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Words Count: Let's Change How We Talk About Public Schools

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Following are examples of how many currently talk about public schools in the United States:

- Our schools are failing
- Our colleges of education do a terrible job of preparing new teachers
- Teacher unions only care about the adults in the system
- The US is losing its leadership place in the world because our students perform poorly on international tests
- The teaching force in the US comes from the bottom half of their class

I could go on, but you get the idea. As someone who has spent her career in public education and who now works with the leadership of the 16 major organizations representing K-12 education practitioners, parents, and elected officials, I know first-hand that the statements listed above are not true or fair, nor do the commonly held beliefs they reflect contribute anything to the work we all acknowledge needs to be done to ensure all public schools serve their students well.

What I do know is true is that everyone involved in public education agrees that we need to make changes in the way we fund, organize and deliver education to an increasingly diverse student population. What we also agree on is that teacher preparation needs to be rigorous, include field experience and assume a workplace that will continue to support ongoing professional learning, so that teachers become more adept in their work as they become more experienced. What is also true is that the organizations in the Learning First Alliance (LFA) are all in the midst of efforts to gather and share the latest experiential and academic research that informs school improvement and is based on real evidence of effectiveness. I would call these efforts "reform" except that term has also been hijacked in service to the assumptions listed above.

For LFA organizations and the members they represent to be successful in their thoughtful, evidence-based, solution-driven initiatives in support of public education improvement, we need to change the way we talk about our public schools and the professionals who work in them. Following are a few suggestions around the statements at the beginning of this post:

- **Instead of** "Our schools are failing," **let's try**, "Public schools need to get better at meeting the needs of all our students, regardless of socioeconomic class or ethnicity. And, we all need to work on this together to be successful."
- **Instead of** "Our colleges of education do a terrible job of preparing new teachers," **let's try**, "Teacher preparation needs to be remodeled to provide more field experience, mentoring and rigorous course work. This work is already underway in many colleges of education across the nation."
- **Instead of** "Teacher unions only care about the adults in the system," **let's try**, "Teacher unions provide a collective voice for classroom practitioners at the local, state and national level and have for some time focused on supporting improved classroom practice. High performing school districts have

strong, collaborative relationships with their teacher union."

- **Instead of** "The US is losing its leadership place in the world because our students perform poorly on international tests," **let's try**, "International tests provide valuable data for us as we work on improving our public system, and we should closely examine approaches high performing countries use in their education systems to learn from them. However, standardized test scores are only one data point and should be viewed in the context of cultural differences and student populations."
- **Instead of** "The teaching force in the US comes from the bottom half of their class" (for the record: this statement is not true, but I won't address that now), **let's try** "Effective teachers need a variety of skill sets and should be intellectually curious and knowledgeable in their field. Teacher preparation institutions should ensure that only the most qualified candidates enter their programs."

If we want our public schools to get better and be as good as we need them to be, we need to change our conversation from accusatory to solution-driven. The current vocabulary, in addition to being inaccurate, impedes real "reform" that is systemic, collaborative and effective.

This year the Learning First Alliance is launching a messaging campaign to frame the conversation about our public schools in a way that reaffirms the importance of the publicly-funded universal education opportunity and highlights work underway and strategies for working together to implement change. Our work is based on the core value statement: **Strengthening our public schools is the best way to ensure our children's future success and our country's prosperity.**

Our key messages are:

- **All children have the right to a public education that prepares them for college, careers and citizenship.**
- **Quality public schools build the knowledge and skills young people need to succeed in a global knowledge-based world.**
- **Communities are stronger and schools are better when we all work together to support public education.**

Our local public schools and the professionals who work in them are our greatest historic asset. Join us in moving the conversation beyond pointing fingers to find fault to working together to ensure that all our children have the future they deserve.

Views expressed in this post are strictly those of the author and do not reflect the endorsement of the Learning First Alliance or any of its members.

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