

An Education President for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:  
Introducing Eight Letters to the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States

Hilda Borko, Jennie Whitcomb, & Dan Liston<sup>i</sup>

Stanford University (Borko)

University of Colorado at Boulder (Liston & Whitcomb)

As this editorial goes to press, Super Tuesday is still spinning in the news cycle. The dramatic primary and caucus season is in full swing, as no candidate has yet clinched his or her party's nomination. Whether a political junkie or a more casual follower of national politics, a record number of individuals have been swept up in the drama of the presidential campaign. Who will be the next president rivets the nation.

Whoever he or she is, the 44<sup>th</sup> President will inherit a troubled educational system, one ready for transformation despite persistent reform efforts since the 1980s. Whatever one's position on the reauthorization of *No Child Left Behind*, a legacy of this federal policy has been to make salient the two profoundly unequal public education systems in the United States. All candidates recognize the moral and cultural imperative to ensure *all* children receive an education on par with our most advantaged. The next President will also find a general public and policy community that grasp how much teachers matter. It is now conventional wisdom among researchers and policymakers to assert teachers are the single-most important school-based intervention to foster student learning. But the next president faces daunting challenges to ensure *all* children are in the company of quality teachers. With regard to education, the concerns are vexing.

As editors, we invited individuals whose work centers on teaching and teacher education to pen letters to the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States offering their advice to ensure quality teaching and teacher education. Our aim was to engage individuals from a range of perspectives and to provoke

conversation and lively deliberation about our nation's educational future. Their letters comprise this theme issue and were also the focus of the JTE/AACTE major forum at the annual meeting in New Orleans earlier this spring. Collectively, the invited letter writers challenge the next president to be bold and clear in his or her vision to value children and teaching. They urge that individual to use the mechanisms available to the office—the bully pulpit, selection of a Secretary of Education, and budget development and federal funding for our public education system—to realize that vision. We highlight here two themes that cut across the eight letters published in this issue, improving the conditions of children's lives and lending dignity to the teaching profession. In doing so, we necessarily leave out details and subtleties of each author's message. Thus, we encourage you to read the letters in their entirety.

#### *Improving the Conditions of Children's Lives*

Children's living conditions are also their learning conditions. Three authors tackle the impact of childhood poverty and long-standing funding inequities in our schools that directly affect primarily black and brown children's chances at learning from teachers who are able to support them to reach their fullest potential. Renee Clift and David Berliner speak to poverty's impact on learning and development. Citing a 2006 report from the National Center for Children in Poverty, Renee Clift reminds us that "18% of all United States children live in poverty, but that figure is much higher for certain racial groups. Thirty-five percent of Black children are poor, as are 28% of Latino/a children, and 29% of American Indian children." To illustrate the impact of poverty on children's learning and development, both Clift and Berliner drill down to the very specific ways in which the inadequate healthcare poor children receive affects their opportunities to learn. Berliner notes that recurrent absences from asthma and *otitis media* (ear infections) dramatically affect poor children's attendance, and he forcefully reminds us "there is no stronger finding in educational research than the relationship between time spent learning and tested achievement." We add that other features of poor children's living conditions also affect

learning, such as housing conditions, access to technological and cultural resources (e.g., libraries, computers/internet, the arts, athletic facilities and the outdoors), or access to affordable, nutritious food. Clift challenges the next president to address the impact of poverty on children’s lives to ensure “conditions that make it possible for teachers to teach and children to learn.”

Gloria Ladson-Billings approaches the impact of poverty from a different angle. Many of the letters begin by arguing the “achievement gap” is unacceptable and must be narrowed, if not eliminated. Ladson-Billings offers a provocative and hard-nosed reconceptualization of the term “racial achievement gap.” She urges, “Instead of an achievement gap, I believe we have an education debt...[T]he notion of education debt requires us to think about how all of us, as members of a democratic society, are implicated in creating these achievement disparities.” Her argument examines the historical, economic, and moral dimensions of funding inequities and educational disenfranchisement. Pointing to evidence from Gary Orfield and his colleagues at the Civil Rights Project, she reminds us that over the last ten years schools have re-segregated dramatically. She calls on the next president to galvanize the nation to “start on a payment plan” that erases this educational debt. She argues policies enacted over the last eight years—“more testing, less funding, disinvestment in public schools, and attacks on teachers and teacher preparation”—have done nothing to eliminate this debt. Ladson-Billings dares the next president to rally the nation to commit its resources and talent to being a democratic, multiracial society where every aspect of a student’s experiences in school affirms that s/he is a full-fledged citizen.

