Going Beyond the Slogans and Rhetoric

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Dear President,

Despite all its limitations, the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act by the
Bush administration in January of 2002 was a significant achievement. For the first time
in our nation’s history, public schools are required to show evidence that all of the
students they serve are learning. Although relatively little is being done to actually help
schools achieve this goal, the fact that it has been enacted into law and has become the
official policy of our country represents a considerable accomplishment.

For many years, the great shame of public education in the United States has been that
large numbers of students attend schools that failed to provide them with even minimal
skills. This is not because this great and powerful nation lacks the resources or the
technical skills to educate all of our children. There is considerable evidence that we can
make it possible for any child to learn under the right circumstances if provided with all
of the essential ingredients -- competent teachers, adequate learning materials and
facilities, and engaged parents.

However, for too long we have lacked the will to insure that the circumstances and
ingredients that we know are essential to promote high levels of achievement and
learning are created for all children.

Certainly, some of our nation’s achievements in education are impressive and worthy of
praise. We send a greater percentage of our high school students to colleges and
universities than any other nation, and our system of public education is by far the most
democratic and accessible public institution in our society. Yet, it is also true that large
numbers of students languish in schools that do not provide them with intellectual
stimulation and fail to promote their academic skills and healthy social development. A
disproportionate number of these students are poor, and many of them have not been
exposed to the knowledge and skills that would make it possible for them to lead
productive lives and obtain rewarding careers. Rather than serving as a vehicle that would
make it possible to break the cycle of poverty, too often our schools have been complicit
in the reproduction of poverty across generations.

Shortly after his election, President George W. Bush boldly told the nation that he
intended to “leave no child behind.” He and his administration promised to hold schools
and students accountable to rigorous academic standards. What this has come to mean in
practice is that failing schools are being pressured and publicly humiliated, and students
are being held accountable for their school’s failure through high stakes testing.
To many, the slogans and rhetoric of NCLB sound like exactly what is needed to fix an ailing system. What sane individual could oppose an effort to demand greater accountability from an unresponsive, multi-billion dollar, publicly-financed industry? Over the last 10 to 15 years alone, substantial investments of public and private funds have been provided to carry out various reforms, but still the system has proven almost immune to sustained improvement. For this reason it is not surprising that NCLB has generated bipartisan support, and is widely endorsed by corporate leaders, state officials, and the national media.

However, as is often true in matters related to social policy, there is a tremendous gap between the goals of NCLB and the process used to achieve them. States like Texas, Florida, California, and Massachusetts (among the first states to implement NCLB) rushed to declare victory in the struggle against mediocrity when NCLB was passed. Pointing to their tough new policies and rising test scores, these states claim progress is being made to improve public education even though they have done relatively little to actually improve schools. In poor communities, the old, persistent problems of overcrowded classrooms, deteriorating facilities, and an insufficient supply of qualified teachers and administrators remain largely unaddressed. Not surprisingly, even as calls for closing the achievement gap take on an almost evangelical tenor, wide disparities in performance between the poor and affluent, and White and non-White students, remain, and at times grow more pronounced.

Of course, there are dissenters to NCLB and standards-based accountability, and it is my hope that our next president will be more responsive to the concerns that these dissenters have raised. I am one of many to point out that rising test scores do not necessarily mean that schools are improving or that students are learning more. However, amidst all of the cheerleading for high standards, compelling evidence that NCLB has fallen well short of its goals has had little, if any, impact on official policy. Several researchers point out that many schools had found ways to raise test scores without improving the quality of teaching and without bettering conditions in the schools themselves. They do so by getting teachers to teach test-taking skills and by limiting the curriculum to material that would be covered on the tests. Some schools have also figured out that they can raise test scores simply by pushing out the neediest students who were likely to bring their scores down.

Despite evidence that the enactment of NCLB is not leading to the large-scale improvement purported by its architects and fans, criticisms of the policy are generally ignored. Instead of looking closely at how schools are responding to the new law, we pretend that it is possible to improve public education simply by applying greater pressure on schools. From their bully pulpits, politicians act as though they can raise standards simply by demanding that schools do a better job serving the needs of students. With slogans like “ending the tyranny of low expectations” they claim it is possible to produce greater equity in academic outcomes without taking any significant action to address the needs of poor children or to support the educators who work with them.
Enough time has lapsed since the enactment of NCLB for us to see that the vast majority of poor children in our country are still denied access to an education that would help them to escape poverty and open doors of opportunity. This is not a small number of children. One out of five children in America is poor. One-third of the children in the United States are enrolled in urban public schools --- many of which are regarded as some of the worst schools in the nation. Poor children generally, and African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos particularly, still lag behind on most measures of achievement and many of the schools that serve them remain woefully inadequate to address this problem.

