

INTRODUCTION

I WISH IT WASN'T SO . . . NOW MAKE US PROUD

Carl Glickman



Dear Reader,

I wish it wasn't so! I wish we did not need another edition of *Letters to the Next President*. The first edition came out in early spring of 2004, just as the presidential primaries were being contested. I wrote then: "These letters from students; great elementary, middle, and secondary school teachers; principals who lead some of the most outstanding schools in the country; parents who organize for their local public schools; education scholars, reformers, and activists on the leading edge of what is possible for all students; and current and former elected officials point us in a better and healthier direction for improving education, our schools, and our democracy."

So why, nearly four years later, is there a need for a second edition of this book? As you are well aware, there is a morass in our land about the future of our country and the future of American democracy. Most of us think that participatory democracy in America today is a sham, that it is not based on the reality of what actually happens, and that it doesn't deal with decisions that affect us in our everyday

lives. Most of us find politics to be distasteful and government officials to be untrustworthy. Most of us show our disdain for government through our refusal to participate at even the most minimal level of citizenship. The majority of us do not vote, do not attend a single public meeting a year, and do not exercise our First Amendment rights and responsibilities. When compared with other industrialized nations, the United States ranks at or near the bottom on indicators of care and support for our citizens—including health benefits, public spaces, maternity leave, family vacation time, minimum wage, guaranteed retirement plans, child care, and equity of resources for education. Indeed, two thirds of Americans believe that “things have pretty seriously gotten on the wrong track” in this country.

Many of us seem to have given up on the American promise of decency and respect for all. And our youth follow in their parents’ and grandparents’ paths, continuing the decline in civic participation begun after World War II.

You, our next president, can do something about this. Deep down, we want to be proud to be Americans and, believe me, we are looking for every possible reason to be proud. We want to talk with pride about how our ancestors rose to the challenges of making a life in America, about how generous Americans are in donating to disaster relief, about how youth volunteerism is on the rise, and about how courageous our young soldiers fighting overseas are. But it is getting harder and harder for us, as a people, to reach across our different religious, political, ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, lifestyle, gender, and occupational lines to discuss how we can work together to improve our larger communities. We want to believe in our country, but we need to find ways to make the ideals of democracy, participation, and education the core of our future.

Yet, perhaps if we rejuvenate the core mission of our schools—to educate free-thinking individuals—our schools could help to create an educated citizenry willing to share the burden of a working democracy. Thomas Jefferson, who first proposed that public schools are essential to a democracy, wrote, “Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves, therefore, are its only safe depositories. And to render them safe their

minds must be improved.” Maybe, just maybe, if we could realize the true promise of public education, we could close the achievement gap and foster an America whose citizens are proud to use their minds to participate in civic life.

How did we fall into the current educational quagmire? The federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), now known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), was quickly planned and passed shortly after September 11, 2001, at the height of America’s concern with terrorism. Educators, civic leaders, students, parents, and researchers knew that—despite the laudable goals of the bill to reduce the glaring achievement gaps amongst various ethnic, racial, special needs, and socioeconomic groups of students—the enactment of the bill would aggravate inequities. They knew it would leave teachers and students with a mess of rules and procedures and would create an education agenda different from what parents, students, and citizens expect from a quality education.

In the first edition of this book, our letter writers predicted that, unless the bill was drastically changed, we would see a further narrowing of curricula, students would be subjected to more and more test-taking preparation for poorly conceived examinations, and that states and school districts would lower their passing levels and manipulate test score data and drop-out rates in an effort to scam the system. They foresaw that student engagement and interactive learning would be pushed aside and replaced by more didactic, “drill-and-kill” teaching. The letter writers also predicted that the mandated formulas the federal government would use for doling out rewards and sanctions to schools would be unworkable.

And it has come to pass. Teachers have been left with a mess. They struggle with whether they should sacrifice science labs, music and art, history and social studies, field trips, and high-interest curriculum to the altar of test preparation. Seventy percent of districts report that this narrowing of learning has, indeed, occurred. Parents know this well, and in survey after survey they complain that their children are over-tested, that curricula are passive and uninspiring, and that there is a lack of balance between the teaching of basic skills and the fulfillment of the democratic and civic purpose of education.

And we should not be surprised that teachers, school officials, and parents—not to mention students—are upset. Elizabeth Debray-Pelot, in the only new letter in this book, explains how legislators and congressional and presidential staff consciously excluded education researchers; assessment specialists; and student, parent, school board, teacher, and school leaders from the planning of NCLB. As a result, NCLB has been criticized, legally challenged, and outright rejected by some states (e.g., Connecticut, Utah, and Nebraska). These states refuse to buckle under to what they see as diminished educational opportunities for their students, the use of bad science to reward or sanction schools, inadequate funding, and an unconstitutional intervention by the federal government into varied and already-proven state accountability systems. Instead of an open, considerate dialogue characteristic of a democracy, criticism of the federal plan—just like criticism about the ongoing war—has been deflected by federal officials. Those who are critical of NCLB have been attacked for being “whiners,” “excusers,” and even “bigots”—thus ignoring and denying any possible merit to their dissent.

Also correctly predicted in the first edition of this book was that the federal government later would claim success for the enactment of the bill. Unfortunately, the government's evidence of “proven” achievement has been selective at best and—according to a number of independent research studies—simply untrue.

Any government—regardless of party affiliation—that believes its side is right, no matter what, becomes far less a democracy and more a gang of believers who need only to report their version of truth to the exclusion of all else. Absence of open discussion in favor of control of the “truth” is more akin to the authoritarian world of George Orwell's *1984*. In order to flourish, a democracy must always be open to inquiry, study, and human reasoning.

It is time—way past time—to enter a new phase and look at what actually has been accomplished and devise ways to improve education from this point on. The matter at hand, no less than the future of our youth and the future of our American democracy, is too important to ignore. With a new president and administration com-

ing into office in 2008, it is past time to open the discussion about how best to educate students and hold schools accountable. It is time for more citizens to connect to their schools and assist in fulfilling the promise of better education for all.

Let me finish as I did in the introduction to the first edition. These letters are meant to open more thoughts, discussions, and plans about what should be an American education for all the citizens of our democracy. These letters are about the core of America: What do we want future students to be able to know and do, who should control such decisions, and how might we help schools respond to the wishes of parents, students, and communities?

Readers who wish to be part of the strengthening of our public schools can find specific suggestions on how to become involved in the letters and in the new resource section, which includes descriptions of several policy and activist organizations for educators, parents, and citizens and a joint signing statement for changing and improving current legislation.

Ms. or Mr. President, all of us—the writers and readers of this book—would like to open a dialogue with you to discuss what we can do together. Please, during your time on the campaign trail and your time in office, listen to your public speak to the issues ahead. There are many lessons to be learned about ourselves as a nation and as a democracy.

*From one citizen
to another in respect and
in optimism,*

Carl Slichterman