

## NATIONAL OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN SUMMIT

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My theme for today: Whose children have been left behind?

Let me tell you a little bit about myself. For many years, I was a strong advocate of testing, accountability, and choice. I worked in three conservative think tanks where these ideas were held sacred. In 1998, I went to Albany, New York, to testify on behalf of charter legislation. At the time I was connected to the conservative Manhattan Institute. I thought that testing would help diagnose the problems that children had and enable teachers to identify their needs. I thought that charters would enroll the kids who had failed in regular public schools or who were not well served by regular public schools. I thought that charters would collaborate with the public schools.

In a book published last year, I said that I was wrong. I was wrong on every count. Testing should be used for diagnostic purposes, to help students and teachers, but it has turned into a blunt instrument that is used to reward and punish teachers and schools. Charters should serve the neediest, but, with some notable exceptions, they have become aggressive and entrepreneurial. Instead of seeking out the neediest students, many of them exclude the neediest students and skim the best. In some states, like Michigan, most of the charters are for-profit, with big dividends to the investors; their profits come right out of the public school budget and into the pockets of shareholders. In some states, like Ohio, Colorado, and Pennsylvania, virtual charter schools are making millions of dollars for their owners, while children sit home alone in front of a computer. These cyber charters get full state tuition, but they have no buildings, no playgrounds, no library, no custodian, no nurse, and few teachers. They often have one teacher to monitor 100 screens. For investors, it's a great business, but the educational results are awful. In Colorado, for example, only 12% graduate from the Virtual Academy, compared to a statewide graduation rate of 78%.

We have had a full decade of No Child Left Behind, and we now know that the law has been a disaster. True, it has documented the shocking gaps in passing rates between different groups of children, but it has done nothing to change the conditions that cause those gaps. We know the gaps are there; actually, we knew about the gaps long before NCLB was passed. Yet Congress is still patting itself on the back for identifying a problem and doing nothing meaningful to solve it.

Many children are still left behind. We know who they are.

In the year 2000, during the Presidential campaign, candidate George W. Bush told the nation about the Texas miracle. He said that there was a simple way to reduce the gaps: Just test every child every year, he said; reward the teachers and schools where the scores went up; and humiliate the teachers and schools where the scores went down. Texas did this, he said, and the gaps were closing; test scores were rising; graduation rates were going up; dropout rates were going down. He said that we had to end the "soft bigotry of low expectations" and set the same standards for all children, rich and poor, black and white, advantaged and disadvantaged.

After his election, Congress bought this story and passed No Child Left Behind. This law mandated that all children would be proficient by 2014 in grades 3-8. All children without exception. Bear in mind that no nation in the world has ever achieved 100% proficiency.

Now we know the results of this absurd law. More than 80% of our schools have been labeled failing schools. By the year 2014, nearly 100% of our schools will be considered failures. Has any other national legislature in history ever passed a law guaranteed to label every single one of its schools a failure? I don't know of any.

We now know that NCLB was based on a phony claim. On national tests, Texas does not lead the pack; it's right in the middle. We now know that the achievement gap did not close in Texas, and that dropout rates went up. But the whole nation is stuck with this testing regime.

Let's be clear about what NCLB has really accomplished: It has convinced the media and major philanthropies and Wall Street hedge fund managers that American public education is a failure and that radical solutions are required. The philanthropists and Wall Street hedge fund managers and Republicans and the Obama administration and assorted rightwing billionaires have some ideas about how to change American education. They aren't teachers but they think they know how to fix the schools.

Their ideas boil down to this strategy: NCLB failed because we didn't use enough carrots and sticks. They say that schools should operate like businesses, because the free market is more efficient than government. So these reformers—I call them corporate reformers—advocate market-based reforms. They say that states must hand public schools over to private management because the private sector will be more successful than the public sector. They say that teachers will work harder if they get bonuses when test scores go up. They say that teachers should have no job protections because workers in the private sector don't have job protections, not even the right to a hearing. They say that if schools have low scores, they should be closed and replaced by new schools, just like a chain store—a burger franchise or a shoe store--would be closed if it didn't make a profit; or the entire staff should be fired and replaced by new staff. They say that the quality of teachers should be judged based on whether their students' scores go up or down.

