

## **Holding the Government and Public Accountable to the Schools: A Retrospective Look at American Public Education**

Letters to the Next President: What We Can Do About the Real Crisis in American Public Education. Edited by Carl Glickman. Teachers College Press, 2004, Columbia College, New York, NY.

Despite the current political divide in America over issues of war, abortion, gay marriage, etc, education is one issue which we are united on in purpose. Americans believe in the right of every individual to be educated and to have the same standard of education and educational opportunities. There are different ways of achieving this aim, as shown through the differing reform policies of democrats, republicans and libertarians, but people of differing political backgrounds agree that the key ingredients are: qualified teachers, adequate resources, and standards. Though these reforms cost money to implement, they are integral to providing a sound education. Many of the contributors to Letters to the Next President (Letters) agree with this purpose, but put their own twist on the means for, or goals of, fixing public education. Their resounding theme is the importance of education to American democracy, as shown in their writing to the future U.S. president. They suggest what really needs to be done to strengthen U.S. public education, including that American citizens must be engaged in the fight for public education, in order to uphold democracy. Letters is a good place for the American public to start to become engaged in public education; with discussion about such a variety of issues, there is an inlet of interest for everyone.

How education works in and for a democracy has been discussed since the time of America's founding. It has been established that everyone has a right to an equal

standard of education in order to pursue a future career and to secure property on equal standing. More importantly, education must form engaged democratic citizens. As David Sehr explains, “Public education, the one public institution specifically charged with preparing young people to become full members of society, can play a central role in the formation of young people’s understanding of democracy...schools also strongly influence the ability of young people to participate intelligently and effectively in a democracy.<sup>1</sup>” The issue then becomes how to educate children to become productive members of a democracy. Aside from the general importance of having educated citizens ready to participate in democratic life, today the importance of this issue rests in the governments’ responsibility to educate all students in accordance with their right to an equal education. Letters addresses this issue directly through its plea with the president to provide for the various needs seen in our public schools and children. The government must recognize its responsibility as the head of democracy to provide all citizens with a sound education. U.S. citizens must also realize the importance of education in their own lives with the responsibility to produce a democratically engaged public that will ensure the survival of our democracy. Letters goes a long way in promoting the case for better public education by showing that democracy and education are inextricably linked. Public education is essential to form a body of engaged citizens, which is necessary for democracy to function.

Although there are more than 50 contributing authors to Letters, including students, teachers, parents, principals, senators, reformers and researchers; Carl Glickman, the editor, outlines the book’s purpose in the introduction. Carl Glickman is

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<sup>1</sup> Sehr, David T. (1997). *Education for Public Democracy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

the Roy F. and Joann Cole Mitte Endowed Chair in School Improvement at Texas State University. He has also been an education professor at the University of Georgia, and has been a consultant to previous governments and state legislators on education policy, a principal, and a teacher. Glickman's purpose in compiling this book is firstly, to "speak directly to the real crisis in education and what all of us—from the next president to local citizens—need to do to rally for better public education" (4). He strives to provide real information, not skewed by media, not from the government, and not from statistical guesswork to the American public about education. Letters is directed towards two audiences: Americans to be engaged in the quest for good public education and the President to be committed to education and responsive to the citizens who know the system. By aiming the letters at these two audiences, Glickman hopes to achieve an interested citizenry and a president devoted to education. Although there is no one thesis proven in this book, it is generally claimed by Glickman that "Only an active citizenry can serve a democratic society" (1-2). His approach to proving this is by using already engaged citizens in the struggle for education to write letters which would encourage others to support and suggest ideas for how we might use education to form this democratic body of citizens. The contributors present a wide variety of issues, while focusing on how the President can improve public education.

The book is separated into five sections, each dealing with an overarching idea with regard to everyone receiving the same level of public education. The diverse issues dealt with by each author fit under the following headings: First, there must be "Schools for All," then "Learning for All," "Teaching for All," "Standards for All," and finally, "Education for All."

In “Providing Schools for All” the authors express ideas about what is needed for everyone to have a school that fits their needs as learners. “Learning” for all must follow once there are schools where everyone can be taught. Schools where everyone can learn is followed by the need for skilled teachers for all students in “Teaching for All.” “Standards for All,” debates the way to implement standards on education. Finally, in “Education for All,” the letters sum up the required resources to provide an equal education for everyone, in order to uphold democracy with an educated public. All the issues raised sit under the umbrella of the need for democratic citizenship.

Glickman’s purpose of engaging Americans in the struggle for good public education is achieved through the presentation of an assortment of reform issues and their importance to upholding and strengthening democracy. Two examples are found in “Financing America’s Future—How Money Counts” by William Mathis, a Vermont superintendent and member of the Board of Directors for the American Education Finance Association; and in “How Our High School Makes a Difference” by high school principal, George Wood.

