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Telling the Story of Public Education in America

By Wendy D. Puriefoy

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At the heart of everything Public Education Network works to achieve is the conviction that Americans must take responsibility for the quality of education delivered in our public schools. But to convince Americans of the vital importance of their role, we need a compelling story—a narrative that informs and inspires a new national movement to support high-quality public education for every child.

The success and survival of public education is essential to the success and survival of democracy and civil society in America. In fact, just as American democracy created public schools, one could say public schools have created America's democracy.

We have all heard the story of Benjamin Franklin being asked what type of government the delegates to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia had given to the American people. His reply, "A Republic, if you can keep it," was based on the premise that keeping the Republic required an educated citizenry capable of governing itself, of making sound decisions, and of restraining its worst impulses.

Over the years, the expansion and improvement of our democracy and the expansion and improvement of our public schools have been so closely linked that historians have had a hard time distinguishing which has been cause and which has been effect. At first, the right to participate in the political process was the purview of the privileged few—namely, wealthy, white, property-owning men. And, just like the fullness of American citizenship, the finest education was reserved for the children of privilege.

At our best moments, however, we have understood that we cannot have equality in the political process, equal justice under law, or equal opportunity in the marketplace, if we continue to have institutionalized inferiority in our public schools. Half a century ago, that insight became the law of the land with the historic Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, whose 50th anniversary we celebrate this year. *Brown* ruled that the United States could no longer tolerate legislated segregation under the sickly euphemism of "separate but equal" because the schools that African-American children attended were most certainly separate and most definitely not equal. Compared to the schools for white children, schools for black children did not receive the same resources; did not meet the same requirements; and, most important of all, did not afford the same level of respect for the God-given potential of the students they served.



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Fifty years later, we are at another pivotal point in American history and, once again, the future of our democracy depends upon our public schools. Once again, we are confronted by the outright failure of most of the schools in our inner cities and in our isolated rural communities. Once again, there is mediocrity in too many schools for too many children across too much of America. Once again, we face the institutionalization of inferiority in our children's education and in their future prospects as learners, as earners, and as citizens.

When it comes to what our young people need to learn, we have to lift our sights and enforce our standards. If we want Americans to compete in an unforgiving global economy, lead in a dangerous world, debate and decide increasingly complex issues, and get along in an increasingly diverse society, then we must have an engaged, responsible public that demands quality and mobilizes resources to educate *all* of America's children.

This brand of public engagement is the very best tool we have to make sure that everyone—voters, elected officials, educators, administrators, parents, and students—is held accountable for education outcomes. To achieve that degree of public engagement, we must motivate and mobilize the American people and, to do that, we need a compelling narrative on the critical importance of getting all Americans involved in public education.

In April 2004, PEN invited leaders from education, business, government, philanthropy, entertainment, and media to participate in a Forum on Public Responsibility for Public Education and discuss ways Americans could translate their concern about public education into concrete action. To inaugurate this first issue of *Connections* in its new format as a journal of education advocacy, we are summarizing some of the conversations that took place at the forum, which was generously funded by MetLife Foundation.

David Dodson, president of Making a Difference in Communities in the South, wants us to make sure the journey of possibility and transformation is open to all people. Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist and George Mason University professor Roger Wilkins shares his family narrative with us to illustrate the power of public education to transform lives, while pointing to challenges this country still faces in closing opportunity gaps for disadvantaged and minority children. Patricia Albjerg Graham, a leading historian of American education at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education, takes us through the changes in educational priorities over time, cautioning that the idea that all children can achieve is relatively new. Stanford University professor Linda Darling-Hammond looks at education inequities in greater detail, pointing out that the wealthiest public schools spend at least 10 times more on education than the poorest schools, thus leaving many children inadequately prepared. To illustrate the important influence of Hispanic families in education and in civic participation, Sarita Brown, president of Excelencia in Education and senior fellow at the Pew Hispanic Center, notes that by 2025 a quarter of the country's youth between the ages of 5 and 18 will be Hispanic. *Parade* magazine editor Lee Kravitz challenges us to find the simple things that people can do on behalf of public education. And David Gergen—editor-at-large for *US News and World Report* and director of the Center for Public Leadership at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University—talks with forum participants on how best to channel interest into action.

These discussions had an overarching purpose: to develop a narrative that will inspire all Americans to act on behalf of public education. The nation's demographics have changed. Americans are living longer and having fewer children. Most Americans no longer have children in the public schools. We have to reach out to all Americans and

persuade them that good public schools are essential for the health of their communities and for the strength of our nation.

In an economy increasingly polarized between winners and losers, our public schools are our first and best opportunity to even the odds. In an era where the workings of government are increasingly privatized, our public schools are the most visible public institutions. In a society where the wealthiest are walled off in gated communities and the poorest are isolated in ghettos, our public schools—for all their faults and all their shortcomings—are still our best chance to give all children a shot at the American dream. Our public schools have enriched America in the past. With your help, our public schools can do so again.



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