The Tea Party governors embraced this narrative and took it to the next level. They used their sweeping victories in 2010 to eliminate collective bargaining rights for public workers and to slash spending on public education, even as they demanded more funding for charters and vouchers. The mayor of New York City said a week ago that if he had the power to do it, he would fire half the city's teachers, double the pay of those that remained, and double class size. He said when he went to school, he was in a large class and he turned out OK. He didn't mention that his daughters went to schools where the class size was 12. My youngest grandchild attends kindergarten in a Brooklyn public school. He has a class size of 24. Under the mayor's plan, his teacher would have a class of 48. None of them would get any individual attention. I don't see this as progress, particularly because the evidence is clear and strong that minority children benefit most when class sizes are reduced below 20 in a classroom.

So which children would be left behind?

We have now had ten years of No Child Left Behind, and we now know that there has been very little change in the gaps between the children of the rich and the children of the poor, between black children and white children, between Hispanic children and white children. Meanwhile our policymakers say we need higher standards, more rigorous standards, and more testing. How exactly will that help children who are struggling to read and do math? Or, in some cases, struggling to read and speak English? Or in the case of children with disabilities, how are they helped by harder tests? This is like saying, “if these children can’t jump over a four-foot bar, let’s lift the bar to six feet and see how they do.” Do you know how they will do? It seems obvious to me.

Just this week, the federal government released the urban district test results and we could see that the gap remained as large as ever. After ten years of NCLB, the children at the bottom were still at the bottom. Those districts where poverty and racial segregation—such as Detroit and Washington, D.C.—are most concentrated had the lowest scores.

But wait, some of the districts tested by the federal government have been actually implementing the market-based reforms advocated by the corporate reformers: New York City, which has had mayoral control since 2002; Washington, D.C., which has had mayoral control since 2007; Chicago, where Arne Duncan launched market-based reforms in 2001; and Milwaukee, which has had vouchers since 1990.

Since the mayor took charge in 2002, New York City has enthusiastically imposed market-style reforms. It has more choice than any other major city—parents and students get to choose among 400 high schools, as well as more than 100 charter schools. All schools are given letter grades based on test scores. NYC spent \$56 million on merit pay, then abandoned the program when it showed zero results. After nine years of market-based reforms, however, the achievement gap between black and white students is unchanged. On the federal tests, math scores are up but no more than in districts without market reforms. Eighth grade reading scores have been flat since 2003.

Which children do you think were left behind?

In Washington, D.C., there have been many claims in the media about sensational test score gains, but that’s not what you see on the latest federal tests. In fourth grade reading, the scores have been rising steadily since 2003, but not for all students. The scores of high-income students have gone up but the scores of black students, Hispanic students, and low-income students remain unchanged for the past four years. In eighth grade reading, scores are down for the past four years for black students, Hispanic students, and low-income students. And most importantly, the District of Columbia public school system has the largest achievement gap of any city in the nation between white and black students, a staggering 64 points in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, compared to an average of 30 points for all urban districts; and an equally staggering 58 points in eighth grade, compared to 28 points for all urban districts.

So whose children were left behind?

In Chicago, where Secretary Duncan’s reform program led to the closing of 100 neighborhood schools, only 18% of the new schools were judged successful by the state of Illinois. On the

NAEP for cities, Chicago continues to be one of the lowest performing in the nation. Since 2003, black and Hispanic students have seen no improvement in their reading scores in fourth grade. In eighth grade reading, there have been no gains whatever for black students or low income students since federal testing began in 2002, and no gains for Hispanic students since 2005. According to the latest research, the black-white achievement gap is larger now in Chicago than when the reforms began.

In Milwaukee, after 21 years of vouchers, black students have among the lowest scores of any city tested, ranked at the bottom along with Detroit, Fresno, and Cleveland. Independent research has shown that the black and low-income students in Milwaukee's voucher schools have the same low scores as the black students in the public schools. Their scores are about the same as those of poor black kids in the Deep South. Vouchers and competition did nothing for the children of Milwaukee. These children were left behind.

