools have been labeled failing and are undergoing sanction, or other relevant news.

Session 2

Loving the Neighbor Means Acting as Good Stewards

Goals

- To critique the assumptions underlying a market approach to solutions in public education.
- To contrast the achievement gap and the opportunity gap and explore what can enhance the opportunity to learn.
- To consider how we can act as good stewards of God's good gift of children.

Preparation

- On a sheet of newsprint, print the following observations from the study guide:

Mike Rose asserts that we have forgotten that we are not just economic beings, but civic and moral beings as well.

New York Times columnist David Brooks writes that economists think of human capital as the skills and knowledge that people need to get jobs to drive the economy. He argues that educational reform has failed because it has failed to address the other underlying components of human capital (cultural, social, moral, cognitive and aspirational capital)

In *Democracy at Risk: The Need for a New Federal Policy in Education*, the authors stress that our country's "civic participation gap" mirrors the "education gap"---therefore putting our very form of government at risk.

- Continue to post the newsprint sheets from the last session with the six aims of public education.
- Participants will need paper and pencils or pens.

Materials and Supplies

- Prepared sheets of newsprint (see preparation)
- Paper and pens or pencils
- Bibles

Opening (5 minutes)

1. *Read Scripture.*

Read aloud, or ask a volunteer to read Genesis 1:26-31.

2 *Pray Together.*

Pray the following, or a prayer of your own choosing:

Creator God, you have entrusted to us the earth and all that is in it and have called us to a wise stewardship of a good creation. Remind us of our calling to be good stewards of children--all children. Clear our minds of the pervasive rhetoric that would have us view our children as cogs in the wheel of commerce or as products to be turned out, rather than as your precious and good gifts. Stir us from the apathy that keeps us from reframing the conversation about education to one that names our young as your children, created in your image to serve you in joy. Amen.

Exploring (40 minutes)

3. *Examine the High Stakes Test.*

Ask a volunteer to summarize the information describing the use of standardized test under the heading, “Accountability and High-Stakes Testing.” (p. 15) Invite those in the group who brought in articles from the newspaper or news magazines or from Internet news sources to share what they found. In your district or city, are schools being labeled as failing, and if so, how many? Are there problems with how test scores are used? What are the issues that seem to be emerging? Discuss the following:

- **In what ways can you identify that disaggregated (disaggregated scores show class-by-class test and school-by-school differences) scores may serve a useful purpose?**
- **If groups such as English language learners or special education students are publicly identified as pulling a school's test scores down, what are potential problems?**
- **What is the "soft bigotry of low expectations"?**

4. *Contrast “Good for the Marketplace” and “The Common Good.”*

Ask participants if they can name examples of the use of the language of the marketplace to describe public education. For example, policy makers and politicians often cite the need to be competitive in the marketplace as the compelling reason for education reform.

Call the attention of the group to the three observations you posted from the study guide from Mike Rose, *Democracy at Risk* and David Brooks and invite them to respond. Then ask:

- **How is the language of the marketplace shaping the debate and direction of education reform?**
- **What are the problems in approaching the education of children as if it can be accomplished like the production of “widgets”—something that can be efficiently produced assembly-line style?**
- **What is sacrificed when education takes this approach? What are the pitfalls?**

Note for participants that the market approach taken by the current federal legislation, with its emphasis on basic skills at the expense of broader content area, is crowding out course offerings such as civics education. Ask:

- **What content and skills would you deem essential in order for a young person to be able to participate actively in a democratic society? Are there groups in our society--new immigrants, for example—for whom this is particularly important?**

5. *Explore the Opportunity to Learn.*

Call the group's attention to the section, "Achievement Gap or Opportunity Gap?" (p. 16) There is increasing attention by those who care about education, including the Schott Foundation, to examine the pervasive opportunity gap caused by the inequitable distribution of resources that underlies the achievement gap. This is a call to ensure that all children have the opportunity to learn, defined as access to quality early childhood education, highly qualified teachers, a curriculum that will prepare them for college, work and community, and equitable instructional resources.

