

A Charge to Our Leaders and to the American People: Redouble Investment in Public Schools

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This past May, after eighteen months of research, study, analysis, and deliberation, the National Commission on Civic Investment in Public Education, convened by Public Education Network (PEN), presented its report – along with recommendations regarding increased civic investment in the nation's schools – to President Obama, Education Secretary Arne Duncan, the U.S. Congress, and the American people.

It was a privilege to serve on the Commission along with its co-chairs, Stanford University School of Education Professor Linda Darling-Hammond and former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley, and its fifteen distinguished members. PEN charged the Commission with making the renewed case for civic investment, highlighting organizations that build and channel that investment, and developing standards for those organizations.

When asked to serve, it was more than an honor; it was my duty. Discussions with my fellow Commission members only underscored my own belief that the need for a redoubled civic investment in public education is urgent.

Today, students arrive at school with more unmet needs than their predecessors; schools and districts face intense financial pressures not experienced in the past sixty years; and despite these remarkable challenges, public schools are expected to meet higher standards and better prepare their students than those of the previous generation. The case for civic investment in public education is abundantly clear: U.S. public schools – particularly those in urban areas – face far greater challenges than ever before with far fewer resources.

As the Commission's report noted, "The challenge of meeting the goal of improving student outcomes and closing gaps in opportunity and achievement is particularly acute." At its core, the Commission's

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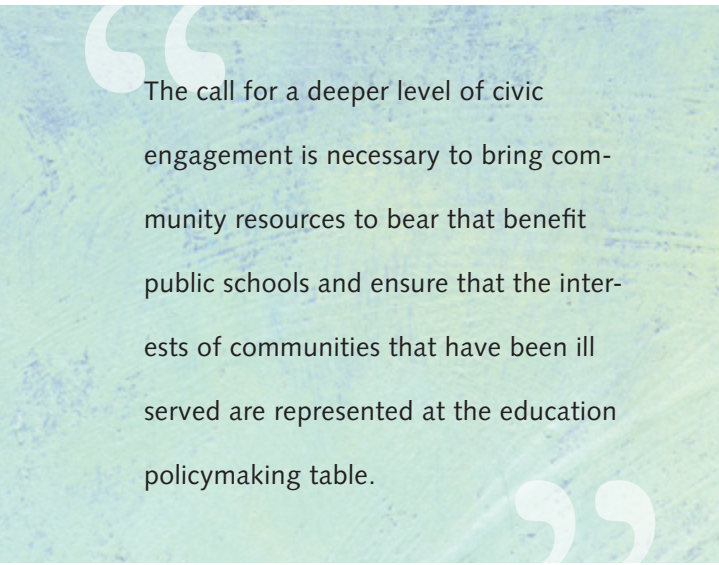
report asked the nation to increase its civic investment in public schools so that every American student receives an excellent education.

As states and cities face draconian budget reductions, or pursue innovative approaches to improve the quality of public schools, the number of local community organizations focused on public education assistance has rapidly increased. Over the past thirty years, locally driven organizations have been formed in more than 2,000 communities to engage citizens in support of public education. These nonprofit groups are striving to restore and build the capacity of the nation's public education system; however, in far too many school districts, the traditional policies that created and perpetuate the inequities in American education remain in force.

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To quote the Commission's report, "This deeper level of engagement focuses on three areas: creating a demand for excellence for all schools, holding public officials accountable for achieving equity and excellence, and ensuring that educational resources and assets are allocated equitably."

The Annenberg Institute shares with the Commission its commitment to support avenues that ensure equal opportunities and outcomes for every student, regardless of his or her circumstances. Hence, through this redesigned issue of *VUE* (our first redesign since *VUE*'s inception in 2002), we are "hosting" many of the National Commission members' views on civic investment in public education and sharing this critically important discussion with our readers and website visitors.



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Wendy Puriefoy, president of PEN, opens the issue with the charge of the Commission and its findings: the growing number of public education funds demonstrates the power of communities coming together to support their schools, but the need is urgent to redouble civic investment in public education.

Commission co-chairs Richard Riley and Linda Darling-Hammond argue that by adopting and implementing high standards of accountability such as those developed by the Commission, public education funds can help galvanize public will to achieve equity and excellence in the nation's

schools. Commission member and Massachusetts secretary of education Paul Reville offers his perspective on how public education funds can lead the way toward a twenty-first-century education system.

Susan Berresford, Commission member and former president of the Ford Foundation, describes how “patient philanthropy” in support of public education funds has provided the means for community members to invest in their schools and led to dramatic reforms and a renewed civic commitment to democratic values. Jim Collogan shares his perspective as executive director of the National School Foundation Association, which has around 1,000 PEFs as members, on the benefits of clear standards of accountability and transparency for PEFs.

Erwin de Leon, lead author of an Urban Institute report for the Commission, recognizes that current economic and social realities make it hard for public education to thrive and succeed, but emphasizes that public education support organizations are helping more and more communities reinvest in our shared future. Commission member Barbara Bartle, president of the Lincoln [Nebraska] Community Foundation, and Margaret Hiller, executive director of the Bridgeport [Connecticut] Public Education Fund, offer on-the-ground perspectives from public education funds.

We close with Commission member Rob Reich’s article on equity issues and the over-reliance on private philanthropy. He cautions us that philanthropic support of public education in itself is insufficient; public policy must change to ensure that charitable gifts remedy existing inequities rather than reinforcing them. My sidebar adds the Annenberg Institute’s perspective of a “smart education system” in which all education stakeholders – including districts, communities, policymakers, the philanthropic community, civic leaders, educators, researchers, and young people – collaborate to provide a network of supports and opportunities that ensures an excellent education for all young people.

A growing number of education stakeholders share the vision outlined in these pages of a renewed civic movement to invest effort and resources in public education. We hope that the stories and perspectives emerging from the work of the Commission will inspire readers to build on this urgently important work that is so crucial to the future of our nation.

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This article is from *Voices in Urban Education* 32 (Winter 2012), “Civic Investment in Public Education,” produced collaboratively by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform and Public Education Network (PEN) and based on the work of PEN’s National Commission on Civic Investment in Public Education and on its 2011 report *An Appeal to All Americans*. VUE 32 is available online at <http://annenberginstitute.org/VUE> and www.publiceducation.org/national_commission. *An Appeal to All Americans* is available online at www.publiceducation.org/pubs_20110526_report.asp.