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COMMENTARY

We Need a Different National Conversation

By Gene R. Carter

From almost any vantage point, it is hard to find sincere concern about the productive future of our young people in the political debates occurring in Washington and state capitals. The passing references to children and students feel largely like rhetorical flourishes in the partisan and ideological fights among adults.

This is not an easy time to preach bipartisan pragmatism. But if we don't find some common ground—and some common national values—around children, we are indeed a nation at risk.

I've been involved in education for 40 years as a teacher, principal, and superintendent. Since 1992, I've been chief executive officer and executive director of **ASCD** (formerly the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development), an international organization of education leaders that includes 135,000 members in the United States. I am fortunate to be a frequent visitor to schools and education systems around the world. I have seen countries making impressive commitments to young people and garnering equally impressive results in student achievement. Most of these countries are also seeing considerable economic growth.

And I see what happens in communities and schools in this country where the commitment to children—their future and ultimately ours—is less impressive.

Consider these facts:

- Our poorest children routinely don't get the help they need inside or outside the classroom. Their teachers are the least well prepared; their schools are the least funded; and the community services they need are largely lacking.
- We talk about the importance of teachers, but we are in the midst of firing tens of thousands of them. We want teachers to be more effective, but we rarely provide the professional development they need or encourage their desire to be the best they can be.



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- Far too many children, and not just poor children, are disengaged from school. We focus relentlessly, though not always successfully, on literacy and mathematics while cutting programs that could engage students, like music, art, science, physical education, and service learning.
- Far too many of our children are unhealthy. We have a public-health epidemic of obesity, but our public response is weak. While we fight over whether there will be Coke or Pepsi products in school, students need exercise and healthier diets.

So much about our country is right and good. America is still often seen as a beacon of hope and freedom around the world. But, from my perspective, we don't demonstrate serious intent about where we are headed. The vitriolic levels of partisanship have sapped much of our will to consider long-term investments that would produce results beyond the current election cycle. Too often, we choose the most expedient fixes, even if they make problems worse in the long run.

Recent education reform efforts have provided clarity about what students should learn so they can be successful and by shining a bright light on our nation's achievement gaps. But the single-minded focus on those accountability efforts has warped our perspective; we worry extensively about test scores and far too little about the whole child. We often choose one-size-fits-all approaches while ignoring solid research about the infinite ways students learn and children develop.

Additionally, states are moving in a variety of education directions, many unsupported by research. Congress, mired in partisan dysfunction, is several years overdue in reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the underlying federal law for schools, and few observers expect anything this year or next.

"Too often, we choose the most expedient fixes, even if they make problems worse in the long run."

I don't have an easy solution. Yet the association I serve suggests actions I believe Congress can take now to move our current education conversation into new, more productive territory that will best serve students. Developed by ASCD's diverse, nonpartisan membership, these recommendations are based on the practical application of their expertise.

In that spirit, I call on Congress to support a whole-child approach to education. Ensuring that all children are healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged is fundamental for students to become college- and career-ready. In practical terms, our standards, our assessments, our measures of accountability, and the many mechanisms supporting learning need to be realigned to support the whole child. Congress' embrace of the whole-child approach to education for every child would encourage parents, educators, and community members to reprioritize reform efforts to prepare students for college, career, and citizenship.

I also ask Congress to support quality schools and effective teachers. The current accountability model must evolve from one that is punitive, federally prescriptive, and overly bureaucratic to one that is state-driven and peer-reviewed, promotes supportive learning communities and cultures of continual improvement, and rewards achievement. Coupled with a commitment to providing educators with sustained professional knowledge, skills, and training to address students' evolving needs, these efforts will provide comprehensive, high-quality teaching and learning experiences that involve students, families, and staff.

I look to Congress to broaden the definition of academic excellence narrowed by the **No**

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Child Left Behind Act, the current version of the ESEA. Science, social studies, the arts, civics, foreign languages, health and physical education, technology, and all core academic subjects not only engage students, but also are crucial to postsecondary success.

I call on Congress to embrace college- and career-readiness standards that include all core academic subjects, not only reading and math. I ask Congress to promote collaboration between state and local governments and between school systems and the social, health, and safety services that support children. We need to coordinate education programs with out-of-school services so that each child can enter school healthy, access personalized instruction, and be prepared for postsecondary success. Congress should promote the connection of the various service providers and leverage their valuable resources for maximum effectiveness to ensure children in U.S. classrooms are ready to learn.

Common to each of these steps is bipartisan action on the part of Congress. I strongly believe that leaders must work together to craft the solutions we need to reform education in the United States. Only in this way will we succeed in breaking the cycle of short-term fixes and Band-Aid solutions that could lead us to becoming, once again, a nation at risk.

The time to change the national conversation is now. ASCD and our members across the United States are advocating for a new direction in our nation's ongoing education dialogue. I hope you will join us.

Gene R. Carter is the chief executive officer and executive director of ASCD, an international educational leadership association based in Alexandria, Va.

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