

# DO WHAT WORKS (AND STOP DOING WHAT DOESN'T)

BY KELLY ALLIN BUTLER

**T**HE ISSUE OF QUALIFIED TEACHERS FOR POOR AND minority children advances a welcome revolution. Parents for Public Schools is committed to this revolution.

Clearly, we must get to the issues of environment and the home, working conditions and teacher shortages and fair compensation. But the rubber is already on the road everyday in classrooms all across the country, where too many children of poverty and of color are victims of the grossest forms of educational malpractice. The medical community would not tolerate these casualties in their realm; neither should educators.

Until communities reclaim responsibility for their public schools and school boards provide bolder leadership, the revolution, in part, belongs to classroom teachers, not the ones who are complaining about *working* conditions, but the many enlightened, committed ones who are focused on *learning* conditions. The ones the research classifies as "high performance" teachers, meaning the kids in their care consistently perform well because they get the kind of instruction they need. They must break rank and help lead this movement from within.

On another front, external pressures and support to change old and entrenched patterns must be supplied as in the case of Parents to Public Schools chapters. In Jackson, Mississippi, the founding chapter of PPS is spearheading a multi-organization project which focuses on improving the capacity of principals to serve as instructional leaders. Initiated by public school parents with funding from The Ford Foundation, the Ask4More Collaborative targets the most impoverished and lowest performing feeder system in this urban district. This community partnership—including the Millsaps College Principals' Institute, the Algebra Project, Jackson State University's Institute for Education Renewal, and the Public Education forum—is shaping measurable and systemic change in practice that is data driven. Aligning the curriculum fosters logical, but unprecedented communications across grade levels and exposes and corrects weak links in the instructional chain.

On other fronts, civic-minded philanthropists, like Mississippi's own Jim and Sally Barksdale, are also looking

for results. Their \$100 million investment in intensive training and retraining of teachers through the Barksdale Reading Institute begins with the forty lowest performing public schools in year one and will build a system of professional competency and accountability across this impoverished state. Mississippi is a place to watch.

For others who feel removed from the problem or simply wring their hands in frustration, you can run, but you cannot hide. This problem is not going away and it will not be solved by vouchers. It will take serious new resources, but mostly it will take guts and honesty, so ...

- *Wake up and smell the smoke.* A community's responsibility for meeting the educational needs of the poor is no different from its more accepted responsibilities of providing medical care, safe water, fire protection.
  - *Adopt an attitude of urgency.* This is a crisis that needs emergency, intermediate and long-term solutions. Emergency measures are not quick fixes, neither should real change take a decade. Teacher quality, beginning with the lowest performing schools, should be every school board's priority.
  - *Make children's learning the number one goal.* Every single strategy should be couched in equity and focused on the educational needs of children, not the convenience of adults in the system or the privileged who have a voice. Do what works, stop doing what doesn't. Be clear about both, or go do something else.
  - *Think outside the box.* Those who have given up on institutional reform of our public schools have begun to take the box apart. Public education advocates must bring honesty and innovation to training, certifying, assigning, evaluating, compensating and retaining teachers.
- Of course, we need more and better parent involvement, but schools cannot wait around for the "right" kids with the "right" support to show up. We must teach, and teach well, those who come to us. It may not be easy and it may not be cheap, but it is no longer a matter of know-how. It is a matter of public and professional will. The will to put children first and to get on with the business of teaching and learning, in spite of the challenges.

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