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EDUCATION IN CRISIS

Judith A. Gouwens

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A Reference Handbook

Judith A. Gouwens

CONTEMPORARY WORLD ISSUES

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.
Manufactured in the United States of America.

This book is dedicated to all of the teachers on the front line of education reform, teachers who believe that the children whose lives they touch can learn well, who go to work every day committed to helping the children in their classrooms learn well, and who make a difference in those children's learning and lives.

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Preface

Public education in the United States is in crisis. Nearly every day there is a media report that keeps the failures of public education at the forefront of our national consciousness. Our government and media fuel that fire with reports that describe schools that are failing and that place the blame for our economic woes on our system of public education. Nearly everyone knows that there is a crisis in education. But not everyone agrees on what the nature of that crisis is.

Some say that the crisis is one of *quality*, predicting a dismal future for the economic viability of the United States in the global marketplace based on what they perceive is the inadequacy of our system of public education. They point to international rankings that purport to show that the scores of children in the United States fall short of those of our international competitors. The most recent Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) show average student scores from the United States on these tests rank below the scores of students from several other developed or industrialized countries in reading, mathematics, and science. More information about these tests and test scores can be found in Chapters 3 and 6 of this book.

Interestingly, many of the countries whose students score higher on the tests than U.S. students look past the rankings of test scores in their determination that what makes the United States strong in the global marketplace is the creativity and innovation that U.S. students learn. Those countries, including China and Japan, understand that standardized test scores do not measure creativity and innovation. China, Japan, and several other countries are seeking to implement curriculum and teaching practices that foster creativity and problem solving, curriculum and

teaching practices that have all but been abandoned in the United States in the pursuit of knowledge- and skills-based teaching and learning in efforts to improve standardized test scores.

Other analysts have reviewed and reanalyzed both national and international test scores and used them to show that the majority of students in the United States *are* learning well, and that the crisis is one of *equity*. They point to the achievement gap as evidence that our schools are failing minority children and children whose families live below the poverty line. According to UNESCO figures, the rate of poverty among school-aged children, nearly 22 percent, is higher in the United States than in any other industrialized nation except Mexico. Gerald Bracey's reanalysis of the test data that links students' achievement to the level of poverty in their schools should be a wake-up call for policy makers in the United States. (See Chapter 3 for more information about Bracey's analysis.) It is not enough to improve schools; the issue of childhood poverty must be addressed if we really want all children to learn to high levels.

Linda Darling-Hammond, George Wood, and a number of other education reformers who make up the Forum for Education and Democracy published a report, "Democracy at Risk: The Need for a New Federal Policy in Education." These reformers assert that all children in the United States have the right to a high-quality education, and they point to inequity as a critical impediment to improved public education. Based on the premise that it is the federal government that has the most leverage for equity in education, they argue that "underlying all federal efforts should be a commitment to paying off the long-standing educational debt our nation has accrued by allowing an unequal system to self-perpetuate for hundreds of years" (2008, 19).

No Child Left Behind (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 2002; PL107–110) is intended to provide additional teaching and support services for children who live in poverty or who attend schools with high levels of poverty to help fill the gap between their learning and that of their more affluent peers. Unfortunately, many educators believe, some of the provisions of No Child Left Behind have actually resulted in more inequity for the children most in need. The accountability requirements of No Child Left Behind have narrowed the curriculum to include, in many schools, only reading, mathematics, and science—the subjects that are tested to determine the quality of schools. Social studies, the arts, physical education, recess, and even lunchtimes

have been cut so that there is more time for teaching the subjects that are tested.

Although one of the provisions of No Child Left Behind is the requirement that school districts employ only highly qualified teachers, children in the poorest schools continue to have teachers with the least experience and who are the least qualified. They attend schools whose facilities are in need of renovation, with larger class sizes, and with fewer libraries, less technology, fewer high-quality instructional materials, and more outdated textbooks.

Between the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in the 1950s and about 1990, schools in the United States made progress toward equity; the gap in achievement between African American and Hispanic children on the one hand and white children on the other narrowed considerably. In the last decade and a half, however, not only has no progress been made in paying off the educational debt but the debt has actually grown as the courts have either refused to hear cases about civil rights and segregation of schools or even reversed earlier decisions that impact equity in schools. According to a wide variety of sources, schools are as racially segregated as, and in some cases even more so than, they were before *Brown*. Jonathan Kozol's latest book, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (2005), documents the deplorable conditions in many of these resegregated schools.