Divide the group into four small groups or pairs of participants. Assign to each group one of the four aspects of the opportunity to learn. Ask them to read the information in the policy paper about their assigned topic and be prepared to respond to the following:

- **Briefly summarize this component of the opportunity to learn. Do you agree or disagree that this component is key to the opportunity for all children to learn? Why?**
- **How would each component address issues of equity? Of quality?**
- **What are the problems standing in the way of children having access to this component? Is lack of access a problem in our district? Our state? What are underlying root causes that are blocking children from access to a high quality education?**
- **In your opinion, what might be some solutions?**

Allow about ten minutes for small groups to work, then ask each group to share with the total group. Call the attention of the group to the sheets from the last session with the six aims of public education. Ask them to respond to the following:

- **Would these elements of an opportunity to learn further the six aims of public education, and if so, in what ways?**

Responding (10 minutes)

6. *Reimagine Children as Gift of God, Not Product.*

Remind the group of the examples of the language of the marketplace that they discussed earlier. Distribute paper and pencils and invite participants to imagine they are presenting a press conference announcing reforms to the public education system. Instead of beginning their remarks by identifying the need to be competitive in the marketplace, ask them to write a short speech reflecting the understanding that children are God's good gift. After allowing a few minutes for writing, ask volunteers to share what they wrote. Then discuss:

- How would this view of all children as God's gift change how we approach reforms to public education?

Closing (5 minutes)

7. *Pray Together.*

Pray the following, allowing time for spoken prayer by participants:

Creator God, you have created every child in your image, yet our policies and practices in public education sometimes deny the truth that we are stewards of each one. We confess that we have not done all we could do to ensure that every child has an opportunity to learn. And now hear us as we lift up our concerns about the opportunity gap in education. Hear our prayers about access and equity in early childhood education. . .in obtaining and retaining highly qualified teachers . . . in providing a curriculum that can prepare children for college, work and community. . . in offering equity in the resources children need . . .

By your Holy Spirit, give us the actions to back up our words. Make us good stewards of the precious gift that is our children, that each child may reach the full potential that you intend for all. Amen.

Additional Activities

Explore Opportunity to Learn in More Depth. In advance, do some web research (or ask volunteers to do so) on how schools in your state are funded. From the National Council of Churches of Christ's Public Education and Literacy website, download the resource "Opportunity Gaps in Public Education Must Be Closed." (<http://www.ncccusa.org/pdfs/elmopportunitygaps.pdf>)

Invite the group to discuss the recommendations **on specific federal reforms to ensure an opportunity to learn for all.**

Panel Presentation. Invite a school administrator, a school board member, a local public school teacher, a parent, a high school youth and an older elementary child to form a panel. Ask them to discuss what impact high stakes testing and the punitive measures in place to sanction schools, as well as funding issues are having on your local school system. What are the problems of which the public is unaware ? What would they like the participants to know about public education?

Hear about Early Childhood Education. If your church houses or supports an early childhood program, invite its director to come to speak briefly about the benefits of early education. Or invite an administrator of a Head Start program.

Assignments

Ask participants to review the information in the policy paper on alternatives to public education under the heading "Alternative Approaches." (p. 19) Ask some to research the laws in your state governing charter schools. Invite others to check news accounts and Internet news sources or interview a local school administrator or teacher about charters in your district. If anyone has a

child or grandchild in a charter or is teaching or administering a charter, interview that person, too.

Presently, some 39 states and the District of Columbia have laws on the books about charters. If your state is among the ten who do not have charters, ask volunteers to do some general research on charters and their effectiveness.

Session 3

Loving the Neighbor Means Loving as We Love Ourselves

Goals

- **To explore access to the choices available in the current educational context**
- **To consider the impact of choice on public education**

Preparation

- On newsprint, print the first portion of recommendation 4f. from the recommendations section in the policy paper (“Recognizes that while some families can choose alternatives such as home schooling, charter, and private schools, the vast majority (84 percent) of our children will, for the foreseeable future, continue to be educated in public schools. The privilege to choose an alternative for one’s own child (and the privilege of exercising this right based on one’s own resources) does not absolve anyone from the obligation to support financially the public schools that educate the majority of our society’s members.”).
- Also print the following statement from the Rev. Jan Resseger from the study paper (10f):

“Clearly there are many children, particularly urban and rural children, who have not been well served by their public schools. In a democracy like ours, whether the public schools can better serve all children is up to citizens. Can we, many of us living in the suburbs, find the political will to adequately fund public schools in poor communities? And when alternatives like charters are proposed to help us Race to the Top, we need to ask ourselves as citizens whether we have a better chance of reaching the most vulnerable children through privatized management, or whether we are responsible for improving traditional public schools. Inequality is built into the market system . . . Inequality is not incidental to privatization, it is its very premise.”
- Make copies of Appendix A— “Public Education Justice—Where Do Charter Schools Fit In?”