#### *Lending Dignity to the Teaching Profession*

Points made in the previous section highlight powerful, sometimes overpowering, factors outside of school that influence what happens inside school. In school buildings, the most important factor in any child’s learning and development is the quality of teachers encountered. Bush’s signature legislation, *No Child Left Behind*, attempts to improve teacher quality through its requirement that all

teachers be “highly qualified” in the subject areas they teach, where highly qualified is defined almost exclusively in terms of content knowledge. States’ varied compliance approaches to this requirement for quality resulted in little progress. The federal approach taken over the last eight years seems to us to have diminished the dignity of the profession in several critical ways. For example, it has focused on narrow criteria to define teacher quality that underplay the importance of professional knowledge and teachers’ ongoing learning. It has also not attended to the conditions in which teachers work and how those conditions affect their willingness to stay. And, it has tolerated, even encouraged, sweeping critiques of teacher education.

The next president has an opportunity to reframe the teacher quality movement in ways that both expand components of teacher quality and affirm teacher’s professional and vocational commitments. From a policy perspective one critical challenge the next president must attend to is recruiting, preparing, and retaining high quality teachers who both choose and stay in schools serving our poorest communities. All contributors to this theme issue take up the topic of this challenge by bidding the next president to use the office to lend dignity to the profession of teaching. Their recommendations cover broad terrain, and each requires the next president to exercise a combination of the power of the bully pulpit, the power of sound policies, and the power of the purse string to honor and support the power of teaching and the work teachers do in service to our nation.

First, all letters argue for valuing teacher preparation and ongoing teacher learning. Christine Sleeter outlines the characteristics diverse students need of their teachers:

Students need teachers who hold high expectations for their learning, who can engage them academically by building on what they know and what interests them, who can relate to their families and communities and read them as well as their families in culturally accurate ways, and who can envision them as constructive participants in a multicultural democracy.

These characteristics are developed through well structured teacher learning experiences. Yet, not all teacher education pathways offer such learning opportunities. For this reason, several appeal to the next president to promote the importance of teacher preparation that attends to the needs of diverse learners (see especially Christine Sleeter).

Julia Freeland, Julie Mikuta, and Andrew Rotherman argue that “Washington can encourage more pluralism in teacher preparation and training organizations.” They point to charter management organizations (e.g., teacher residency models, Teacher for America) as promising models to encourage highly motivated and academically accomplished individuals to choose teaching. Seeking to bridge the now familiar professionalization versus market-based pitches at reform in teacher preparation, Freeland and her colleagues argue for a “third way approach.” For them, drawing from the best aspects of each approach will yield policies that “open the teaching profession to a wider pool of higher quality candidates, enable the development of more and better preparation programs, and encourage more innovation while still maintaining an important credentialing function and role for the public sector.” Freeland, Mikuta, and Rotherman challenge the received wisdom in current teacher education circles, and the challenge needs to be heeded.

Along with improving initial teacher preparation, several letters tackle ways the president can improve teachers’ opportunities to continue learning throughout their careers. Most professional development is disconnected from teachers’ immediate questions and challenges. Additionally, Freeland and her colleagues argue that it is often not cost-effective, particularly because professional development dollars are not spent on approaches aligned with improving student learning or meeting teachers’ professional goals. To guide the next president, Ann Lieberman and Desiree Pointer-Mace synthesize what we know about teacher learning communities (TLCs) and highlight reform networks and TLCs as an exemplary approach to improve teachers’ practice. In their analysis, key features of TLCs include the following:

[T]hey focus on instruction; are sustained and continuous, rather than short term and episodic; provide opportunities for teachers to learn from one another both inside and outside school; make it possible for teachers to influence how and what they learn; and engage teachers in thinking about what they need to know.

Lieberman and Pointer-Mace urge the president to promote opportunities for teachers to “open the doors” to their practice, both literally and virtually.

