

## THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION\*

HON. EUGENE W. HICKOK\*\*

The Future of Public Education: This is an appropriate time to explore this very important topic. It has been more than a year since the January 8, 2002, signing of the No Child Left Behind Act.<sup>1</sup> As Under Secretary of Education, I oversee the implementation of this landmark law. It is a difficult process. The No Child Left Behind Act is easily the most complex and potentially transforming piece of federal education legislation since Washington got into the education business back in the 1960s.

Around the nation, public opinion polls, surveys, and public agenda research tell us that the American people believe public education is our highest domestic priority. They tell us generally that Americans support the kind of changes outlined in the new law. They want improvement in American education. They also tell us, interestingly, that they feel the same about education as they do about Congress: They think Congress is a mess, yet they like their Congressman. They believe schools are a mess, yet they like their school.

This past Fall we completed mid-year elections. At the national level, these were historic in terms of an off-year result. But more importantly for education, at the gubernatorial level, state legislature level, and probably the school board level across this country, these elections represent new leadership. After a decade or so of great economic growth, leaders and their constituents confront budget challenges at all levels. In Pennsylvania, I served as Secretary of Education at a time when we had lots of money. We did not spend it on education; rather we spent it on trying to change education. In Pennsylvania, we had the luxury of not having to make

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\* This article was originally presented on November 22, 2002, as the keynote speech at The Future of Public Education, a symposium sponsored by the NYU Annual Survey of American Law.

\*\* United States Under Secretary of Education. Prior to his appointment, Dr. Hickok was Secretary of Education for Pennsylvania. Dr. Hickok was on the faculty of Dickinson College for fifteen years, teaching courses in political science and law, and serving as Director of the Clarke Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Contemporary Issues. In 1991, he consulted to Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia on constitutional, political, and economic reform. He also has been a special assistant to the Office of Legal Counsel at the U.S. Department of Justice, and an adjunct scholar at the Heritage Foundation.

1. No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 20 U.S.C. §§6301 et seq. (2002).

some very tough choices. Now all of us have to make tough choices in regard to our priorities and public policy.

This also proves to be an interesting time for changes in education because of what we know about student performance. Test scores, one indicator of educational performance, are flat nationally. They have been ever since these national indicators—the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP)—were created. Scores on NAEP reading and math tests have remained level. There are other indicators as well. Dropout rates in some communities are at record levels, especially in our most challenged communities. Many students drop out every year within this great city of New York. These indicators tell us that while we have islands of excellence in American public education; it is best characterized in far too many places as mediocre. Our best kids can compete with the best kids anywhere in the world. But our best kids are the exception, and our best schools are the exception. We have our work cut out for us.

At the same time that scores have been flat and the drop out rate is high, the amount of money spent by the American people has skyrocketed. For example, federal dollars devoted to state education are at record levels, in most states constituting about eight percent or more of the state's education budget. Overall, if you look at the amount of money the American people spend, at the state, local, and federal levels of education, it is impossible to tell anybody, with a straight face, that the American people are not supporting public education. We spend a lot of money. People will say we need to spend more. My overall impression is that rather than spend more we should spend smarter.

We as a nation should be doing much better in public education. We are capable of doing much better in public education. And we have a moral responsibility to improve public education. There is not a day in my job, and in my past job, that I do not mentally push away from my desk and ask myself one very basic question: how did it get to this? If you look at the United States of America, and measure all that we have, and all we could be, by what we spend, the fact remains that the quality of our schools is mediocre at best. I find that unforgivable.

Before considering how we got to this state of affairs, and sharing some ideas on what a new vision of American public education might look like, allow me to take a snapshot of where we are in education as a nation. Looking at where we are allows us to get a sense of the symptoms of the larger problem and the causes of the

larger problem, and perhaps generate ideas on how we might solve these problems.

