

STRENGTHENING OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

THE PROBLEM

Our nation's public school system is characterized by dramatic inequities along racial, ethnic and socioeconomic lines. Poor children and children of color are more likely to live in communities where decades of disinvestment have led to high rates of poverty, pervasive unemployment, and a range of threats to health of individuals as well as community cohesion. These systemic challenges limit the ability of communities to generate the property tax revenues necessary to employ and retain high quality teachers, support an engaging, challenging and relevant curriculum, provide an array of enrichment activities, clean, safe and attractive facilities and meet the full set of student needs that serve as barriers to learning.

However, misguided federal, state and local policies created and supported by corporate-supported foundations and lawmakers still support and fund the closing of public schools, expansion of privatization, and the dismantling of democratically elected school boards. Mississippi, Texas, Louisiana, Georgia, Arkansas have all passed or are in danger of passing laws that hand over whole segments of their public schools to the private sector whose primary goal is profit, not the education of our most vulnerable students. Where these policies support the proliferation of charters, they disregard the lack of evidence that these institutions improve on traditional public schools. In doing so, they advance a larger agenda of privatization that threatens to undermine hard-won victories in the areas of civil rights, workers' rights, and good government.

SOLUTION

Quality and equitable education is a long-term public safety strategy. Measures to reduce school dropout, increase access to health and mental health services, and improve employment prospects are proven alternatives to expensive, and often inhumane attempts, to reduce crime via criminalization and incarceration. Studies

show that a 10 percent increase in the graduation rate leads to a 9.4 percent reduction in the crime rate. This effect may also be multiplied, as an increase in graduation rate will also lead to an increase in real wages and lower unemployment rates. Moreover, a one-year increase in education level reduces the crime rate by 1.7 percent. A new report from the Alliance for Excellent Education finds that the nation could save as much as \$18.5 billion in annual crime costs if the high school male graduation rate increased by only 5 percentage points.¹ The future of democracy and the health of our economy both depend on our ability to provide a high-quality education for all the nation's children.

Despite potential danger to educational equity precepts implicit in devolution of policy back to the states, the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides multiple opportunities to create positive school change.² For example, it mandates states to include additional measures for school success within accountability systems, including measures on school climate which pave the way for more restorative justice programs. Because the new law does away with federal mandates on everything from assessment, accountability and evaluation, state legislatures will be playing a decisive role in determining how ESSA is implemented. It's now up to the states to work with local stakeholders and districts to design, for example, new and better assessments and accountability systems and follow-through on identifying and filling opportunity gaps.

There is a need for policies that give parents, teachers, and members of the broader community real power to improve struggling schools. But this only becomes reality if parents and communities engage with their local jurisdictions to demand The Public Schools All Our Children Deserve. The Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS) – an alliance of community organizing groups, teachers unions and research and policy organizations is coordinating strategies around the country to make sure this engagement takes place.

POLICY ISSUES

The following are important issues to consider in designing local policies to improve education through meaningful parent, teacher, student and community involvement. Policy-makers can tailor their proposals to the political realities of their communities.

Where **charter schools** exist, local policy-makers should strongly advocate for school board oversight and pass a resolution adopting the Annenberg Public Charter Accountability Standards that will ensure maximum transparency and accountability to the community as the charter schools begin to operate.³ If charter schools express interest in starting, the standards should be passed and the compliance should be a condition for authorization.

For districts looking for a strategy that improves student well-being and academic outcomes, pilots for **community schools** (or an expansion) should be a top priority. Board members should pass a resolution supporting community schools and prioritize funds to support a Community Schools Site Coordinator for each school. Districts should consider the implementation of all six strategies that contribute to the success of community schools in their district.⁴

Districts should analyze and take advantage of **opportunities available to them through ESSA**. The law offers ample opportunity for districts to define their priorities, decide how to allocate resources to support their lowest performing schools and determine a more diverse portfolio of measurements upon which student outcomes are judged. Districts should collaborate closely with district administrators, educators, parents, students and community leaders to design improvement plans and make decisions on accountability and financial priorities for investment. ESSA offers a number of opportunities for district boards to take a leading role in crafting policies and priorities to fit the needs of their community, in fact it requires community and stakeholder input.

LANDSCAPE AND RESOURCES

The **Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS)**, **The Center for Popular Democracy and the National Education Association (NEA)** all have resources available that elaborate on holistic and successful school improvement strategies.