Materials and Supplies

- Bibles
- Prepared sheets of newsprint (see preparation)
- Copies of Appendix A: “Public Education Justice—Where Do Charter Schools Fit In?”

Opening (5 minutes)

1. *Read Scripture.*

Read aloud Mark 12:28-31. Then read Luke 10:33-35. Point out for the group that in his actions to the wounded man, the Samaritan demonstrated loving the neighbor as he loved himself. Invite the group to reflect in silence for a moment on how we would be moved to act if we considered the well-being of all the nation's fifty million public school children with the same degree of care and concern as we show for the education of the children closest to us.

2. *Pray Together.*

Pray the following prayer, or one of your own choosing:

Loving God, we know that for some privileged children, school is a place where there are dedicated and skilled teachers, a clean, spacious building with computer labs and up-to-date textbooks, and programs that address the full range of educational needs. But others languish in crumbling buildings with inexperienced teachers and limited resources. Give us fresh insight into what all children need and the will to bind up the wounds of systems that fail to meet those needs. Call us to the kind of response that values all children as much as we value our own. Amen.

Exploring (35 minutes)

3. *Explore Alternatives to Public Schooling.*

Ask for a show of hands of any participants who have children or grandchildren who are being home schooled or who attend private or parochial schools. If you have persons who so identify themselves, ask them to describe the reasons why they (or their children) made the choice they did.

Ask participants to read the information in the policy paper under the headings “Home Schooling” and “Private/ Parochial Schools.” (pp.21-22) Point out that the policy paper states that roughly 2.9 percent of the children between the ages of five and seventeen are home schooled. Some 11 percent of children are educated in private or parochial schools. Discuss:

- What factors allow a family to have a choice about where they educate their children? What factors might limit a person’s choices?**
- Why is it important for Presbyterians to affirm support for public education?**

Ask someone to read aloud the first portion of recommendation 4f. posted on newsprint, and invite the group to respond.

4. *Examine the Issue of Charter Schools.*

Because the issue of charter schools is currently a hot topic as well as being fairly complex, tell participants that you will explore this alternative to public schooling in some depth.

First ask the volunteers who researched charters in your state to report their findings. Presently, some 39 states and the District of Columbia have laws on the books about charters. If your state is among the ten who do not have charters, ask those who did the research to report the general information they found. Then ask the group to take a few minutes to read carefully the section “Charter Schools” under “Alternatives” in the policy paper. When the group has had time to read, ask a volunteer to define what a charter school is. Be sure to note that charters are publicly funded but managed privately.

Distribute copies of Appendix A, “Public Education Justice—Where Do Charter Schools Fit In?” Number off by threes; then ask participants to form small groups with a number 1, 2 and 3 in each group. Assign to the number ones the principle of access; to the twos the principle of equity; and to the threes the principle of public ownership. Ask participants to first silently read over the evaluation questions in the Appendix for their assigned principle, and then ask each group of three to discuss what they read. After allowing several minutes for the small groups to work, call everyone back to the total group. Considering each of the principles in turn (equity, access and public ownership), invite participants to name whatever questions or issues struck them as particularly compelling.

In the total group discuss:

- **Which of these questions for evaluation can we answer about charters in our state and community? About which do we need more information?**

Call the attention of the group to the quote from the Rev. Jan Resseger, posted on newsprint. Remind the group of the discussion in Session 2 about equitable resources, and review the sources of school funding: property taxes provide the primary source, with some funding from the state and a small amount of designated federal funds.