And consider this: Tea-party governors know that vouchers do nothing to improve education, but they are pushing them anyway. The Governor of Indiana, Mitch Daniels, pushed through the first statewide voucher program in the nation. Governor Scott Walker in Wisconsin got his conservative legislature to expand the Milwaukee program, to raise the income eligibility cap, so that more children could go to voucher schools, despite the evidence that vouchers don't improve education. The whole point seems to be to decimate the public sector.

And here is the latest voucher scandal. When Jeb Bush was governor of Florida, he pushed through a voucher program. The state courts struck down one part of the voucher program, the part for students in failing schools. But the courts did not eliminate the McKay Scholarships, which enabled students with disabilities to get vouchers to attend any school. Just this week, the Florida press revealed that some of the deregulated voucher schools are fly-by-night operations, conducted in storefronts, churches, and dingy homes, staffed by administrators and teachers with criminal records. They found students who spent their entire day filling out workbooks or hanging around a gymnasium watching television. One school had a class, described as "business management," which consisted of shaking cans on street corners. Florida has pumped over \$1 billion into this voucher program and Governor Scott wants to expand it to more deregulated schools.

Whose children are left behind by these policies?

From all the developments, experiences, and research of the past decade, here is what I have learned:

First, charter schools have been portrayed as a silver bullet that will raise up every child, especially poor and minority children, but they are not. By their very nature, charters vary. Some are excellent, some get high scores but are boot camps where children are taught to obey without question, some are terrible. On the whole—and study after study shows this—charters don't get different results from regular public schools. When I was active a decade ago with the Manhattan Institute, which is led by conservative business leaders, it was decided that the best way to market charter schools was to present them as a way to save minority children. This strategy, it was believed, would win liberal support for a very conservative idea. They were right. Liberals could not resist this narrative.

So today we see Wall Street hedge funders and billionaires saying that they are leading the civil rights movement of our time. I have trouble imagining Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., walking arm in arm with billionaires in a crusade to privatize control of public education. Dr. King understood that social movements need a mass base, and that they are not based in Wall Street. He knew that the civil rights movement depended on its moral authority as well as its ability to mobilize poor and working people in coalition with labor unions. He had no desire to privatize. He wanted to make private interests bow to the demands of the public interest. As I watch rightwing politicians doing their best to destroy the public sector unions, I recall that Dr. King was assassinated at the very time that he was fighting to organize the sanitation workers of Memphis. How dare they invoke his legacy to attack public education and public sector workers!

We know—or we should know—that poor and minority children should not have to depend on the good will and beneficence of the private sector to get a good education. The free market works very well in producing goods and services, but it works through competition. In competition, the weakest fall behind. The market does not produce equity. In the free market, there are a few winners and a lot of losers. Some corporate reformers today advocate that schools should be run like a stock portfolio: Keep the winners and sell the losers. Close schools where the students have low scores and open new ones. But this doesn't help the students who are struggling. No student learns better because his school was closed; closing schools does not reduce the achievement gap. Poor kids get bounced from school to school. No one wants the ones with low scores because they threaten the reputation and survival of the school.

The goal of our education system should not be competition but equality of educational opportunity. There should not be a Race to the Top. What is the Top? Who will get there first? Will it be poor and minority students? Don't count on it. The Top is already occupied by the children of the 1%.

To be a healthy society, we must improve our public schools. We must provide better schools in every neighborhood. We must help the children who need help. We must treat our teachers and principals and administrators with respect. If they need support, they should get it.

With all the talk about the achievement gap, it is important for you to know that there are two different achievement gaps. One is the gap between the children of the wealthy and the children of the poor. This gap has doubled in the past half century, as poverty and income inequality have increased. The racial achievement gap was actually cut in half in the 1970s and 1980s. Paul Barton of the Educational Testing Service attributed the shrinking of the racial achievement gap to the creation of federal assistance programs for the neediest children, such as Title I; to desegregation; to reduced class sizes; to early childhood education; and to increased economic opportunities for African-American families. He pointed out, however, that the racial achievement gap has remained almost unchanged since the 1980s.

We now know that none of the current carrot-and-stick policies will shrink the gap. We know it because they have been tried for 10 years and they haven't worked. Structural changes like charters and vouchers overall will not make a difference. Merit pay makes no difference. Judging teachers by test scores demoralizes teachers and will lead to narrowing of the curriculum—so that the districts where children have the lowest scores will have more time for test preparation

and less time for the arts, less time for history or civics, less time for science, less time for physical education. The children who need a great education the most will get the least.

