

An Alternative Vision for Public Education: Four Short Video Conversations

Bringing the Voices of Dr. John Jackson and Dr. Diane Ravitch to Explore Serious Concerns Raised in a Pastoral Letter by the NCC Governing Board about Today's Federal Public Education Policy

This Study Guide will help you explore important questions. What is the impact of poverty on educational opportunity? How can the church help ensure opportunity to learn for all children? Why the attacks on school teachers and on schools as community institutions?

The National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy has posted four short videos on YouTube and embedded them on the website of the National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy, <http://www.nccusa.org/elmc/publiceducationwebisodes.html>.

In these four short films, Dr. John Jackson, President and CEO of the Schott Foundation, and education historian, Dr. Diane Ravitch discuss many of the concerns raised by the Governing Board of the National Council of Churches on May 18, 2010, in "A Pastoral Letter on Federal Policy in Public Education: An Ecumenical Call for Justice," <http://www.nccusa.org/elmc/pastoralletter.pdf>.

Each video conversation is wrapped in a statement from National Council of Churches General Secretary, Rev. Dr. Michael Kinnamon, who endorses public school justice reform as a priority for the churches. "Each child has special, sacred gifts that need to be nurtured, and all children are special and precious in God's eyes," Kinnamon declares, "which means that a system in which some children have access to excellent instruction while others don't is simply unacceptable."

How to Use these Resources

The members of the National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy designed the films to be used as discussion starters in a congregational justice committee, an adult education class, a group of youths or young adults who have recently experienced the education system, or an inter-generational reflection group.



- The films are quite short—only six or seven minutes.
- Each of the films speaks to one of the important topics of the NCC Governing Board's Pastoral Letter, <http://www.nccusa.org/elmc/pastoralletter.pdf>. These topics include inequities that grow from racial and economic injustice in our public schools and our society and many serious concerns about today's federal public education policies that attack public school teachers and promote market-based reforms in what are among our most precious community institutions.
- You are free to use all of the films, choose one of the films to start your conversation, or select several of them. You are free to select and sequence your showing of the films in whatever order facilitates your discussion.
- We are hopeful that the videos will encourage you to invite the members of your group to read and discuss the Pastoral Letter, <http://www.nccusa.org/elmc/pastoralletter.pdf> as part of the background for your conversation.
- The following pages in this study guide present several questions to stimulate reflection on each one of the films. Our questions are intended only as a starting place for what we hope will become a prayerful and spirited conversation and time of discernment.
- There is a list at the end of this study guide of additional resources to support your congregation's discussion—from the National Council of Churches, from several of the Council's member communions, and from our partners.



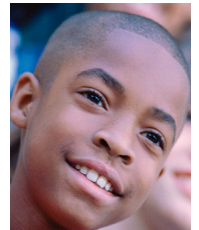
National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy
<http://www.nccusa.org/elmc/specialministries.htm#anchorwgpel>,
Jan Resseger Chair, ressegerj@ucc.org, 216-736-3711

Video 1: Educational Opportunity for All — John Jackson, President and CEO of the Schott Foundation, and education historian Diane Ravitch discuss why our society must rise to the challenge of providing educational opportunity for every child in public schools.



1. Dr. Jackson makes a distinction between opportunity gaps—the way we describe disparities in resources in a society that continues to be highly unequal—and achievement gaps that describe the outcomes of education as measured by standardized tests.
 - Make a list of some of the school conditions Dr. Jackson and Dr. Ravitch mention that contribute to opportunity gaps.
2. Dr. Ravitch lists some of the other broader social conditions, such as lack of health care and lack of jobs, that she believes directly affect school achievement.
 - The United States tolerates a higher level of child poverty (over 20 percent) than any other industrialized nation. Why do you think our society accepts such a high level of child poverty compared to European societies, for example?
 - What do you think the church can do to help create the political will to address child poverty?
3. Dr. Jackson and Dr. Ravitch agree that our society has reached a point when we cannot afford not to address our society's massive inequality. Dr. Jackson lifts up our low level of taxation today, and both speakers suggest that we need to reassess the priorities by which our society distributes the revenue we do have.
 - Do you think the existence of opportunity gaps in education is a matter for the churches? Why or why not?
 - What will be needed to address opportunity gaps, both those in schools and those in society?
 - What would you or your group change to make it more possible to address the needs of children in poverty?
4. Look at your own state or region.
 - Where do you most clearly observe the inequities that create opportunity gaps?
 - What are some ways your congregation has worked to address poverty or unequal school resources?
 - Are there additional steps you should be taking today—through direct service? —through advocacy?

