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A Civil Right to a Good Education

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American schools are not as good as they need to be, according to President Obama, the Republican presidential candidates, business leaders, and many others. It has not been for want of trying to improve education, so the problem must be the way we have gone about it.

Over the last half century, three major movements have dominated efforts to reform education in the United States: equity-based reforms, which were a product of the 1960s and 1970s; the school choice movement, which arose in the late 1980s and took hold in the 1990s; and standards-based reform, which came about in the 1990s and the 2000s.

Each of these movements promised major improvements in schooling, yet each has fallen short of fulfilling its promises. The equity movement succeeded when it took the form of legislation that guaranteed certain rights, such as Title IX, which forbade discrimination in education against girls and women. But when efforts to bring about greater equity through grant programs were less effective because they generally led to services for students at risk being layered on top of their regular education.

The choice movement, which includes vouchers for private school tuition and the creation of charter schools, sought better education through the market mechanism of having parents choose which schools their children would attend. But students who use vouchers or attend charter schools generally do no better academically than comparable students who remain in regular public schools.

The standards movement began as an effort to better define what children should learn in reading and math, but when penalties were attached to student test scores by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), this reform morphed into test-driven accountability. Although NCLB has brought greater attention to the needs of children who perform poorly in school, the primary objective for many teachers has become attaining the state-prescribed test scores. As a consequence, practices such as narrowing the curriculum to the tested areas and drilling students to prepare them for the tests have too often become the norm.

These three major reforms did not achieve their promise because they tried to bring about improvement through external means--adding programs on top of school districts' regular education services, applying market mechanisms to sift out bad schools, and exerting pressure to raise test scores. In a way, these routes were taken because it was easier to seek improvement by adding on programs and applying pressures than it was to deal with the core of education, which is teaching and learning.

If American schools are to improve broadly, we must shift the agenda and concentrate on improving the essence of education: what is taught, who teaches, and how this is paid for. These are the factors inside a classroom that determine whether a student learns.

These are also the factors that cause great controversy when change is proposed. When the content or rigor of curriculum is raised as an issue, fears of government control arise. When the training, job tenure, and pay of teachers are discussed, emotions frequently become heated among both teachers and advocates for changes. When the financing of schools is debated, tempers flare because better-off school districts fear losing their funds. But we must act on these issues much more forcefully and comprehensively than before if we are to have real improvement in schooling.

To face up to these challenges, let me make the following proposal. I do this because I have learned over half a century of experience with these issues that big ideas have more of an impact than small ones.

We should make equal educational opportunity a federal civil right for all students. This should include the right to a challenging curriculum, well-trained and effective teachers, and the funding to provide these essentials.

After signing NCLB into law, President George W. Bush said that "education is the great civil rights issue of our time." Later

President Obama used almost the same words: "It is the civil rights issue of our time."

Let us make real this rhetoric by passing a law that incorporates that idea. This law also ought to include a grant program that helps to pay for the broadening of educational opportunity that must occur to ensure this right. A state/federal partnership should direct this campaign to make American schools good for all students.

We are at a moment of decision. We can repeat the experiences of the last 50 years and institute partial reforms or focus on some groups of students, with some good results but no overall improvement. Or, we can seek to raise the general quality of American education for all students. That means we must improve the core of education -- curriculum, teacher quality, and funding -- regardless of the controversies that will arise.

A fuller explanation of these ideas is available in [Reflections on a Half Century of School Reform: Why Have We Come Up Short, and What Can We Do About It?](http://www.cep-dc.org), available on the Center on Education Policy website (<http://www.cep-dc.org>).