

# Letters to the Next President - What We Can Do About

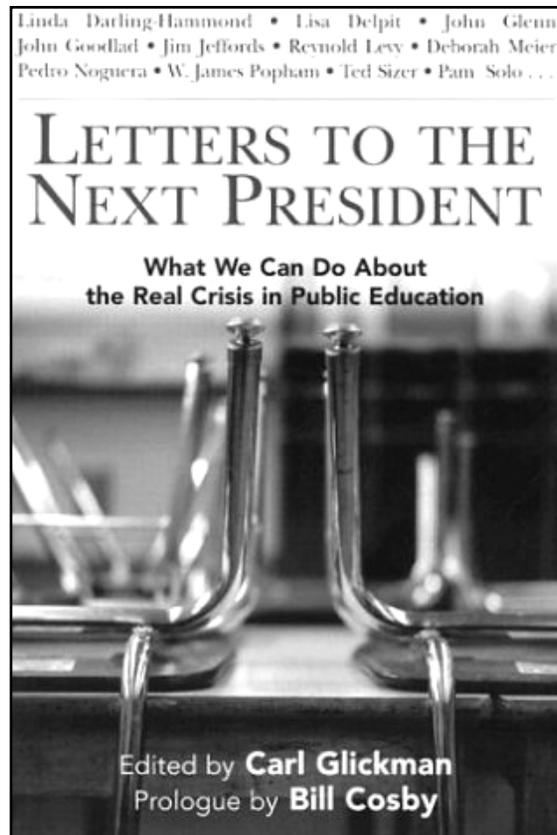
A Book Review by Katy Kelly, Indiana

Often when commuting or showering, those times when I have few mental distractions, I find myself composing mental letters to the editor of my local paper, to the school board, or, particularly in election years, to the president. This exercise helps me to focus my thinking around a particular subject. So when a copy of "Letters to the Next President" arrived on my desk early last summer it immediately caught my attention. In the words of its editor, Carl Glickman, this book is "...straight talk from experienced, caring, and intelligent citizens about what can be done to improve public education in America."

More specifically, it is a collection of letters, written by a diverse group of people, at the invitation of Mr. Glickman, to the next president of the United States. The letters, written with passion and clarity, provide the reader (including the president, one hopes) with a deeper understanding of the complexity of significant issues facing educators in America today.

Some of the letters are familiar, comfortable, reaffirming: Ted Sizer gently guiding the president, suggesting that "you ponder fully what you want and hope for your own children and grandchildren." Others opened my eyes to situations I was unaware of, like the one from Iris, writing from a Correctional Institution near the Canadian border: "on behalf of the 2,000,000 women and men behind bars, I urge you to have the courage to restore the once common college-in-prison programs." Jacqueline Jordan Irvine's account of the young boy Darius still haunts me. When prompted

by Ms. Irvine to "tell me about your dreams," Darius replied, "Lady, I don't see nothing and I don't have no



dreams."

In his opening prologue, Bill Cosby uses a junky room as a metaphor for schools. In closing his letter to the next president he invites him "to look into this room. You have these letters to point the way, to keep you going as you sweep and mop and dust and even do some of the heavier work. You can say to our nation, 'We must begin, we cannot wait for someone else to clear out the mess.' My hope is that 30 years from now this book will no longer matter because kids will have the public schools that they deserve."

I invite you to look into this book. It may inspire you, inform you and trouble you. You may even want to write a letter of your own. Here are a few letters from people who chose to do just that.

Dear Mr. President,

To educate is to develop attitudes and values needed to actively participate in the civic life of one's local community, nation, and the world. One of the goals of education is to produce an effective citizen.

An effective citizen is one who can conceptualize, interpret, analyze, generalize, apply knowledge and evaluate knowledge. These are all critical thinking skills that in part are developed through education. Education provides opportunities for learners to participate in projects and activities that will develop their thinking skills. Through education, an individual can make reflective decisions and participate effectively in his or her society.