Invite them to respond to the following:

- **The Rev. Resseger poses the following question: Can we, many of us living in the suburbs, find the political will to adequately fund public schools in poor communities? What, in your opinion, would constitute the necessary steps to galvanize our political will?**
- **Would you agree or disagree that inequality is inherent to privatization? Is this market value consistent with viewing all children as gifts of God with God-given potential?**

5. *Uncover Root Causes.*

Ask the group to make note of the comment added by the committee that considered this study paper at the 219th Assembly:

Comment: The Assembly Committee on Social Justice Issues (A) advises that the assembly address issues of systemic factors that undermine children’s education. These include:

- The destructive impact of generations of poverty that diminish expectations of success.

- The debilitating impact of socioeconomic conditions such as lead-paint poisoning, fetal alcohol syndrome, drug dependency, and nutritional deficiency.
- The lack of support for families trying to be involved in their children's education.
- The in-applicability of curriculum to the life-settings of those children.

This comment calls attention to some of the underlying root causes impacting children's ability to learn. What racial, economic, religious and other differences affect the academic horizons of whole school districts?

Responding (15 minutes)

6. *Love Your Neighbor's Children.*

Say to the group that one aspect of a system of education that is market-driven is that competition, rather than collaboration, becomes the watchword. Charter schools, originally conceived as places for innovation to be tested and then for their best practices to filter into the system, now compete for resources.

What would characterize schools that would be good for all children? Divide the group into smaller working groups and invite them to generate a list of the features that they would like to see in a school that educates their own children or grandchildren. After allowing a few minutes for brainstorming features, make a master list of those things that would be characteristics of the very best schools for all children. Then ask:

- **What kinds of policies, in your opinion, would be most likely to lead to these kinds of improvements in public schools?**
- **Is competition the best way to achieve good schools? Who wins in a competitive system? Who loses?**

Closing (5 minutes)

7. *Pray for the goals of an Ideal School.*

Use the list generated by the group in a time of intercessory prayer.

God of justice, we pray for the system of public schools that serve most of our nation's children. We pray for discernment for ways in which we might best work to achieve schools that embody these things for all children. We pray for: (read the items on your list, or invite volunteers to name these things aloud). Amen.

Additional Activity

Case Studies on Choice. Divide the group into two smaller groups. Assign one of the following to each and invite them to respond by identifying the factors or issues in each situation that limit choice.

Case Study #1: You are a farmer in a rural area some sixty miles from a town or city of any size. The small local school can't offer AP courses and does not have an adequate science lab. Your child has the option of transferring to a school in a community that is an hour and a half's bus ride either way away from your home. This commute would make it impossible for your child to help with the chores on the farm.

Case Study #2: You and your wife both work two jobs in an effort to put food on the table, and you make enough to live just above the poverty line. You would like your children to have a good education, but the local school building is badly in need of repairs, there are not enough textbooks to go around, and the teaching staff has a high turnover each year. Although there are other options in the large urban area where you live, your own limited reading skills make the complicated paperwork involved in applying for a charter school too intimidating.

Use these, or invite the group to generate their own scenarios that illustrate how choice may be available to some and not to others for a variety of reasons.

Assignments

In the final session, the group will be generating action plans. It will also be a time when models of successful public schools and programs that benefit them can be lifted up for consideration. In preparation, explore the following websites:

For a program that partners churches and schools:
One Church One School (<http://www.onechurchoneschool.org>);

For a model that organizes a community's resources around student success:
Community Schools: The Children's Aid Society
(<http://www.childrensaidsociety.org/community-schools>).

For a summer enrichment program:
Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools (<http://www.childrensdefense.org/programs-campaigns/freedom-schools/>).

Also invite participants to check with your own district or with parents in your church for stories about exemplary public schools that are doing good work.

Session 4

Loving the Neighbor Means Acting with Justice

Goal

To formulate plans for action to make a difference in public education.

Preparation

- If possible, get a copy of *The Message*, Eugene H. Peterson's paraphrase of Scripture.
- Decide if you will sing "What Does the Lord Require?" (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, # 405), "We Are Called" (#2172, *Sing the Faith*) or "What Does the Lord Require of You?" (#2174, *Sing the Faith*), and obtain copies of the appropriate hymnal.
- Make copies of Appendix B, "A Litany for Education and Schools," produced by the National Council of Churches Public Education and Literacy Committee.
- Download and make copies of information from the websites listed in last session's assignment.