And many more children will be left behind.

The entire current reform movement rests on a fanatical belief in standardized testing. Yet testing experts warn us that the tests should be used for diagnostic purposes, not to fire teachers and close schools. The basic rule of testing is that a test should be used only for the purpose for which it was designed. A test of fifth grade reading tests whether students can read at a fifth grade level; it is not a test of teacher quality. Testing experts warn that tests are subject to statistical error, measurement error, and human error. Sometimes the answer is wrong. Sometimes the question is wrong. Sometimes a thoughtful child will pick the wrong answer because it sounds plausible.

One thing we know for certain about standardized testing. Poor and minority kids consistently get lower test scores than white and privileged kids. So why would we make testing the most important measure of education? Why would we take the technology that is most discouraging to children in the bottom half and then insist that it matters more than anything else? Why would we give more credibility to standardized tests than to teachers' and parents' judgments about children's potential?

In September, I visited Finland and I want to share with you what this tiny nation has accomplished. It regularly scores at the top of international tests in reading, mathematics, and science. It has the least variance from school to school, meaning that almost every school is a good school. Students in Finland never take a standardized test until they complete high school. Teachers in Finland are required to have a master's degree. Teaching is a highly respected profession. Parents trust teachers. Teachers have autonomy to exercise professionalism.

Every child has regular medical checkups and healthcare, at no cost. Schools have health clinics. Whereas more than 20% of our children live in poverty, less than 4% of Finnish children do. Higher education is tuition-free.

Finland has no charter schools, no vouchers, no merit pay, no standardized testing. Instead, every teacher is trained to take care of the needs of individual children. If children are having learning problems, there are specialists and social workers in every school to take care of them early and provide whatever assistance is needed. Nearly half of all Finnish students get extra attention and services in the early years of schooling. Finland has no tracking. All children get the education and support they need to succeed in school. Finland does not have a longer school day or a longer school year. Finnish schools emphasize creativity, ingenuity, problem-solving, the arts, projects, activities, physical education, and risk-taking.

By the way, Finnish teachers and principals belong to the same union. It doesn't seem to be a problem.

So what can we do? First, we should speak out when politicians say "there is no more money." There is money to do what we want to do. There is money to fight wars in the Middle East. There is enough money to give big corporate cuts. There is enough money for 1% of this nation

to live lives of splendor. Why is there not enough money to provide the basic public services that every child needs?

- Every pregnant woman should have good pre-natal care and nutrition so that her child is born healthy. One of three children born to women who do not get good prenatal care will have disabilities that are preventable. That will cost society far more than providing these women with prenatal care.
- Every child should have the medical attention and nutrition that they need to grow up healthy.
- Every child should have high-quality early childhood education.
- Every school should have experienced teachers who are prepared to help all children learn.
- Every teacher should have at least a masters degree.
- Every principal should be a master teacher, not a recruit from industry, the military, or the sports world.
- Every superintendent should be an experienced educator who understand teaching and learning and the needs of children.
- Every school should have a health clinic.
- Schools should collaborate with parents, the local community, civic leaders, and local business leaders to support the needs of children.
- Every school should have a full and balanced curriculum, with the arts, sciences, history, civics, geography, mathematics, foreign languages, and physical education.
- Every child should have time and space to play.
- We must stop investing in testing, accountability, and consultants and start investing in children.

Do we want to be a decent society or a decadent society? Do we want to nurture, protect and inspire all of our children? Do we want children who are leaders or followers? Do we want to make sure that this generation of young people is prepared to sustain our democracy? Do we want citizens prepared to ask questions or just to answer questions posed by authorities?

We must stop the trash talk about our public schools and dedicate ourselves to making every one of them a school that is just right for all our children. Yes, it will cost more, but ignorance and neglect are much more expensive.

Surely the greatest nation in the world can mobilize the will to do what is right for the children. It won't be easy, it won't be cheap, and it won't be fast. Doing the right thing never is. The only simple part is to recognize that what we are doing now is not working and will never work. What we need is a vision of a good education for every child. We should start now. Today.