When speaking about the need to fund reforms for public education, William Mathis, reminds us that “while we have not kept our promises to our children, we have had enough wealth to provide \$350 billion in tax cuts where the major beneficiaries have been the wealthiest people in society” (52). In the section on “Schools for All,” he explains that improving schools is not possible without funding due to the cost of teachers, materials and facilities. Mathis encourages citizens to fight for funding of public education to uphold democracy. He claims that the government has failed to provide equal opportunity to all children, while Americans’ failure is “...a failure of faith

in our democratic ideals. It [The Americans'] is a failure to recognize that an educated citizenry is the most essential prerequisite to our freedom" (53). Thus, Mathis convinces the public that funding is necessary to provide equal opportunity and uphold democracy.

In the section on "Learning for All," George Wood argues that in order for all children to learn, schools must be allowed to use curriculum and programs that suit the individual needs of their students. This replaces a standardized method forced on them in relation to testing. He claims that "the quality of our public schools has worsened as unique, locally-designed programs are eliminated to make room for test-preparation programs" (90), and thus the President should "leave every decision about the life in schools to the most local body of decision makers possible..." (92). With local decision making, kids are treated based on their own individual needs and life experiences as understood by their communities, so there is a better chance each child will have the opportunity to learn. Wood believes that the place of the federal government should be to "help schools be places where we nurture the habits of heart and mind that make democratic citizenship possible" (90). Thus, Wood expresses the need for a reformed system of decision making in regards to education and a federal government whose ultimate responsibility is to help produce democratic citizens.

Education is essential for democracy because only educated citizens can make informed decisions, which is a necessity for being involved in the democratic process. Many of the authors in Letters deal with this issue, including John Glenn and Leslie Hergert, as they "...call upon the next president to reclaim the public purpose of education and include preparation for citizenship as an important goal of education"(202). They recognize that education is public in that it prepares the future of society, and thus democracy. Also, without equality in education, America is not upholding her

democratic ideals, namely each person's right to be given equal opportunity. Without equality—in education, meaning everyone learns—not everyone can participate or be represented, which is a necessity for democracy. Letters often refers to this issue. For example, Linda Darling-Hammond explains that “the richest U.S. public schools spend at least ten times more than the poorest schools...” which contributes to “the inability of many children to make a living, pay taxes, and become solid members of a community” (242). Therefore, democracy is in trouble if all students cannot be educated with the same level of opportunity, and it is the responsibility of the government to assure that students have “an equitable ‘opportunity to learn’” (245).

However, there are also differing opinions expressed over some controversial issues. For example, the issue of testing as a means to provide accountability is one which produces a great variance in opinion. Deborah Meier, a school principal and long-time education reformer, believes that “to use *one* system of testing or *one* type of test to make all decisions about individual children and their teachers *as well as* to provide broad, comparative data for state and federal policy purposes guarantees that we do both poorly” (22). On the other hand, W. James Popham, a former teacher and current professor at UCLA, feels that tests are a good standard “...because...evaluating a school staff's success surely ought to be whether students have learned what they were supposed to. Because we can efficiently find out what students have learned by testing them, the logic underlying test-based accountability appears to be unassailable” (166). The great variance of opinion in Letters is a strength of the book, because readers do not always have to agree with what the author is saying, and thus are able to see and understand counter-arguments to their own opinions. This helps readers to either be persuaded in the opposite direction of their views, or to strengthen their own point through the faults they

see in the opposition's logic or understanding of the issue. If one is yet to have an opinion, having both sides of the issue allows for them to critically form their view rather than just adopting the single line of one author.

Therefore, Glickman's purpose is achieved to the extent that the letters "speak directly" about the concerns as they come from the mouths of interested, engaged and experienced citizens. The extent to which this convinces the president and American readers to become involved in democratic life is not easily measured. The thesis that an active citizenry is necessary to serve democratic society is not proven, however the letters show that many Americans feel the same and believe that education is the way to produce an engaged population. The authors themselves are a living example of active citizens serving democratic society through the positions they hold which influence public life and the action of their efforts to get the attention of the government to improve democratic life.

Letters is a good introduction to the hundreds of issues surrounding American education, and an example to citizens that those engaged have made a difference, and so can they. By reading Letters citizens are encouraged to get involved by supporting their local schools in ways such as: voting "yes" on the school budget; attending school board meetings; and following the example of these authors and writing letters to their legislatures on whatever issue captivates them. This will show that America is concerned about their public education, and put it as priority on the political agenda.

Thus, Letters contributes to the effort of promoting educational reform by calling on citizens and the President to become involved, on the basis of upholding democracy and equality. Letters presents both conservative and liberal views, deals with issues from

the arts to xenophobia, and shows perspectives from students to statesmen. The diversity would seem to invalidate the book's purpose, but instead it shows that despite different perspectives, backgrounds and political orientations, all citizens can and should be engaged in public education, just as all should participate in democracy. In the great melting pot of America, a common belief among people still rings true: that liberty, justice, and *learning* are for all.

Overall, Letters encourages those who have a voice to be engaged citizens in American democracy in order to pave the way for those who cannot yet raise their voices, so that they may also one day pursue justice for the greater good through democracy. As Paul Wellstone said: "...if we are not for our children, then who will be? If we do not do right for our kids, then who are we? And if not now, then when?" (260).