Materials and Supplies

- Copy of *The Message* (if possible)
- Copies of Appendices B and C
- Paper and envelopes and pencils or pens for each participant
- Hymnals
- Copies of information from the websites listed in last session's assignment

Opening (5 minutes)

1. *Read Scripture.*

Read aloud Micah 6:6-8, if possible from *The Message*. Invite the group to reflect in silence on what it means to do what is fair and just to your neighbor. What would constitute actions that are fair and just for our neighbors, the children in public schools and their families?

2. *Sing a Hymn.*

Sing a hymn about justice, such as "What Does the Lord Require? (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, # 405), "We Are Called" (#2172, *Sing the Faith*) or "What Does the Lord Require of You?" (#2174, *Sing the Faith*).

3. *Pray Together.*

Pray the following, or a prayer of your own choosing:

God of justice, we know that you have made it plain how to live and what to do. We are called to do what is fair and just, to be compassionate and loyal in our love, and most of all to take you seriously. Forgive us when our vision of justice is limited; when our compassion is reserved for those near and dear to us; when we fail to live out what it means to love the neighbor. And now be with us as we explore ways to put our justice and compassion to work. Amen.

Exploring (30 minutes)

4. Explore What Works.

Invite volunteers who were able to talk with administrators or teachers in your district to share success stories of schools, programs, or individual classrooms in public schools where good things are happening. What are the elements of these success stories that are making a difference?

Divide into three small groups. Give to each group the website materials for one of the three programs or initiatives: Community Schools, One Church One School, or Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools. Ask each group to read the materials and to be prepared to report back to the total group, giving a brief summary of the program or initiative and highlighting a few points about how it works. After allowing a few minutes for groups to work, invite participants to come back to the total group and report. Discuss:

- What are the features of this program? How does it work? What problems does it address?**

Also point out for the group that at the national level the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) works collaboratively on public education issues with other communions in the National Council of Churches Public Education and Literacy Committee to produce such resources as those included in the study as Appendices A and B. Other resources are available on the committee's website, <http://www.ncccusa.org/specialminstries>.

Distribute Appendix B and note that this litany can be used in a service of worship to lift up public education as congregations are encouraged to do in recommendation 5c.

Recognize Public Policy disagreements where participants may disagree with the General Assembly's positions:

- 4.b calls for sources of funding other than almost exclusive reliance on property taxes.
4.i calls on all institutions “to honor the right of all persons, including public school educators, to organize to participate actively in decision-making that affects them.” (4.0 is even clearer about “union representation.”**

Responding (20 minutes)

5. *Formulate Action Plans.*

On a sheet of newsprint, print the following categories: worship/prayer, education, service, advocacy. Brainstorm with the group actions they might take, individually or as a group for each category. For example, in what specific ways and for what specific persons or issues related to education might Presbyterians pray? How can public education be lifted up in the service of worship? How might we need to further educate ourselves on the issues? What could we do by way of direct service (mentoring? after-school programs? adopting a school, using a model like One Church One School?) In what ways might we advocate for change (At school board meetings? With our state legislature? On the federal level?)

When the brainstorming seems to be coming to an end, invite members of the group to identify one thing in each category to which they might be willing to commit. Also discuss whether there are common actions the group may want to take.

Distribute paper and envelopes and pens or pencils. Invite participants to write down the actions they will commit to take for public education and place them in the envelopes, sealing the envelopes and addressing the envelopes to themselves.

Closing (5 minutes)

Pray a Litany of Commitment

Invite participants to join in “A Litany of Commitment”, bringing forward the sealed envelopes at the appropriate time. In about a month’s time, plan to mail the envelopes to participants as a reminder to them of the commitments they made.

Additional Activities

Write Thank-You Notes. If possible, get the names of teachers and the principal in a local school and the names of administrators at your district office. Distribute note cards and pens to participants. Invite them to write notes of thanks and appreciation to these persons for the work they are doing.

Explore a Pastoral Letter. From the National Council of Churches Public Education and Literacy website, download “A Pastoral Letter on Federal Policy in Public Education: An Ecumenical Call for Justice” (<http://www.ncccusa.org/elmc/pastoralleter.pdf>). Invite participants to discuss the questions posed in the resource related to choice-based alternatives.