Allow me to take you to a few places. We begin in a medium-sized town. Walk with me through this town, and consider the fact that you have just been asked to be the CEO of a major organization in this town. During your interview, you see that the board of directors and board of trustees are highly capable men and women, of a variety of ages and a variety of backgrounds. They seem committed to the well-being and the prosperity of the organization.

First of all, this organization has the largest budget in the community. It has the largest payroll. If you take this job, you will be a major player in this town. Let us take a stroll around the organization. The facilities are in decent shape, but need upgrading. Technology is adequate. Next, we take time to check out the means of production. You find out that in this organization, every single one of your employees is guaranteed job security for their entire employable life. They are not only guaranteed job security, they have it regardless of their productivity. You are told it is impossible to gauge productivity, and regardless of productivity, these employees will receive guaranteed pay increases every year. Their contract demands this. You are told they are a highly qualified and highly trained group of personnel, but you will not be able to assess this based on their work. As you begin to figure out this interesting, complex organization, you are also told that there is relatively little you can do to make distinctions among these personnel to reward outstanding service or to deal with inadequate performance. In this organization, all personnel are treated equally. You are beginning to wonder if you can do anything to move this organization forward. This is the most critical organization in this town, the future of the town. Ask yourself: could you effect change? Would you take this job? Most of us would not. This is somewhat of a caricature of the way public education is organized in many places throughout our nation. I would ask you: if you were starting out to design an organization, to provide for the education of young men and women, would it look like this? I cannot imagine it would.

Let me take you to another place. This could be in any major city in this nation. It is a fourth-grade classroom in an inner city like Philadelphia. As we walk into the fourth-grade classroom, the first thing we notice is all the energy. When you walk into this classroom, you cannot help but smile. There is that organized chaos of fourth graders, especially as the school day begins. Some put their coats down, their backpacks and everything else, while others are getting organized at their desks or their tables. The students are

predominately African-American and low-income. It is probably too crowded, maybe thirty kids, which is a lot to handle in a fourth-grade classroom or at any age. Now look around the classroom. The facility is not brand new; in fact, it is pretty old. But the room is full of color. Thanksgiving is coming, and there are little hand-turkeys on the walls, with pumpkins and pilgrims, and you think, this is great stuff. There are books everywhere around the room. You are feeling good. Walk with me around that classroom, just for a second, and look at those fourth graders. Do you see them? Do you see the energy? Do you see the hope in their eyes? They are human sponges. These kids are just soaking stuff in. Notice the energy. See the optimism. See the hope. Now keep looking in those eyes for a second, because in this fourth grade class of endless optimism and opportunity, of these thirty fourth graders, twenty-six cannot read. And most likely, at the end of the school year, they will go on to fifth grade, and still will not be able to read. They may go on to sixth grade the next year. Unfortunately, because the facts speak for themselves, gradually, the majority of these fourth graders will give up. They will not make it through middle school. The ones who make it to high school are even more the exceptions. In the Philadelphia high schools there are no class size problems, because many of the kids have already dropped out. What about the incredible potential in that fourth-grade class? Wasted. The tragedy here is, it is not their fault.

Let us move on and meet the principal. She is a great lady. She has been a teacher or a principal for thirty years. She is a dedicated professional. If you met her you would be very impressed. Her students love her. She walks through the hallways as the classes change and kids come up and hug her and say, "We love you!" and, "Good to see you!" She loves them back. You could not ask for a more supportive environment. But when you ask her how well her kids are doing, and how they are learning, she responds like this: "We're having a good year, we're off to a good start. These kids are doing pretty well, when you consider where they come from."

These are telling words. Just like that, without even knowing what she has said, this principal has given an articulate eloquence to the soft bigotry of low expectations.

So, I have taken you to an organization that is not organized to be successful, and to a real classroom with great potential waiting to be realized. Allow me to take you to another place. This is a suburb of any major city. It is the kind of place where the parents spend a lot of money on houses and a lot of money on schools. You walk onto school campuses in this area and know this is a great

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place to go to school. There is no question they have top-of-the-line facilities. The campus course book rivals many small colleges in terms of selections and opportunities. They do not need to take assessment tests because they have AP courses. The kids here do well. The teachers are great. Schools here do not have department heads; they have deans. Their state test data show they have the highest average scores on the state assessments. They spend money for this success, maybe twelve to eighteen thousand dollars per student, average. But the fact is, they think they get their money's worth, and in America, that's what matters.