The massive cuts in spending that school districts were forced to undertake in 2003 as the Federal government enacted the largest tax break in our nation’s history, are only contributing to the further lack of progress in improving education. Faced with cutbacks caused by declining state revenues, many schools and districts feel compelled to eliminate subjects such as art, music, and even science if they are not covered on standardized tests. Some have eliminated field trips, recess, and physical education to increase the amount of time available for test preparation. Rather than taking steps to insure that students in failing schools are taught in enriched learning environments where they are exposed to creative and effective teachers and stimulating curricula, the narrow pursuit of higher test scores has reduced the focus of education in many schools to test preparation. Even before our nation’s recent fiscal crisis it was clear that policymakers were failing to tackle the most important issues facing public education. Our next president will need to recognize that the toughest and most controversial educational issues have always been related to the ways social inequality shapes and limits educational opportunities. Getting serious about improving public education will require that we tackle these issues head on.

In most parts of the United States, we continue to spend less on the education of poor children than we do on middle-class and affluent children. Consistently, we give the most privileged -- those who have the most in terms of personal resources -- the very best in public education while we provide substantially less to those with the greatest needs and relegate them to the least desirable schools. It is still true that, in many parts of the country, poor children are more likely to attend schools with fewer qualified teachers and inferior facilities. Even when poor and minority students are enrolled in more affluent schools they are more likely to be excluded from honors and gifted and talented programs, and to be over represented in special education and remedial classes. Getting serious about improving public education will require that we truly embrace the vision of Horace Mann, who called for public schools to serve as the “great equalizer of opportunity.”

Opposition to standards-based reform should not be equated with a desire to return to the time when it was possible for students to graduate from high schools with meaningless diplomas, or when too many schools showed little interest in promoting higher levels of learning and achievement. There is nothing wrong with establishing academic standards and testing students to see if they have met those standards. The main questions are: Will we allow the tests to determine what students are taught, and will we use the results of
tests to punish failing students or to provide them with greater academic support? What about the most troubled schools? Do we simply pressure and threaten them with state takeovers if they fail to show progress, or do we take the steps necessary to make it possible for them to improve? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, how do we reconcile the drive toward greater equity in academic outcomes with the deeply held belief that all students are not equal? How do we accept the fact that producing greater achievement for all students places our educational goals in conflict with our economic goals, which operate on the assumption that there will always be inequality in wages and opportunities?

If you, as our next president, are serious about improving public education and are willing to insure that all children -- regardless of their race, culture, immigration status, and wealth -- have access to a quality education, here are some steps that you will have to take in order to end the cycle of reform and failure and to produce lasting progress in public education.

Respond to the Nonacademic Needs of Poor Children.

If we want to insure that all students have the opportunity to learn, then we must insure that their basic needs are met. This means that students who are hungry should be fed, that children who need coats in the winter should receive them, and that those children who have been abused or neglected should receive the counseling and care that they deserve. Removing lead paint from old apartments and homes and providing students in need with eye-glasses and dental care are both examples of the necessary steps that must be taken to insure that students have the opportunity to learn. Although the law was called No Child Left Behind, many of these needs have been ignored, and, consequently, many children have been left very far behind. Addressing these needs will require the development of a more comprehensive social policy because it is neither fair nor reasonable to expect schools to serve these needs on their own. We are a wealthy nation, and, like other affluent nations, it should be possible for our government to insure that all children have access to the basic services they need so that they can concentrate on learning in school.

Hold State Governments Accountable for Maintaining High Standards in Schools.

Just as we do for the maintenance of highways and the public water supply, we should insure that common standards of education are upheld at all public schools. A recent ruling by the New York State Court of Appeals will require that state to insure “a meaningful high school education” to all of its students. Despite the ambiguity of this charge, it is a step in the right direction. Unlike the state of Florida, which affixes letter grades to schools as a symbol of the quality of education provided there while doing practically nothing to improve them, state governments should be required to do more. No students should be allowed to attend schools staffed by unqualified teachers or to learn in buildings that are falling apart. State governments should be required to establish minimal operational standards for public schools and they should be held accountable for the quality of education provided to all children.
Focus on the Problems Facing Low-Performance Schools. There are a few things we already know about low-performance schools.