Use a Lenten Resource. From the National Council of Churches Public Education and Literacy website, download “Journey to Lent, Journey to Learn: A Reflection on Public Education in God’s World Today” (<http://www.ncccusa.org/2011lentenguidepubed.pdf>). Although designed for Lent, these reflections based on biblical passages could be used at other times in the year as well.

Public Education Justice—Where Do Charter Schools Fit In?

A Resource of the National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy

Are children in your congregation or your community attending charter schools? Maybe you have been asked to serve on the board of a charter school. Perhaps your congregation is considering forming a charter school. What questions should people of faith be asking to explore whether these quasi-public schools serve the public good?

What are charter schools?

Charter schools are publicly funded schools, but they are operated by separate, semi-autonomous, appointed governing boards. Some charter schools are founded by visionary local educators while others are part of local or national non-profit chains. Still others are part of huge for-profit enterprises like Edison Schools or the on-line schooling giant, K-12. Some are excellent, others deplorable, and many quite average. Overall, charter schools have not out-performed traditional public schools, although such generalizations are deceiving because they mask the disparity in quality among charter schools. Charter schools are established in state law and their licensing requirements and operations differ significantly from place to place. They are rarely subject to the same public oversight required for traditional public institutions.

How can we evaluate charter schools?

Well-respected educators, public high school principal George Wood and charter school founder Ted Sizer, call us to evaluate charter schools according to principles of **access, equity, and public purpose-public ownership**.¹ These same principles have also historically been of concern when people of faith look for justice in traditional public education.

- Universal **access** means that all children—wherever they live, whoever their parents, and whatever their abilities or needs—can find a place at a high quality, nurturing, publicly funded school.
- **Equity** means that all publicly funded schools, no matter the school district or state, must have the resources to serve all children including those who are poor or disabled and those who speak a language other than English at home. Schools everywhere must be adequately funded to serve each child's needs.
- **Public purpose-public ownership** means that society provides schools not only for the formation of each child but also for the formation of an educated citizenry. And when society taxes itself to provide education, there must be the assurance of careful stewardship of those public dollars.



Charter schools embody the idea of school choice; each one is designed to serve a small group of children with the intention that a mix of schools will provide for all children. In a 1999 policy statement, without opposing choice altogether, the National Council of Churches General Assembly reminded people of faith that justice will require our attention to the traditional public schools that will continue to serve the majority of our nation's 50 million children:

“...all of us, Christians and non-Christians alike, have a moral responsibility to support, strengthen and reform the public schools....we call upon our members to direct their energies toward improving the schools that the majority of children will continue to attend. The long-range solution is to improve all schools so that families will not be forced to seek other educational alternatives.”

We must find a way to ensure that each charter school serves its students, for they are our children. We must also find enough attention, even if we are deeply involved with a charter school, to address the injustices that remain in the larger system of traditional public schools

¹ Leigh Dingerson, Barbara Miner, Bob Peterson and Stephanie Walters, ed., *Keeping the Promise? The Debate Over Charter Schools* (Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools in collaboration with The Center for Community Change), 2008, pp. 5-6.

Using This Resource

The questions on the following pages will help you or a group in your congregation evaluate individual charter schools or the implications of charter school policy in your state according to the principles of **access, equity, and public purpose-public ownership**. Some of these questions will require you to research how your state's chartering and licensing laws work. Others are philosophical, open-ended questions. Use these questions to guide your own personal reflection or as a discussion guide in your justice committee or adult education class.

