

February 22, 2011

Dear colleagues concerned with preparing and developing teachers and administrators,

While the assault on public education, educators and teachers' unions, teacher education, and well-rounded curricula has been relentless for some time, the current events in Wisconsin provide an opportunity for those involved in preparing the nation's teachers, administrators, and educational thinkers to examine our important work. The members of the North Dakota Study Group ([www.ndsg.org](http://www.ndsg.org)), a diverse network of progressive educators committed to democratic education and dedicated to advocacy for constructive, fair, and democratic ways to document and assess children's learning, encourage you to join us in examining our work and taking action during this critical moment in public education, teacher education, and administrative preparation.

We invited highly respected teacher and activist Bob Peterson, co-founder of both *Rethinking Schools* magazine and *La Escuela Fratney* in Milwaukee, to this year's annual meeting. It proved to be well timed with our theme *Teachers as Organizers, Professionals, and Artists: Creating a Democracy in and out of the Classroom*, as increasingly more people gathered and protested Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's plan to eliminate many rights of public employee unions in the state, including bargaining for workplace conditions and benefits, among others. Bob, fresh from the capital where nearly seventy thousand people were protesting, energized conference attendees to travel to Madison and join the protest. We want to share with other concerned persons, such as yourself, that this critical moment invites us to take actions to defend and strengthen our public education system.

In the last decade, the rhetoric against teachers has become more hostile, castigating teachers as unconcerned and incompetent state employees getting fat paychecks, who harm children through their terrible work in ineffective schools. It is time for teachers, administrators, and colleges of education, to speak boldly against this defamation, to recast the rhetoric, and to counter the negative public policy proposals threatening to destroy public education, a vital component of a democratic society. While there are imperfections and problems in public education, dismantling the public education system to make way for privatized, less transparent, and anti-democratic systems of schooling is hardly the answer.

In the spirit of democratic dialogue within the education profession, we share the following ideas on developing democratic capacity within those who prepare teachers and administrators, as well as within those who serve as public school employees:

- ✓ We have a moral and ethical responsibility to prepare teachers and administrators to advocate for children and democratic processes in public ways, something that is rarely explicit in teacher preparation curriculum.
- ✓ Teachers and administrators must study democratic purposes of schooling and put them to use in their work in schools. While rhetoric stresses that a twenty-first century education relies upon developing creativity, problem-solving skills, and an engaged citizenry, anti-democratic movements against public education undermine this vision.
- ✓ We have to examine the historical development of unions that led to improved teacher work conditions, and their current functions beyond providing liability coverage, bargaining for wages, and defending academic freedom, so that educators can push unions to fight for democratic and equitable public education.

- ✓ The majority of teachers and administrators have little understanding of social policy and its effects on public education. We must engage students in using a systems approach to look at schooling and convey how many aspects of social policy impact schools and educators' work within them. In particular, powerful interests and groups heavily influence education policy, and school funding is often at odds with other governmental priorities.
- ✓ Outside of their classrooms with children, most teachers do not envision themselves as leaders. Yet more teacher-leaders who understand how systems operate and influence curricular development, school procedures, professional development, and interaction with the community, are precisely who we need to effectively push against the tide of public school and teacher education bashing, and to rebuild our profession.

Here are some ideas for furthering this important work in teacher and administrator preparation:

- ✓ Hold a workshop session with pre-service teachers and future administrators about the events in Wisconsin to educate about and contextualize the importance of Walker's actions, and how they undermine public education and a democratic society.
- ✓ Integrate the above and other important ideas into courses and professional development opportunities. Engage teachers to see and experience themselves as advocates for children, democracy, and an ethical profession promoting equitable education.
- ✓ Develop and advocate for preparation courses focused on systems thinking that contextualizes education in our complex society, the ethical responsibilities of educators, and the capacity of educators to be leaders in their classrooms, schools, and communities.
- ✓ Within our courses, actively engage future educators and administrators in curriculum building. The curriculum is more than the content we teach; it is also how we engage people in their learning. We will not have a democratic society when we engage learners through autocratic methods.
- ✓ Ask your local school leaders, school boards, and state legislators to create more humane, ethical, and inclusive educational policy that benefits children, their parents, educators who work with them, and the community in which we all live.

We cannot ignore our opportunities in this critical moment. If we choose not to address, critically analyze, and engage our students in understanding the current assault on public education, symbolized by the events in Wisconsin, then we are taking the position that our work in preparing teachers and administrators is irrelevant, for it will only be a matter of time before the rhetoric working to destroy public education is applied to university teacher and administrative preparation programs. Please join us in taking a stand for democracy in education to build an educational system that better serves our children and communities.

In solidarity from the North Dakota Study Group,

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