A school community's teaching philosophy is one that promotes learning and meets the needs of ALL students. This is why it is important that colleges and universities train future teachers to teach the students of today and of the future and not those of 10 years ago. The students of today are more challenging and demanding due to the impact of globalization. Schools need to be a community of life-long learners with a common vision.

Our community of learners depends on our ability to develop relationships, especially our relationship with parents; this relationship needs to be fostered through the same strategies that we are implementing with students and staff. We need a re-alignment between the school and the family.

I feel that to educate students without the deep partnership of a school community and parents is hopeless. It is not enough to have a handful of parents present in a monthly school council meeting. That is not where change occurs. It occurs in different forms throughout the school and community. Involvement needs to be deliberately fostered, developed and supported. Programs are needed to expand and increase the capacity of parents and community, in the same ways that we

# the Real Crisis in Public Education

establish programs and supports for teachers and students.

I urge you to prioritize partnerships between our schools and families. Please earmark funds to support our outreach efforts so that each child can benefit from a true community of support before, during and after school is in session.

Nelson Reyes

*Nelson Reyes is the Principal of Feltonville-Horn Schools, Grades K-4, in Philadelphia, PA, and a member of the Leadership CFG in the Philadelphia Center of Activity.*

Dear President,

A fifth grader observed, "I learned some disabilities don't revolve around legs and arms." Michele's comment reminded us that every individual is unique, each having different strengths and needs. We believe that our public education system can meet the needs of every child; however, NCLB mandates are having a crippling effect on this goal.

Students need time. To improve student reading and writing, students need time to practice reading great books and writing while studying mentor authors.

Students need to have voice, a valuable commodity that's becoming more endangered as we institute 'cookie cutter' curricula. Learning is social. Our students need to have time to talk, listen, and share with each other.

Students need to practice reading the world critically, discussing issues of injustice, gender and power from multiple perspectives. They need opportunities to reflect about possible action plans for positive change.

Finally, voluminous standardized testing does not improve student learning. Students might become better test takers but not critical thinkers who know how to negotiate and improve

their worlds. Standardized tests provide only a small window of information about a student on one particular day. We work with them every day and gather much more pertinent useful information all the time.

Teachers are not averse to being held 'accountable' (as some critics



claim) – we are accountable to our students, parents, administrators, and most of all ourselves. Excellent teachers are being forced to sacrifice what they know best about teaching and learning in exchange for test prep curriculum that emphasizes memorization and isolated skills. Please listen to teachers and help us do what's best for children and ultimately for the world.

Sincerely,  
Kevin Gallagher and Rise Reinier

*Kevin Gallagher and Rise Reinier teach a K-6 class at Templeton Elementary in Bloomington, IN. They can be reached through e-mail at [kgallagh@mccsc.edu](mailto:kgallagh@mccsc.edu) and [rreinier@mccsc.edu](mailto:rreinier@mccsc.edu)*

Dear Mr. President:

I am the parent of two children in the Texas public school system. I have a sixteen-year-old daughter in the traditional public school and a thirteen-year-old son in a charter school. My daughter is an exceptional student with a positive sense of direction. My son

has a passion for the mechanics of how things work; he has been diagnosed as dyslexic.

I am writing this letter to ask for the reduction of classroom sizes in our schools. The average size of the traditional classroom in this country is about 22- 40 students per class. Statistics show that 3 out of 5 students who attend college are not equipped to successfully complete college. In the classroom the teacher should have the opportunity to know the student that he or she is teaching. There should be a personal relationship established between student and teacher.

Reducing the number of students in a classroom allows the teacher to meet the student where they are and have a curriculum that's beneficial to each student. The teacher would better understand the learning styles of the students. Every child is teachable if given adequate attention, and smaller classes support better study skills.

The following are recommended classroom sizes:

- K-4 level: up to 15 students per class
- 5th - 8th: up to 17 students per class
- high schools: up to 22-25 students per class

The idea is that no child is left behind.

Mr. President, the reduction in student-teacher ratio will be paramount in improving the education process of our children. Please ensure that every student and teacher has a real opportunity to succeed.

Sincerely,  
Jerrye Stephenson  
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