Still other observers of education believe that the real crisis in education in the United States is the *impending demise of our entire system of public education*. They point to the neoliberal agenda of right-wing think tanks and business groups that view education as an opportunity for financial profit and that work toward privatizing education and dismantling the system of public education that has been a pillar of our democratic society. Kenneth Saltman (2007), DePaul University professor, speaks for critical educators in asserting that "a number of privatization initiatives are being enacted through a process involving the dismantling of public schools followed by the opening of for-profit, charter, and deregulated public schools" (p. 5).

Critics of the neoliberal agenda argue that the use of public resources for such private schools is part of a redistribution of economic wealth that goes against the democratic principles upon which our country was founded. In effect, these critics warn that school privatization is part of the neoliberal "class warfare waged by the rich on the rest" (Saltman 2007, 8), and that inequity in the

education system serves the purpose of the neoliberal agenda for privatization.

I believe that the crisis in education involves quality, equity, and the threat of privatization. All of these issues must be addressed to close the achievement gap and to ensure that public education in the United States continues as one of the pillars of our democratic way of life.

So What Are We to Do?

Nel Noddings, professor emerita from Stanford University, argues that before beginning any reform, we need to identify the problem. According to Noddings, solutions are often sought and enacted without identifying the problem—and then they solve nothing. Noddings argues also that the problem might not be the same for all schools or all school districts (2007). But agreeing on what the problem is, is the first step to finding solutions.

Once there is consensus about what the problem is, we should look to past education reform efforts to understand what has worked, what has not worked, and what the effects of those efforts have been. According to Noddings, there is much to be learned from our history with education reform. Finding *a* solution might not be the answer because "one size fits all" really fits no school or school districts; reforming U.S. education may require a whole array of solutions. Chapters 1 and 2 describe the history of education reform in the United States and a variety of reform efforts that could serve as possible solutions. We can also look to what other countries are doing and have done to reform education, and Chapter 3 provides accounts of some other countries' education systems and reform efforts.

Teachers must be at the forefront of the process of identifying problems and proposing solutions. In the United States, teachers have often been left out of the process of education reform. Very few teachers, for example, were involved in the development of the national goals, and similarly, few teachers were involved in the development of No Child Left Behind. But the responsibility for implementing reforms falls to teachers, and their commitment to any reform effort is critical to success.

I have spent nearly 40 years in education—as an elementary teacher; as a school and school district administrator; as a senior research associate consulting and working with schools, school

districts, and state departments of education in the process of education reform; as an evaluator of educational programs; and as a university professor and researcher. During my career, I have met countless numbers of teachers who are committed to the learning of their students and truly making a difference, not only in their students' learning, but also in their students' lives. These teachers work hard, not because of mandates or legislated accountability, but because of their commitment to the learning of their students.

Real education reform doesn't happen in legislative bodies or through mandates. It doesn't happen because members of the media or government officials describe teachers as not doing their jobs or not qualified. It doesn't happen because teachers are offered bonuses to improve their students' test scores or because their jobs are threatened if they don't. Real education reform happens in the hearts and minds of teachers who come to know and understand the children they teach, their lives outside school, and the myriad strengths the children bring into their classrooms. These committed teachers design learning opportunities for the children in their classrooms that connect the curriculum to the children's real lives outside school so that the children see value in learning. It is then and only then that children will learn well. It is the work of good teachers to mentor and coach that learning.

Noddings tells us that it will take creativity and innovation (what we Americans are known for internationally) to identify the problems in our public education system and to find solutions that will truly address the problems. "We need to engage in fresh thinking," she says.

> We should draw back from standardization and outmoded structures of schooling, but remain willing to analyze, adapt, and revise promising old ideas. In the process, we should avoid dehumanizing teachers and students and explore new ways to educate for genuine intellectual growth, moral commitment, and democratic citizenship. (2007, 83)

We can view the crises in our education system as occasions to wring our hands and place blame. Or we can view the crises as opportunities for real reform of our schools. In 1978, Ronald Edmonds, one of the first researchers to investigate the characteristics of effective schools, challenged educators to look forward to

new solutions. In a speech titled "Some Schools Work and More Can," he said,

> We can whenever, and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need in order to do this. Whether we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far. (1979, 32)

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