A second way the president can encourage quality and lend dignity to the profession is to support the provision of external markers that value particular features of the profession. Berliner asserts, “Our nation needs the pay scales and social rituals to honor all its teachers and to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers for our classrooms.” The authors offer a number of specific strategies. Freeland and her colleagues, for example, look to Britain’s successful and “aggressive \$50 million media campaign [that] managed to attract a wider audience to the teaching profession, elevating teaching from the 92<sup>nd</sup> most desirable next job for 25-35 year olds to the *most* desirable.” Arthur Levine argues for “creating the equivalent of a Rhodes Scholarship for teachers.” His proposal, now being implemented in several states as Woodrow Wilson Scholarships, provides substantial fellowships (on the order of \$50,000) to “America’s best” who attend a one-year graduate program in teacher education and agree to teach in urban or rural schools for three years. In a culture that lives by the expression “show me the money,” creating financial incentives to teach is intuitively appealing. On the one hand, Levine’s model holds promise as an incubator of innovative and excellent teacher preparation; on the other hand, it is also a harbinger for growth of teacher preparation programs financed by philanthropies and administered through school districts. Such programs are not, in principle, weak, but they do have the potential to become apprentice-based, job training that diminishes the value and values added by grounding teacher preparation in the liberal arts and social sciences.

As a third strategy to dignify the profession, the authors encourage the next president to nurture creativity and innovation in teacher preparation, professional development, and research in teaching. Given that states and districts bear the central responsibility for teacher quality, the federal government can promote innovation. Looking to high-tech companies, Berliner suggests the president “nurture ‘skunkworks,’ that is working groups that allow creative development of ideas and projects outside the normal course of the work in which the business engages.” Clift asks the president to learn from and expand “unique initiatives” that foster coordination and collaboration across the varied institutions (universities and colleges, districts, and other agencies) who support teachers across their developmental continuum. Freeland and her colleagues encourage “innovations based on demand rather than supply,” that is giving teachers more choice in their selection of professional development programs while holding those programs accountable for results in student achievement. To improve research, Berliner suggests funding more teacher research and implementation studies. Sleeter requests funding for research on teacher education practices that “have promise [to prepare] teachers for diverse and historically underserved learners.” Freeland and colleagues call for funding quality data collection systems that allow states to track “teachers’ student gains back to their training institutions.”

A final approach to lend dignity to the profession comes from Lee Shulman, who asks the next president to serve as a paragon of an educated person. Speaking directly to the next president, he writes,

I want you to support the work of teachers at all levels by serving as a persistent, relentless, and self-conscious *model of an educated person*. I further implore you to define the president’s role as the *principal teacher* of our nation, the model educator, whose responsibility is to exemplify the habits of mind, habits of practical judgment and action, and habits of heart that we associate with our ideal for all well educated citizens in our democracy. Even more important, I

implore you to define your roles as the *principal learner* taking every opportunity to make your own intellectual and moral development visible and transparent to your fellow citizens.

Shulman's message reminds us that the next president's leadership, more than policies or purse strings, may be the most essential factor in reframing the tenor and substance of reform talk about teaching and learning. Such a shift may yield fertile ground for the many excellent suggestions made in the letters written to our next president.

In closing, it is too early to tell whether this will be a national security election, an economy election, a change election. It is unlikely that it will be an education election. The primary season has been marked by record turnouts in nearly every primary election or caucus. Yet, as Arthur Levine reminds us, education was largely ignored in speeches, meetings with voters, and televised debates. Similarly, the 44<sup>th</sup> president may or may not be an "education president." There will be many issues competing for that President's time. For us, one key moral and pragmatic imperative of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to redesign our education system to serve those who have been historically underserved and marginalized. Thus, the 44<sup>th</sup> President must be an education president for the 21<sup>st</sup> century; he or she must commit vigorously to improve factors outside educators' control that dramatically shape what children and teachers are able to do in school. Read our lips: It's about the poverty. The next President must also reframe the teacher quality movement. A quality teacher is one prepared to work in schools serving our nation's English language learners and new arrivals, low-income families and communities, and students of color. We look forward to the race ahead in the fall and hope that the bloggers, campaign staffers, and speech writers will attend to the thoughtful advice offered by our eight contributors.

---

<sup>i</sup> As an editorial team, we write editorials collaboratively. To reflect the nature of this joint work, we rotate order of authors with each journal issue.