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WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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Supporting Good Public Schools

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In *The Courage to Teach* Parker Palmer lifts up school teaching as a vocation. Palmer writes that our work is most authentic when we respond to a sense of calling. Teachers who can sustain excellent work over a long career continue to be able to hear that call.

Only at retirement after thirty years in the classroom did writer Frank McCourt publish *Angela's Ashes* and *Teacher Man*: "So what took you so long? I was teaching... in four different New York City public high schools... When you teach five high school classes a day, five days a week... your head is filled with the clamor of the classroom." Five classes: that's 140 students every day.

Most of us are not called to spend our working lives teaching fractions to third graders, insisting that pre-adolescents write muscular prose, or helping high schoolers master the periodic table of the elements. How we feel about those who do this work may speak more about our understanding of ourselves than the people we presume to judge.

Are we mere consumers, free to complain about the schools, or are we citizens with the responsibility to provide a climate where trust can develop, learning can happen, and teachers can work?

By the time you read this column, President-Elect Obama will likely have appointed a Secretary of Education. But as I write, there is an attack on public school teachers by advocates who seek a Secretary who would base pay on test scores, deny tenure, intensify the test-and-punish mechanisms of No Child Left Behind, and rely far more on charter schools. These critics deride public school improvement as mere "weak, status-quo" reform.

While I am all for improving teaching, I disagree with critics who imagine we can raise achievement merely by making it easier to fire experienced teachers or create more so-called escapes from the public schools.

I believe our best hope is to embrace what these critics trivialize as "status-quo" reforms. We must reduce class size, strengthen counseling, engage families to support children, improve staff development and school leadership, equalize school funding despite state budget crises, address the injustice of racial segregation, and make it clear that raising school achievement will require expanding children's healthcare and reducing family mobility, homelessness, and disparities in early childhood programs. We must also develop the political will to tax ourselves for these initiatives in a society where money and privilege long ago moved to the suburbs.

Weak reforms indeed! It will require massive change to improve the most challenged public schools in big cities where children, hyper-segregated by poverty and race, are insulated from opportunity systems. Beating up teachers and their unions brings us no closer to improving public schools. It is just another way to let policy makers and ourselves as citizens off the hook.

Parker Palmer warns: "visit a public school near you and shadow a couple of teachers for a couple of days. Almost certainly you will witness for yourself the challenges teachers face, their lack of resources, and the deep demoralization they feel about serving as scapegoats for our nation's ills."

The United Church of Christ has more than 5,700 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.