

Those Who Can, Teach

By James Crawford

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Thank you, Father Holtschneider. I am deeply honored by the degree you have awarded me today and by the invitation to speak to your graduates. And thank you, Dean Donovan, for that very generous introduction.

I must tell you that this is my first commencement address. So naturally, after being asked to speak, I cast my nets far and wide for ideas about how to approach the assignment. The best advice I could find came from former Governor Mario Cuomo of New York, who was, in fact, passing on advice he received in preparing for his first commencement address.

“Commencement speakers,” Cuomo said, “should think of themselves as the body at an old-fashioned Irish wake. They need you there to have the party, but nobody expects you to say very much.”

I'll try to bear that role in mind ... because you, the graduates, are the ones who deserve the spotlight today. You are the ones to be congratulated for entering – or advancing in – a profession that is vital to our nation's future. And you have wisely chosen to prepare at an institution that is dedicated to making a difference in the lives of children, especially the children who most need our help.

I can't think of a more important career, or a more honorable vocation, than teaching: giving a meaningful voice to students who might otherwise be ignored and excluded; providing them with the tools not only to succeed in the workforce, but also to become active members of our democracy; not merely filling their heads with basic skills, but helping them grow into critical and independent thinkers; enabling our children to appreciate rather than fear diverse peoples and cultures, while inspiring them to better themselves and their communities.

In short, teachers' contributions are indispensable to a just, caring, and prosperous society.

Now, I don't have to tell you that these are challenging times for your profession. And I'm not just talking about the financial meltdown, the draconian budget cuts by state and local governments, the plans to terminate school programs and lay off school personnel in many parts of the country. This is a stressful and frustrating period for anyone who cares about public education. But eventually it will pass, the economy will recover, and job opportunities will return.

What I'm more concerned about is a different kind of challenge: an environment in which educators are under increasing pressure – from politicians,

news media, think tanks, corporate officials, and others – to answer for all the problems of our schools.

“Accountability” is the reigning buzzword these days. And it sounds fine in principle. We should all be held to high standards in our work. But in practice, greater accountability for teachers now comes with less and less control over what you teach and how you teach, less and less say in how schools are rated and how schools are run.

Decisions, large and small, are being dictated externally: whether it’s curriculum and instruction, student promotion and graduation, school restructuring, or – coming soon – “merit pay” for teachers. These decisions are being made, for the most part, on the basis of a single, not very reliable indicator: standardized test scores.

As you know, testing once played a useful but subordinate role in education. By providing feedback on how students were doing, it primarily served the goal of improving instruction. But in far too many schools today, the tail is wagging the dog. Instruction now serves the paramount goal of pumping up test scores, because tests are now what count, above all else, in judging schools, teachers, and kids.

After a decade of experience with high-stakes testing, we still have no evidence that this version of accountability has benefited our schools. Indeed, we have growing evidence to the contrary. Yet it remains the governing principle of school reform today, as embodied by the No Child Left Behind law.

It is disheartening to hear national leaders defend this approach by comparing American schools unfavorably to schools in other countries, citing questionable statistics and sometimes none at all.

It is shocking to hear claims that American students won’t be able to “compete” with their counterparts in India and China unless we make radical changes to our educational system, beginning with the firing of so-called “bad teachers” and the closing of so-called “failing schools.”

This assessment is not only unfair to hard-working, dedicated professionals. Worse, it is a faulty diagnosis that can never help us cure the very real maladies of our schools.

As someone who has tracked efforts at school reform over the past 25 years, since my early days as a reporter for *Education Week*, I am troubled by the growing politicization of the debate.

Too many of our policymakers seem more interested in looking for scapegoats than for solutions. They are drawn to simplistic slogans that sound good to voters – “Hold Schools Accountable,” “Data-Driven Reform,” “Race to the Top” – while they fail to address the fundamental problem: a two-tier system of public education, sorted by race and class, separate and unequal.

We know that students in America’s affluent communities and well-resourced schools are doing quite well, able to hold their own in international comparisons. As a group, they are on a par with similar students in other advanced nations.

What's more, none of those nations has anything approaching the 22% child poverty rate in the United States. That figure, from the Economic Policy Institute, was reported in 2006, well before the current recession.