Now let us do something with their data, with those high test scores. When we disaggregate the data and find out what happens as we organize it by socio-economic groups, ethnic groups, and Limited English Proficient (LEP) students, do you know what we find out? This is what often happens to real suburban, high-performing school districts around the country. In this particular school district, consistently and persistently over the last five years, African-American students are experiencing an achievement gap, on every indicator, of around fifty points. Now you would not know that if you look at the average score. But as you disaggregate data, as you take it apart and peel off the layers, you find out the real story behind the figures. We must at this point ask ourselves this question: as taxpayers, parents, teachers, principals, are we really as good as we think we are? If public education is about educating all of America's students, aren't there some issues here we must address?

These three pictures I have painted for you are based on real evidence and real business. They demonstrate symptoms of larger problems. Why has this happened? How has this happened? American public education was once, and must be again, the ticket, not only to the American dream, but also to ensure the future for the next generation of Americans.

How can we fix this problem? There are many possible answers and some are beyond the classroom. First of all, it is important to note that the world in which we live has changed dramatically. Just look around. Families are different and socio-economic conditions are different. The days of Ward and June Cleaver are gone, not that they ever really existed. We know that things are not easy in classrooms today, and kids come to school with all kinds of baggage. We might not be able to change that. However, we can change some things. For starters, we need strong public policy dealing with early childhood growth, education, and resources for families. But even the best public policy in the world

is not going to change everything. We must try to improve the lives of all children through education, acknowledging the fact that as the world changes, the educational system which operates in that world is not changing with it. And it must.

This is no one's fault. Many good people in public education care a great deal about each and every child, but that is not enough. We have to change the system because it is broken and simply not working for all kids. Despite good intentions, the system is inadequate as it currently exists and cannot do the job that must be done. It's a simple proposition, an obvious statement. Are we willing to tackle this problem head on?

Teacher preparation is outdated in most places. There is not enough emphasis on content-area discipline. There is not enough emphasis on special education and technology. Far too many teachers enter the profession inadequately prepared and leave after three years. They come for the right reasons, and within months, are disillusioned. Some have financial concerns, some feel unprepared to face the challenges of a classroom full of students, and some leave for other reasons. Often, in far too many of our cities, our newest and most excited teachers are assigned to the most difficult schools. Seniority systems and contracts allow veteran teachers to choose their school, leaving inexperienced teachers to fend for themselves. Does this sound like a system that is doing what is best for students?

Earlier, I discussed the CEO in the organization. The issue of governance, the management of people and funding, is huge. How do you govern an organization that is ungovernable? Indeed, how do you govern an organization that is structured so that it is ideally situated to sustain itself? Sustainable malfunction—what a tragic concept. I am a former school board member. I have often seen that, in far too many places, school boards are largely ineffective. As a nation we believe in electing school boards. Although I am a big fan of democracy, we must realize that we get what we elect. Our approach to educational leadership is outmoded. It is interesting to note that places like New York City, Philadelphia, Chicago, Seattle, and Sacramento are taking a new approach to educational leadership at the superintendent level. They might call them CEOs out of a sense of desperation. They want leadership to look and act differently. Education leadership in the twenty-first century needs to look far different than it has for the last century.

