

Focusing on the Whole Child: A Broader Approach to Eliminating the Achievement Gap

A Call to Action

by the Puget Sound Educational Service District Board of Directors and Staff

October 15, 2008

As educational policy leaders and board members, we live with daunting realities that face our schools:

Gene Carter, Executive Director of ASCD, states that if we put the child at the center of our discussion, *"...we would create learning conditions that enable all children to develop all of their gifts and realize their fullest potential. We would enable children to reconnect to their communities and their own diverse learning resources, and we would deeply engage each child in learning. Finally, if the child were at the center, we would integrate all the ways children come to know the natural world, themselves, and one another, so that they can authentically take their place in creating a better future for all."*

"The Learning Compact," ASCD, 2007, (p. 2)

- The challenges of providing compelling programs for every child in every school;
- The necessity of lowering drop-out rates and closing the achievement gap so that all our students graduate ready and able to take the next step;
- The constant tension of balancing worthy program against worthy program when budget cuts must be made;
- The sure knowledge that, under the No Child Left Behind accountability structure, all public schools will be branded "failures" within a very few years;
- The importance of maintaining neighborhood schools, even as financial pressures and declining enrollments force us to consider closing schools;
- The difficulty of retaining quality extracurricular programs for students, regardless of a family's ability to pay;
- The paramount importance of recruiting and retaining a high quality teaching staff in an era of escalating labor demands and decreasing resources to support those demands.

In conversations with you, our fellow board members across King and Pierce counties, we've heard your heartfelt concern for students and your frustration at the roadblocks your districts encounter in providing a high quality education for each student. We have shared with one another our hopes for the children and families

In a compilation of essays directed to the next US President on the needs in education, Thomas Sobol, retired Professor of Education at Teachers College at Columbia University, discusses the issue of NCLB:

"The good news is that the standards movement, of which NCLB is a part, is making a positive difference for some students in some places. For some, the movement promotes clarity of purpose, quality of work, equity of expectations, and consistency of approach across schools and school districts.

The bad news is that for many other students in many other places the movement is narrowing the curriculum, imposing a stifling uniformity of practice at a time when we should be discovering new ways to use our miraculous new learning technologies, and punishing students and teachers for failing to achieve what we have not given them the means of achieving. No wonder there is such a backlash against the standards movement developing across the country!"

Letters to the Next President, edited by Carl Glickman, 2004, (pp. 194-195)

we serve and our struggles as to how best to achieve academic success for each of our students, how most effectively to prepare them for responsible citizenship, and how to instill in them a love of learning that will last a lifetime. The demands that will face our children as they pursue their lives and seek employment in a job market that we adults cannot yet imagine, require that our students master world-class academic skills, abilities, and attributes. At the same time, they must be equipped with the life skills to become wise parents, thoughtful leaders, and engaged citizens.

Current Definitions of Success

This year our discussions have taken on a new urgency, as the requirements of NCLB result in more and more schools being identified as "failing" to meet our children's needs. We know that educators in our region bring dedication and skill to the task of educating every child in their care. We know that many children achieve at high levels and find our schools to be exciting, challenging, and fun places to learn and grow. We also know that for other children, particularly our most disadvantaged students, some schools do not deliver the success it is our mission to provide.

Like you, the Puget Sound ESD Board and staff focus our service on success for all students. We are increasingly troubled, however, by just how we define "success" and by how we go about ensuring that all children meet the criteria for success set out in No Child Left Behind. We wonder: Do we sacrifice a child's genuine engagement and success in learning to a definition of academic success that constricts all the possible ways a child might succeed in school?

We question whether with our forced focus on test scores and achievement gaps, we actually withdraw the kinds of learning opportunities that can lead to academic

In his open letter to the next president of the United States, Ted Sizer, Professor Emeritus at Brown University and founder of the Coalition of Essential Schools, says:

"To guide your reflection, I suggest that you ponder fully what you want and hope for your own children and grandchildren. Education policy must have a child's face, and what better faces with which to begin than those of your own offspring? You will find that what you devoutly wish for each of your own children, born and yet to be born, is probably quite similar to what every parent and grandparent wishes for their children. To the greatest possible extent, education policies in a humane democracy should emerge from such wishes, messy and vague though they may often appear. We all want our offspring to be themselves, one by one, none exactly like any other, each reveling in and prospering from the best of his or her passions and worthy commitments."

[Letters to the Next President](#), 2004 (p. 208)

success for many of our struggling students: Hands-on experiential and project-based learning, a rich curriculum including the arts and recreation. Have we, with all good intention, unintentionally marginalized some children by limiting or eliminating programs that fire their imaginations and keep them engaged in school?

