



Four Pillars for Successful Schools

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EDUCATION WAS ECLIPSED by numerous other issues and controversies during the presidential election campaign. But if there was any question about the importance Americans place on public education, it was answered when Donald Trump nominated Betsy DeVos to be secretary of education. DeVos's nomination galvanized a passionate and dedicated force for our public schools: the public.

DeVos has spent decades as a lobbyist and cheerleader for alternatives to public schools: charter, virtual, private, and home schools. Her record of undermining public schools, her poor performance at her confirmation hearing, and Trump's pledge to pour \$20 billion into private school vouchers all sparked deep alarm. But DeVos's confirmation battle had a major silver lining: the public in public education has never been more visible or more vocal, and it is not going back in the shadows. An example of this is #PublicSchoolProud, a campaign to showcase the great things happening in public schools every day.

I sent an open letter to DeVos one week after she took office, voicing concern about her early actions and statements as secretary denigrating public schools, and inviting her to spend meaningful time in public schools. I've visited hundreds of schools across the country and have seen firsthand their struggles and successes. The American tradition of local control of public education has resulted in a rich array of approaches, designs, and programs. But there are common traits among all schools that are working as they should. I call them the four pillars of effective public schools: promoting children's well-being, supporting powerful learning, building teacher capacity, and fostering school and community collaboration. And the new federal Every Student Succeeds Act enables these pillars to become a reality.

Promoting Children's Well-Being

Education starts with meeting children where they are—emotionally, socially, physically, and academically. Every school must provide a safe and welcoming environment for all children. And instead of fixating on tests, we must focus on the whole child. Half of all public school students live in poverty, so confronting this reality is an absolute necessity. One way to help these students is through community schools—neighborhood public schools that meet kids' needs by coordinating partners and resources. New York City's Community Health Academy of the Heights is a great example. It offers supports like mental health counseling, a parent resource center, a food pantry, and a community health clinic. A variety of indicators, including large gains in academic achievement, attest to the academy's effectiveness.

Supporting Powerful Learning

Society rightly sets high expectations for our public schools—to develop students academically, for work, for civic engagement, and to lead fulfilling lives. The path to accomplishing these goals lies in powerful learning—learning that engages students and encourages them to question and collaborate. One way to inspire such learning is through project-based instruction, like in Corpus Christi, Texas, where students investigated the potential for humans to live on other planets. Career and technical education can also deeply engage students and help them to develop skills and knowledge they can use in the world of work.

Building Teacher Capacity

Becoming an accomplished teacher takes time, support, and an intentional focus, key features of the teacher residency model described in a new report by the Learning Policy Institute, which is excerpted in this issue of *American Educator*. New and veteran teachers alike benefit when they

have opportunities to share their expertise with colleagues. Teacher evaluation can also build capacity, and the AFT has fought against the broken test-based evaluation systems of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top and pushed for evaluation systems that support both teacher growth and student learning.

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Fostering School and Community Collaboration

Collaboration among educators, parents, and community partners is the glue that holds all this together. This is evident in the Progressive Redesign Opportunity Schools for Excellence program in New York City, also featured in this issue. Collaboration is essential—schools with parents, educators with administrators, and schools with community partners. When schools struggle, the response too often is “disruption”—mass firings, school closures, and district or state takeovers. Those approaches are indeed disruptive, but they are not effective.

The Path Forward

Advocates for public education were handed a stinging defeat in the presidential election. But out of defeat has emerged a dedicated and diverse alliance in support of public education as a public good—uniting parents, educators, students, civil rights groups, faith leaders, and many others. I believe that not only will my fellow champions of public schools be paying close attention to the actions of this administration, but that public education forever will be a driving factor whenever they cast a vote.