They tend to be racially and/or socio-economically segregated. They often lack essential resources. They tend to suffer from a dysfunctional culture where low expectations for students, lack of order and discipline, and poor professional norms are common. Such schools also tend to have high turnover among staff, particularly among administrators.

Schools like these need help, not humiliation. They need adequate funding so that they can attract and retain highly-skilled professionals. They also need assistance in devising and implementing intervention strategies. States should set up intervention teams comprised of skilled educators who can be deployed to work closely with troubled schools.

Make Schools More Responsive to the Parents and Families They Serve Through the Enactment of Systems of Mutual Accountability. One of the reasons why schools in middle-class communities tend to perform well is that the parents of the students they serve feel entitled to insist upon high quality education. Poor parents are much more likely to defer to the decisions made by the professional educators who serve them, and are more likely to keep their children in the schools that they are assigned to, even if they are not happy with the education their children receive there. NCLB allows parents to remove their children from failing schools, but it does not provide them with funding for transportation to new schools or access to information on superior alternatives. The only way to assure that poor parents are treated as valued education consumers is for districts to devise strategies to insure that the concerns and satisfaction of parents are taken into account in the school’s operations. This requires the development of systems of mutual accountability in which the responsibilities of schools, parents, and students are clearly spelled out so that all can be held responsible for their role in the educational process. Site councils, like those in Chicago, that require parents to be involved in decision making, and the development of formal contracts between parents and schools that establish norms and expectations for all parties (including students), are some of the ways that this can be done.

Implement Diagnostic Assessment to Strengthen the Link Between Teaching and Learning. Instead of using standardized test results for ranking purposes we should use those test results to figure out how to help students in need. Typically, state exams are given in the spring and the results are not available until the fall. By this time, students have been assigned to new teachers and, in some cases, new schools. Such an approach limits the possibility that the data generated from these tests could be used to provide teachers with an accurate sense of the academic needs of students. It also makes it difficult to use data from tests to make modifications in instruction.

Diagnostic assessments administered at the beginning of the school year can provide schools with a clearer sense of the strengths and weaknesses of students. Such an approach makes it possible for schools to monitor student performance over time and to measure the performance of students in relation to established standards. Provided with a
clearer and more accurate sense of the learning needs of students, schools would be in a better position to make informed decisions about curriculum and instruction and how best to utilize supplemental resources (e.g. Title I funds, grants, etc.). Schools should strive to ascertain how much academic growth occurs over a course of a year so that they can determine whether the approaches they utilize to support teaching and learning are effective. This requires treating assessment as an ongoing process of evaluating student knowledge and ability, not through the administration of more standardized tests, but through the meaningful analysis of student work. Such an approach would also make it more feasible to hold teachers accountable for the growth in knowledge and skills that they produce among their students during the course of a school year.

Build Partnerships Between Schools and the Communities They Serve. Schools serving poor children and poor communities will often need additional help in meeting their needs. In many communities help could be provided by health centers, community agencies and non-profits, churches and local government, and even private businesses and corporations. Organizations and institutions that have a vested interest in the health and well-being of the communities in which they are located should be the natural partners of schools. Some of these organizations may have no prior experience working with schools, and they may need to be persuaded to play a role in supporting public education and to do more than simply making token donations. Strategic partnerships with outside organizations will need to be developed to provide schools with the technical support, material resources, and personnel that are required to make it possible for them to meet the needs of students.

There is evidence that NCLB has succeeded in forcing some schools that were previously complacent to become much more serious and deliberate in how they approach teaching and learning. However, pressure alone will not produce substantial improvements in public education, particularly in communities with the greatest concentrations of poverty. Schools serving poor children need help and, thus far, the advocates for standards-based reform have not displayed a willingness to provide the help that is needed.

It is not fair or reasonable for our society to expect schools to solve the problems facing young people -- especially those from poor families -- without help. Educators must call attention to the great injustice of such an expectation while simultaneously doing all they can to improve their schools. It is also not realistic to assume that all children will achieve at high levels, graduate from high school, and enroll in college. Our society will never be Lake Wobegone where all children are above-average. But we can make sure that all children receive a sound basic education that provides them with the skills they will need to lead productive lives, and with the knowledge they will need to participate in a democratic society.

Most of all, you, as our next president, must realize that the future of our society will ultimately be determined by the quality of our public schools. This simple fact has been ignored for too long and we have suffered the consequences of our neglect. Finding ways to fulfill the great promise and potential of American education is the task before us. For the sake of the country, our kids, and our future, I hope that we can meet this challenge.
Sincerely,
Pedro Noguera

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