Finally, pedagogy is outdated and in need of improvement in far too many places. There is not enough use of technology, and a failure to understand new teaching challenges. Accountability,

teaching, leadership, training□ these are big challenges in education today. The beauty of the No Child Left Behind Act is that if it is fully implemented, and it does what it has the potential to do□ and that is a big □if□ because, as we know, while the federal government can pass laws and spend money, education is done at the state and local level□ then, fully implemented, the No Child Left Behind Act will force us to confront the real nature of the challenge. We will find out about that fourth-grade class in Philadelphia and that suburban school, because the law makes it possible. It will be impossible to ignore failure. It will be easier to replicate success, which is something we need to do a much better job of in this country. If this law works the way we hope it will, then by and large, maybe ten years from now, the frustration level of the American people regarding the quality of American education will be so great that change will be inevitable. With this change, what I call a □new understanding□ of public education, we can focus on educating children, not maintaining a system. The system exists to educate people and if it is not working, we must change the system.

Imagine a public education approach that encouraged city elementary schools to collaborate with the medical school down the street, or the hospital, recruiting doctors, residents, interns, students to come and visit with a fifth grade class and work with the science teacher. Everyone has a lab coat. They use microscopes, learn about amoebas, and engage in science. They become excited about learning! These visitors might not be certified teachers, but they know something about science. The certified teacher is there. All of a sudden, a whole new idea of what it is like to be an adult, to be a scientist, enters these kids' lives.

Imagine a school in a cornfield. As you watch the kids get off the bus, you notice they are not carrying backpacks. They all stand up straight! That is because they go to a school without traditional textbooks. They have electronic books. Each classroom is entirely wired for technology. They might even be dual classrooms with third- and fourth-graders together. They still have story time; they still do the traditional classroom activities. However, when you observe these kids, they not only have knowledge, they know how to access knowledge. They know how to think. They are ahead of their peer group on all the indicators.

Another place might be the little dot-in-the-road kind of school, in the middle of nowhere. There are many of these schools, which is one of the great things about this country. This school maintains a technology network with a local university and a local cable company. They can access foreign language courses, AP

courses, anywhere in the world. This little school does not have much money, but the nice thing is that the technology benefits the entire community. The town doctor, who once upon a time had to leave every summer to receive professional development, and left the town without a doctor for six weeks, now does it all through telemedicine. There could be countless examples like that around the nation.

How about this? Imagine a state with no school districts, no school boards, but many schools: public, private, parochial, big, small, charter, and magnet. In this state, how do they fund education? They fund families who then choose education. Now, that is public education.

We must confront the nature of this challenge and begin to think dramatically differently about education in America. The No Child Left Behind Act merely provides the foundation for new discussions and goal-setting. It is up to all of us to rethink and redefine education for the American public.

A very long time ago there was a wise gentleman named Benjamin Rush. Benjamin Rush was a physician from Philadelphia. He was one of the Founding Fathers, and is often considered the Founding Father of American Medicine. He was also a student of education. He wrote several essays on education in the 1700s. One of my favorite essays is called "Of The Mode of Education Proper in a Republic."<sup>2</sup> Rush wrote at about the time the Articles of Confederation were fading and this fledgling nation considered a new constitution. Rush talks about education and describes the necessary qualities an educated person needs in order for a free republic to succeed. He talks about the kind of curriculum. He talks about the kinds of instruction, the importance of language, the sciences, religion, moral character. It is a great essay; I commend it to you. It is truly timeless.

But he also says something that rings in the back of my mind with more urgency now than ever before. "The business of education has acquired a new complexion by the independence of our country," he writes,

The form of government we have assumed, has created a new class of duties to every American. It becomes us, therefore, to examine our former habits upon this subject, and in laying the

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2. BENJAMIN RUSH, *Of the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic* (1798), in *THE SELECTED WRITINGS OF BENJAMIN RUSH* 87 (Dagobert D. Runes ed., 1947).



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foundations for nurseries of wise and good men, to adapt our modes of teaching to the peculiar form of our government.<sup>3</sup>

As we start a discussion of a new version of American public education, I would argue that a new class of duties falls upon each of us. Not just for those of us engaged in education, but each of us, because education is everybody's business. I would argue that if we are thoughtful, entrepreneurial, innovative, creative, and serious, we will create the next generation of American education.

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3. *Id.* at 87.

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