

# Changing Schools, Enduring Principles

WHAT YOU SHOULD BE ASKING ABOUT EDUCATION REFORMS



## Education Is Changing Rapidly

*Trends such as charter schools, technology, and new standards and testing are spurring major changes in U.S. public education. For example:*

**THE INTERNET** has made it possible to deliver education at any time and in almost any place.

**GROWTH IN CHARTER SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL CHOICE** has expanded the kinds of entities that provide education funded with tax dollars.

**NEW STATE STANDARDS, TESTS, AND ACCOUNTABILITY REQUIREMENTS** have raised expectations for students, placed greater demands on teachers and administrators, and given states more authority over how education is organized and delivered.

# Changing Schools, Enduring Principles

## THESE CHANGES HAVE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF PUBLIC EDUCATION.

The Center on Education Policy, an independent national advocacy group for improved public schools, encourages changes that will result in better learning opportunities for students. But in our view, a key element is often missing from discussions about education reform. When policymakers and other concerned citizens debate proposed education reforms or emerging trends, they often focus on how these changes will affect the delivery, structure, funding, or control of education. Less attention is paid to how these changes will affect the fundamental purposes and principles that underlie the U.S. system of public education.

Without an *explicit* discussion of the impact of change on these principles, the nation could adopt policies that unintentionally undermine or let go of vital ideals for public education.

## WHAT ARE FUNDAMENTAL PURPOSES AND PRINCIPLES?

By fundamental purposes and principles, we mean the expectations and values that embody what Americans want public education to do and to be. Many of these purposes and principles are so deeply linked to our national interest that they must be retained no matter how the physical form of public education evolves. Some can be traced back 150 years, to the creation of the U.S. system of free public schooling. All of them represent a vision of what public education *should* be, rather than what it is in all schools — in other words, they embody ideals that most contemporary Americans hold for their public schools.

The Center suggests that a short list of essential purposes and principles would include the following aspirations and values for public education: (1) effectively preparing all students for a satisfying life, good job, and active citizenship; (2) promoting social cohesion and a shared culture; (3) guaranteeing universal access to a free education; (4) ensuring equity and non-discrimination; (5) promoting public accountability and responsiveness; and (6) ensuring religious neutrality while respecting religious freedom.

## IT'S TIME FOR A DIRECT DISCUSSION OF FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES.

We suggest that whenever a new education policy or future direction is being debated, state and national policymakers and other interested citizens should explicitly discuss the impact of the proposed change on the fundamental purposes and principles of public education. The idea is not to put a straitjacket on change, but to make sure that people are fully aware of its implications. This kind of dialogue could help Americans to identify which purposes and principles are essential and should be maintained, which should be revised, which are no longer necessary and could be let go of, and which new principles, if any, should be added. If Americans could reach a broad consensus about these notions, then debates about the structure and delivery of public education might be less polarizing. Policymakers could spend less time arguing about the non-essentials and more time figuring out how to refashion a promising concept so that essential principles are maintained.

To help initiate this type of discussion, the Center has developed the following list of basic questions that should be asked about any proposed education reform or change. It is based on our preliminary thinking about fundamental purposes and principles and is intended to be a catalyst for discussion, not a final list.

## WE'D LIKE TO HEAR YOUR THOUGHTS.

We welcome input from state legislators, national policymakers, educators, and the public about our suggested fundamental principles and our list of questions. If you have any additions, suggestions, revisions, or other comments, we invite you to contact the Center on Education Policy by e-mail at [cep-dc@cep-dc.org](mailto:cep-dc@cep-dc.org) or by fax at 202-822-6008.

## Key Questions That You Can Ask about Education Reforms

- 1 EFFECTIVE PREPARATION FOR LIFE, WORK, AND CITIZENSHIP.** Will the proposed reform produce an education of the quality needed to effectively prepare young people: (a) to lead fulfilling and contributing lives, (b) to be productively employed, and (c) to be responsible citizens in a democratic society?
- 2 SOCIAL COHESION AND SHARED CULTURE.** Will the proposed reform promote a cohesive American society by bringing together children from diverse backgrounds and encouraging them to get along? Will it help to form a shared American culture and to transmit democratic values?
- 3 UNIVERSAL ACCESS AND FREE COST.** Will the proposed reform guarantee a public education that is universally accessible to all children within the governing jurisdiction and is free of charge to parents and students?
- 4 EQUITY AND NON-DISCRIMINATION.** Will the proposed reform provide the same quality of education for poor children as for non-poor children? Will it treat all children justly and without discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, disability, religious affiliation, or economic status?
- 5 PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY AND RESPONSIVENESS.** Will the proposed reform ensure that education supported with public dollars remains accountable to taxpayers and the public authorities that represent them? Will the reform be responsive to the needs of local communities and afford citizens a voice in the governance of their schools?
- 6 RELIGIOUS NEUTRALITY.** Will the proposed reform provide a public education that is religiously neutral and respectful of religious freedom?