It's no accident that, in the United States, poor and minority students, recent immigrants, and English-language learners – often in segregated and under-resourced schools – fare much worse on average in every measure of academic progress.

These are the students who in many cases cannot come to school ready to learn because of poor health and nutrition; inadequate housing; family instability and illiteracy; crime, drugs, or toxic hazards in the neighborhood; and other social ills. Researchers such as David Berliner and Richard Rothstein have documented the enormous role that such factors play in student failure.

Professor Rothstein tells the story of a high-poverty school in Boston that seemed to defy the odds one year, when test scores soared. Naturally, the principal was not bashful about taking his bows. In a national magazine article, he credited his school's rigorous testing program, high expectations, emphasis on team teaching, and of course, its visionary leadership.

What he neglected to mention was that at the beginning of the year, a volunteer team of optometrists had visited the school and fitted many of the kids with glasses. Suddenly, these students could see the blackboard for the first time and their reading scores jumped dramatically. This may well have been a good school, Rothstein concludes, but a simple, nonacademic initiative had a lot to do with its success.

Of course, school quality matters. Excellent, caring teachers can have, and are having, a major impact for children in poverty. We need many more such teachers – professionals like you – who are well trained and well supported to address these students' unique needs.

For example, nearly half of the nation's elementary and secondary classrooms now enroll English language learners, a group of students who face the formidable task of mastering academic skills and a new language at the same time. But in a recent national survey, teachers in those classrooms reported receiving just four hours of inservice training on how to serve English learners over the past five years.

It's on issues like this that policymakers should be focusing: expanding programs of professional development and disseminating research-based knowledge about best practices.

But we also know that no amount of pressure on teachers and schools alone will lead to academic success for all children. The reason is simple. Many of the sources of underachievement are beyond the control of teachers and schools.

We will never eliminate the "achievement gap" in this country without eliminating the *opportunity gap* – that is, without attacking the persistent social barriers that hinder student learning.

We will also find it impossible to improve public education unless experienced educators are deeply involved in the process.

Unfortunately, in recent years our policymakers have largely looked elsewhere for leadership. The most powerful figures in K-12 education today are CEOs, career politicians, foundation presidents, hedge fund managers, corporate lawyers, a college dropout who made billions in the computer industry, and a former semi-pro basketball player you may have heard of. None of these so-called “reformers” has firsthand experience as a classroom teacher.

No doubt many of them are smart, well-intentioned people. But they are outsiders who don’t have the relevant expertise – and often express a bias against those who do. Would we rely on nonexperts to straighten out the medical profession or the space program or the auto industry? Of course not. So why are we entrusting them with our children’s futures?

I would like to propose a new cliché: Those who can, teach; those who can’t, get put in charge of school reform.

It doesn’t have to be this way. And it *must not* be this way if we hope to improve outcomes for kids.

Education is a calling that brings you face to face, every day, with questions of social justice. I believe that explains why a growing number of teachers are becoming active agents of change. Not just grumblers and critics, but advocates and organizers.

Challenging the powers-that-be is never without risk. But it can also be a teachable moment of considerable value, both for professionals and for students.

A few years ago, as a journalist, I reported on a policy initiative to slash federal support for bilingual education. The U.S. Secretary of Education at the time, William Bennett, claimed that the program was wasting billions of tax dollars, promoting ethnic pride rather than teaching English. After his speech, Bennett’s staff encouraged members of the public to write in and express their views on the issue.

And many did. Among them were students from a dual language program in California, in which English-speakers and Spanish-speakers were learning together and becoming fluent bilinguals. A 6th grade teacher had given her class the assignment of analyzing the speech and sending Mr. Bennett their reactions. Which proved to be quite articulate. One boy asked the Secretary:

“Try to put yourself in a class where everyone spoke a different language. How would you feel? Ha! It would make you feel rotten. A lot of my new friends are Spanish, and I can talk to them. So, next time before you say something, think about it.”

That final message would be excellent advice for today’s education policymakers: less pontificating, more cogitating. It would also help if, one of these days, they started listening to teachers. They might even learn something.

Thank you and, again, congratulations.