

February 10, 2011

Dear President and Mrs Obama,

Last week, I joined more than 400 parents, teachers, school administrators and elected officials in my home town of Reading, MA to view *Race to Nowhere: The Darkside of America's Achievement Culture*. I returned home to watch the State of the Union address. As a public school teacher and a parent of three students in the Reading schools, I agree that as a nation we face a Sputnik moment: an historic opportunity for adults to work together to support a public education system that taps into the potential of our youth so that they can thrive in a competitive global community. I am writing to you with the hope that you two, as America's First Parents, can reframe the conversation about education to replace the competitive race for high test scores with a collaborative discussion about how to best educate whole students.

We need to broaden our definition of academic achievement to include multiple intelligences like interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence. I have been a public school teacher for over 20 years, teaching courses in European History to ninth and tenth graders and Psychology and AP Psychology to juniors and seniors. As an educator and a parent, I believe that we need to take care of the emotional lives of our children. Students need free time away from standards to explore, play, run around, take risks, pique their curiosity, and pursue their passions. *The Race to Nowhere* is a powerful documentary that, consistent with my observations as a high school teacher, chronicles the devastating consequences of our *No Child Left Behind*, test focused, high pressure, brand oriented, academic culture.

It is imperative that adults nurture students' emotions: Children must be safe and cared for in order to learn. Students need opportunities outside academics to develop skills to manage their emotions and to work with others. Vibrant programs in the arts, athletics, and community service are invaluable learning opportunities for students. Additionally, these programs promote civic engagement and strengthen the fabric of the community as a whole. Every year, I have a number of students who are unable to complete their course work due to emotional suffering, severe anxiety and serious psychological diagnoses. *Race to Nowhere* is dedicated to a 13 year old girl who commits suicide. Sadly, I have taught numerous students who have attempted suicide, and some who have succeeded. It is hard to overstate the grief caused when a young person takes her own life. It is even harder to grapple with the loss when a young person kills someone else, as occurred on January 19, 2007 at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, where I teach. The ninth grader who was stabbed to death in a school bathroom was an innocent victim, entangled in the emotional demons of a troubled 17 year old student. This tragedy devastated our school community. It is unconscionable that many urban students contend with this level of violence on a regular basis. The number of students in our public schools who suffer from serious emotional issues, who lash out at themselves and others, is a national tragedy and a call for action. Adults have a moral responsibility to take care of students' emotional health. Moreover, it is practical because myriad neuroscientific studies confirm that frontal lobe

functioning (the seat of critical thinking and problem solving) is inhibited in traumatized brains.

We need to expand the way we think about measuring academic achievement. I am a public school teacher because I hope to inspire students to achieve their potential so that they can make a difference in their communities. I was moved by your speech at the Arizona Memorial service especially in your description of Christina Taylor Green. “Imagine: here was a young girl who was just becoming aware of our democracy; just beginning to understand the obligations of citizenship; just starting to glimpse the fact that someday she too might play a part in shaping her nation’s future.” Over the years, I’ve taught numerous students who express similar ebullient hope in making a difference and serving our country. The kinds of activities that stoke that spark -- writing and ratifying a classroom constitution, putting leaders like Napoleon on trial, rewriting the Treaty of Versailles -- take time and careful assignment of roles that acknowledge individual strengths and weaknesses. Unfortunately, given the time constraints of mandated standardized testing, hands-on activities that help students practice collaboration and citizenship become less likely. This is especially true for at-risk students who need to devote more time during the school day on test prep activities designed primarily to help them earn more points on standardized tests. Lou Kruger’s movie *Children Left Behind* carefully documents the deleterious consequences of standardized tests on groups of students who, ironically, are the stated beneficiaries of Education Reform policies, for example, students with disabilities, Latinos, African-Americans, and English language learners. Furthermore, research on stereotype threat demonstrates how stereotypes present in the dominant culture around intelligence and academic achievement drive minority students’ test scores down, especially the scores of those students who care most about academic achievement. Relying on standardized test scores as the main measure of teaching and learning advantages certain types of learners while shutting down others. Finally, these tests do not accurately assess development of citizenship skills like ability to work with others, creative problem solving, and resiliency.

We need to trust and empower classroom educators to make decisions that are in the best interest of their students. Classrooms are communities made up of individuals with a wide variety of academic, emotional, and social needs. In “China’s Winning Schools” Nicholas Kristoff states “The larger issue is that the greatest strength of the Chinese system is the Confucian reverence for education that is steeped into the culture.... We’re not going to become Confucians, but we can elevate education on our list of priorities without relinquishing creativity and independent thought.” (*The New York Times*, January 15, 2011) Evaluating teacher performance, and especially allocating depleted public education funding to teacher bonuses based on student test scores, encourages teachers to teach to the test and discourages teachers from devoting the considerable time necessary to build a trusting relationship with troubled, sometimes traumatized, and reluctant learners. Not only is vilifying an individual teacher or teacher union disrespectful, it also silences voices and inhibits the collaborative and creative problem solving necessary to address our academic crisis and change our culture.

Our youth deserve an educational system that engages both hearts and minds. In order to face this Sputnik moment public perceptions need to be dramatically changed. I greatly

appreciate all your efforts engendering a commitment to collaboration and civic engagement in these divisive times. As you eloquently said at the Memorial service in Arizona, "I want us to live up to her expectations. I want our democracy to be as good as she imagined it. All of us – we should do everything we can to make sure this country lives up to our children's expectations." In order for me to be a public school teacher worthy of Christina's hopes, I need the government's and the public's trust and support. As Thomas Jefferson said "Educate and inform the whole mass of the people...they are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty." Please continue to remind the public of the urgent need to work together to strengthen education; doing so is consistent with our core values and democratic beliefs.

Sincerely,

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