Video 2: Public Schools and the Common Good — Education historian Diane Ravitch and John Jackson, President and CEO of the Schott Foundation consider what appears to be a timetable for the destruction of America's system of public education and the imposition of competitive programs that create winners and losers, when the mission of public schools is to serve every child.



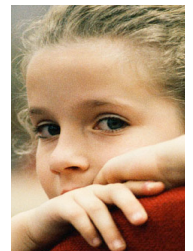
1. Both speakers worry that our society is not paying attention to improving the public schools that will continue to serve the vast majority of our nation's 50 million children in public schools today, including our society's poorest children.
 - Why do you think there is so much talk today about creating alternatives to public schools and so little talk about improving the public schools that will continue to serve the mass of our children?
 - Why have we allowed the conversation to shift to blaming teachers and closing schools or privatizing them or firing the teachers?
2. Dr. Ravitch states categorically that she believes the No Child Left Behind Act and the Race to the Top have created a timetable for the destruction of public education.
 - Ask the public school educators in your congregation how these huge federal programs are directly affecting your state's and your community's public schools.
 - Talk to teachers or public school administrators in your congregation and ask these people with daily experience in the schools whether they agree with Dr. Ravitch.
3. Dr. Jackson points out that in a competitive program like Race to the Top, some states are winners and the rest are losers, even though public education is a civil right for all children.
 - What do you think about a public education funding program that is designed to create winner and loser states or school districts?
 - What are the relative merits of competitive programs and of more traditional formula programs like Title I that distribute federal funds according to the number and concentration of poor children in a school district? What do you think about the idea of freezing the number of formula programs as Arne Duncan's Department of Education has proposed and begin to move to competitive programs?
 - What do you think about the federal government's rewarding only the states whose legislatures will adopt favorite programs of the Secretary of Education with federal competitive grants?

Video 3: Public Schools, Part of the Community or Marketplace? — Education historian Diane Ravitch and John Jackson, President and CEO of the Schott Foundation, reflect on the public role of public schools as an expression of our common purpose. How is it we have come to use a data driven approach to judge the most important things in life, things that do not have metrics like the love of learning?



1. In its Pastoral Letter, the Governing Board of the NCC stated: “As a people called to love our neighbors as ourselves, we look for the optimal way to balance the needs of each particular child and family with the need to create a system that secures the rights and addresses the needs of all children.”
 - Reflect on the many needs we seek to address in public schools today.
 - What are the challenges of providing a system that makes provision for each child’s special needs?
 - Do you think the provision of such a system is worth the cost?
2. In the Pastoral Letter, the Governing Board rejects the language of business for describing public education: “We worry that our society has come to view what is good as what can be measured and compared... As people of faith we do not view our children as products to be tested and managed but instead as unique human beings, created in the image of God, to be nurtured and educated.” Dr. Ravitch declares that the most important thing that can be taught in education is a love of learning among other values such as integrity, respect, caring for others, justice, compassion and empathy.
 - Do you agree with the Governing Board? With Dr. Ravitch?
 - If you were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the schools in your district or of a set of school teachers, how might you decide to conduct your evaluation? What would you look for? Would you establish a ranking system? What kind of mix of qualitative and quantitative analysis might you create?