Access

1. Are charter schools in your community open admissions schools or do they select students with entrance exams? What does your state law say about selection procedures in traditional public and charter schools?
2. Even if open-admissions are required for charter schools, are charter schools using any other ways to screen children? Is the application procedure so complex that only savvy parents can negotiate it? Are admission interviews required? Are application or admissions fees charged? Do your area's charter schools have enrollment caps? Are parental or student contracts required (to make it easier later for the school to shed unwanted children or families)? Does the charter school provide transportation or must parents make their own transportation arrangements?
3. Do the traditional public schools in your community embody open admissions or do they use screens as described in the questions above? What are the different challenges for schools that accept all children and those that, in obvious and subtle ways, select their students?
4. How do charter schools in your community market themselves to attract students? Do they publicize their school in all neighborhoods? Are promotional materials available in multiple languages? Do the schools offer bonus payments or other incentives for enrollment? What are the implications when schools compete for students?
5. Are charter schools in your community providing comprehensive services for students with special needs in accord with the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act? If not, where and how are these students being served?
6. If your district is using school choice, does it provide a range of high quality options (which may include charter schools) or have some schools become schools of last resort? What happens to the children who are unable to choose or be chosen?
7. Do you think it is possible to offer good choices for all children?
8. Does your school district recognize the need to protect racial and economic diversity as it plans charter schools?
9. As charters are opened and neighborhood schools perhaps closed or restructured, what has been the impact on school assignments? What are the implications if children are not given right of return to their former neighborhood school?
10. Think about the politics connected to the distribution of charter schools in your community. Are some neighborhoods better placed politically to attract charter schools? What role does politics or the charter school manager's philosophy play in the placement of the school? Are any schools targeting a particular niche market?



Equity

1. Charter schools, each one operating autonomously, are rarely able to realize economies of scale. Should school districts be empowered to impose at least some unified planning for equitable provision of programs across traditional public and charter schools for children with learning, visual, hearing, or developmental disabilities and English language learners?
2. If a charter school closes mid-year or pushes students back into the traditional public schools mid-year, should the public money for those children follow the children back into the public schools expected to serve those students? How does your state's law address such funding issues?
3. When school districts create new experiments and models (whether they be charters or traditional public schools) should these schools have access to more public money than other schools? Why or why not?
4. In neighborhoods that are gentrifying, what is the impact of allowing some schools (whether charter or traditional public) access to additional resources in order to attract more affluent students? What message is sent to students and their families?
5. Charter schools often depend on private grants as well as public funds. Should some schools (whether they be charters or traditional public schools) have more access to private money than other schools? What are the implications over time as schools (traditional public or charter) compete for foundation funding?
6. When several small schools (traditional and charter) are housed in one building, what challenges are raised if one of the schools has access to greater resources than the other(s)? What message is sent to students?
7. Should charter schools be required to provide the same salaries and benefits as other publicly funded schools in the area? Should charters be required to allow their staffs to bargain collectively, if the traditional public district in which they operate does?



Additional Resources

Leigh Dingerson, Barbara Miner, Bob Peterson and Stephanie Walters, ed., *Keeping the Promise? The Debate Over Charter Schools* (Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools in collaboration with The Center for Community Change), 2008.

Jan Resseger, "Charter Schools: Quasi-Public Institutions and the Public Good," *Message on Public Education 2009*, United Church of Christ Justice & Witness Ministries, <http://www.ucc.org/justice/public-education/pdfs/Message-09.pdf>.

Public Purpose and Public Ownership

1. When public and private monies are commingled in a charter school, what bodies should establish the oversight rules, and who should enforce them?
2. When schools are funded with tax dollars, should their operators be permitted to make a profit? Are some charter school operators in your state making a profit?
3. What policies should be in place to protect the public from waste or theft of public funds by charter operators? Are charter schools in your area currently being held accountable for fiscal management?
4. Should charter schools, as schools funded primarily with tax money, and their boards be subject to sunshine laws and should their records be required to be made available to the public? Does your state require rigorous transparency for charter school financial records?
5. If a charter school or a chain of charter schools (accepting public funding) is being operated by a privately held corporation, should that business be required to report publicly on its expenditures and its hiring practices? What accountability rules and public transparency are in place in your state for charter school authorizers and charter school management companies?
6. State laws require charter schools to adhere to the same academic standards and to administer the same standardized tests as traditional schools. Are charter school regulations being enforced in your area to hold these schools accountable academically? What policies should be in place to protect children in charter schools from poor academic programs?
7. Why is public access to records and democratic oversight important? Whose rights most need to be protected—children and parents—taxpayers concerned about public stewardship—school district administrators considering unity of vision and coherence of programming across a district?
8. Can parochial schools be chartered in your state? If a religious school becomes a publicly funded charter school, does your state require that the curriculum be secularized to comply with the First Amendment? Does your state enforce this federal requirement that public funds not be used to establish religion?
9. How can responsible citizens work to make the successes we have observed in the best charter schools become systemic in all public schools?