The number of students dropping out of our schools is, by anyone's measure, alarming. While we recognize that students drop out of school for a number of reasons, one of those reasons is certainly a young person's disengagement from learning, a failure to thrive in a system that has, in recent years, become more narrowly focused on WASL preparation as the key to graduation and, perhaps, less sensitive to the dreams and ambitions of individual students. We all know that a student who leaves high school without a diploma will most probably not have the credential or the skills required to take the next educational step or find a stable, family-wage job. How do we take our dropout prevention efforts beyond the traditional academic focus to create a learning environment that keeps all students engaged?

New Frameworks for Student Success

In searching to find how best to support educational policy leaders in dealing with these challenges, we met with **Dr. John Goodlad**, a highly respected educational researcher and Professor Emeritus at the University of Washington with decades of experience in these issues. He provided inspiration to us on the importance of creating dialogue in local communities about what we believe are the purposes, tenets and best practices of quality schooling. He

suggested that there are not only academic, but social goals to education that we need to keep in mind. In his view, the mission of schools should include the introduction and preparation of our young people into the responsibilities and freedoms of a democratic society and participation in the "human conversation." Those who teach our young are responsible to employ a caring pedagogy and provide moral stewardship of schools.

John Goodlad, Professor Emeritus at the University of Washington, international researcher and writer, states in his open letter to the next President:

"And so, Mr. President, the most important educational initiative I'm asking you to support during your watch is to restore the central school mission that served us so well in the past: the development of democratic character in the young. It embraces the social, personal, vocational, and academic purposes that parents expect of our schools. The first step toward this end is to restore the educational debate in local communities nationwide. You will have no trouble finding able and willing individuals and agencies to help you do this. It cannot be done by federal mandate."

Letters to the Next President, 2004 (p. 58)

We are also inspired by the work of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), which has developed a Learning Compact focused on ensuring that our schools meet the educational needs of the "Whole Child." We have found this document and ASCD's Whole Child website very helpful in articulating what we believe comprise the necessary elements for student success.

The Compact outlines the responsibilities schools, districts, and communities share to ensure that:

- Each student learns in an intellectually challenging environment that is physically and emotionally safe for students and adults.
- Each student is actively engaged in learning and is connected to the school and broader community.
- Each student enters school healthy and learns about and practices a healthy lifestyle.
- Each student has access to personalized learning and to qualified, caring adults.
- Each graduate is prepared for success in college or for further study and for employment in a global environment.

A Call to Action

At the Puget Sound ESD, our Board and staff have taken on what we're calling The 2020 Vision: to focus our energies, in service to our member districts, on eliminating the achievement gap in our region by 2020. This work will require skill, persistence, optimism, and an unwavering belief in our students' abilities to achieve academic success. It will also require a larger view of just what this means, a view that includes engaging all of our students at high levels through their interests and dreams.

Our current, well-intentioned focus on academics is essential. Global economics require that each citizen be prepared to live in and contribute to a worldwide community of shrinking size and growing complexity.

If, however, we concentrate solely on academics and on narrowly measured academic achievement, we fail to educate the whole child. We shortchange our young people and limit their future if we do not create places of learning that encourage and celebrate every aspect of each student's capacity for learning. We can do more, and we can do better.

"The Learning Compact," ASCD, 2007 (p. 6)

Like you, we believe that the elements that support a successful educational system are broader than our current national focus on high stakes tests. We believe that our forced focus on the narrowest of measures of student success does, in fact, leave far too many students behind. We reject the notion that a student's chances for success in life and a school's success in educating students can be neatly quantified.

We believe, instead, in an enduring social compact between children and adults: a compact that promises our young people that we will give them a brighter future. We believe that, in our role as board members, we shoulder the responsibility of educating each child to his or her highest potential. We believe in educating the whole child.

We know that we deal with many roadblocks to achieving success for all children and that the road is not easy. However, we will be stronger by coming together as a region to create responses and systems that address the challenges to each child's success.

This is our invitation to you to participate in a regional Board Member Forum focused on how we, as Board Members, can work together most effectively to ensure for our students the success envisioned by John Goodlad, ASCD's Learning Compact, the Board and staff of Puget Sound ESD, and you.

Our intent is four-fold:

- To create a framework for continued regional conversations among board members on topics related to student learning and the board member's role in advocacy on behalf of all our students;
- To ensure that our students experience Goodlad's notion of a caring pedagogy in each of our schools and ASCD's elements encompassed by The Learning Compact;
- To engage in specific policy work at the local, state, and federal levels that results in policies that address the learning needs of the whole child.
- To continue our collective advocacy for full funding of public education.

In light of the daunting realities that face us all, we will be more creative in our thinking and more powerful in our impact if we come together as a regional collaboration of board members to take action on these challenges. It is our responsibility to do better by our children.

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