Video 4: Supporting Our Teachers — John Jackson, President and CEO of the Schott Foundation, and education historian Diane Ravitch reflect together on how our society has come to demonize public school teachers. How is it that we have people doing some of the most important work of society being abused, ashamed and humiliated? Why does this have to stop?



1. In the Pastoral Letter, the NCC Governing Board wrote, “We look for a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that honors the professionalism of teachers and treats these individuals with respect. Wholesale scapegoating of public school teachers is an ugly and unfortunate development in federal policy.” In the film, Dr. Jackson and Dr. Ravitch also talk about many of the very serious attacks on public school teachers.
 - Think about what you are hearing about teachers in news. Ask the teachers in your congregation how they feel about what is being said about teachers.
 - Why do you think the narrative of blaming school teachers has become so deeply embedded in our national consciousness?
2. When you hear our political leaders attacking teachers and when you read such attacks in the media, do you attach these allegations to the school teachers you know in your community or in your church?
 - Whom do you visualize when you hear teachers described this way?
 - Make a list of the teachers you know personally or have known in your family or the people who taught you... your best and even your worst teachers. Think of ways to describe the strengths and even the weaknesses of school teachers you know.
3. Ask parents and grandparents in your group to share what qualities they value most in their children’s or grandchildren’s teachers. How can these concerns be best addressed in teacher preparation programs?
4. If you were a school teacher, how would you seek to be evaluated?
5. Strategize in your congregation about ways to be supportive of teachers, to speak constructively about what school teachers contribute to our children and our society, and to advocate for programs that will support improvement in the preparation of teachers and the practice of teaching.

Resources That Explore These Issues Further

From the National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy

- **A Pastoral Letter on Federal Policy in Public Education: An Ecumenical Call for Justice**, May 18, 2010, <http://www.ncccusa.org/elmc/pastoralletter.pdf>.
- **Journey to Opportunity, Journey to Learn: A 40-Day Bible Study Guide and Reflection on Public Education in God's World Today**, <http://www.ncccusa.org/pdfs/40dayreflection2011.pdf>.
- **Opportunity Gaps in Education Must Be Closed**, <http://www.ncccusa.org/pdfs/elmcopportunitygaps.pdf>, and in the format of a bulletin insert, <http://www.ncccusa.org/pdfs/elmcopportunitygaps.pdf>.

From the United Church of Christ Justice & Witness Ministries

- **2012 Message on Public Education**, "Why the Conventional Wisdom on School Reform is Wrong and Why the Church Should Care," <http://www.ucc.org/justice/public-education/pdfs/Message-12-web-version.pdf>.
- **2011 Message on Public Education**, "New Federal Public Education Policies Undermine Justice, Eliminate Democracy, and Shatter Community," <http://www.ucc.org/justice/public-education/pdfs/Message-11-web-version.pdf>.

From the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Family & Children's Ministries of Disciples Home Missions

- **Justice in Education Reform, Resolution 1121** <http://www.disciples.org/GeneralAssembly/Business/1121/tabid/863/Default.aspx>

From the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church

- **One Church One School** <http://www.onechurchoneschool.org/>.

From the Presbyterian Church, USA

- **Loving Our Neighbors: Equity and Quality in Public Education (K-12), Resolution and Study Guide**, <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/loving-our-neighbors-equity-and-quality-public-edu/>.

From the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

- **ELCA Social Statment on Education** <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/Education.aspx>.

Promise the Children <http://promisethechildreanu.org/>.

From the Children's Defense Fund

- **The State of America's Children 2011 Report**, July 15, 2011, <http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/state-of-americas-children-2011/>.



Dr. John Jackson is President and CEO of the Schott Foundation for Public Education, <http://www.schottfoundation.org/>, and is also involved as a leader of the Opportunity to Learn Campaign, <http://www.otlcampaign.org/>.



Dr. Diane Ravitch blogs on Tuesdays for *Education Week* on the "Bridging Differences" blog, <http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/Bridging-Differences/>. She has her own website, <http://www.dianeravitch.com/>. She is the author of the best-selling, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).