National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy
Jan Resseger, Chair (216-736-3711) ressegerj@ucc.org

A Litany for Education and Schools



will develop caring hearts and minds that think clearly. We believe in you and care about your education.

PEOPLE: As your faith community, we pledge to be with you on your educational journey. We affirm that each of you is a precious gift from God. We will do all that we are able to ensure that your schools are positive places filled with hope and the resources necessary for learning. (Children and youth may be seated)

LEADER: Let us pray—Gracious God, we lift up to you all those involved in education in this community and in all the communities in our nation and world. Guide us, great God, that we will know the best way to show our interest and support for our students, teachers and all those involved in education.

PEOPLE: We pray for wisdom and strength to make a positive difference in the lives of those in school. We pray for courage to explore new ways of supporting the people and institutions that teach our children and youth. We pray in the name of the great teacher, Jesus. Amen.

PEOPLE: We celebrate your calling and pledge to support you and others in our communities who are involved in the education

of children and youth. (Educators may be seated)

LEADER: As we recognize those who teach in schools, we recognize as well those who teach at home. Will parents or guardians of our children and youth in school, who are able, please stand.

Education involves a partnership between school, home and community. The support of parents and guardians is essential to a child's success. This morning we recognize you for the support you give the students in your home. We hold in prayer all those in this congregation who have children and youth in school and pray that all homes will be a place where learning is valued and encouragement offered.

PEOPLE: We pledge our support to parents and guardians. We pray that our ministries will encourage and strengthen those in our church families who provide care for children. (Parents and guardians may be seated)

LEADER: At this time I would like to invite our youth and children in preschool, kindergarten, elementary, junior high, or high school, if you are able, to stand.

Your church family believes that each of you is a gift from God filled with potential and possibility. We pray that as you learn and grow you

Our faith challenges us to care for children, especially those who are at risk—those Jesus called “the least of these.” Within the important guidelines of our nation’s Constitution, the church and public schools can work together for the well-being of children. The National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy brings together representatives of member denominations to explore ways we can work for quality schools and the well-being of all our children.



For information about our committee, and a copy of the brochure “It’s About Children!,” please contact Reverend Dave Brown at dbrown7086@aol.com.

The National Council of Churches Policy Statement on Public Education, as well as a link to your denomination’s materials on public education, can be found at the NCC Web site: nccusa.org.

Appendix C

A Litany of Commitment

- Leader:** Who will work to see that every child enters school ready to learn?
- All:** **We will, by the grace of God.**
- Leader:** Who will believe, and act on the belief, that all children can reach their full potential to learn, given the opportunity?
- All:** **We will, by the grace of God.**
- Leader:** Who will work to support children, family members, teachers and administrators to make the best educational decisions possible?
- All:** **We will, by the grace of God.**
- Leader:** Who will support quality teaching and let our teachers know their work is valued?
- All:** **We will, by the grace of God.**
- Leader:** Who will see that all children and all schools have the resources they need to prepare every child to learn, develop and thrive?
- All:** **We will, by the grace of God.**
- Leader:** Who will work to involve our whole communities---health care providers, police, social service agencies, neighborhood groups, voluntary organizations, and other faith communities---to see that our children get what they need to learn and succeed in school and beyond?
- All:** **We will, by the grace of God.**
- Leader:** Who will speak up for children by holding our leaders and legislators accountable for laws and policies that work for the common good of all children and families and that acknowledge that all children have the right to a high quality education?
- All:** **We will, by the grace of God.**
- Because we affirm that all children are a gift of God, created by God and created good; all children are a gift to the whole of the human community; all children have a real faith, and gifts for ministry; all children have the right to be children; and all children are not just tomorrow, they are today. Therefore we covenant to act, with God's grace, to help all children to learn, to succeed, and to fulfill their God- given potential. Amen.**

Adapted from “A Protestant Worship Service”, in *Wonderfully Made: Preparing Children to Learn and Succeed*. National Observance of Children’s Sabbaths, Copyright 1999, Children’s Defense Fund, and *A Vision for Children and the Church*.



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