

Public Education: A Call to Action for People of Faith

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A Resource of the North Carolina Council of Churches

Foreword

This document was created as a Capstone project for the MDiv/MSW dual degree program, a partnership between Duke Divinity School and the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill School of Social Work, with assistance and guidance from George Reed at the North Carolina Council of Churches and Chris Hill and Matthew Ellinwood of the Education and Law Project of the North Carolina Justice Center. They provided support in research, editing, and presentation to create a document that offers concrete evidence of the needs of public schools in North Carolina and theological reflection on appropriate responses to these needs by North Carolina's communities of faith.

Creating this resource was a challenging and moving experience, allowing me to see the essential role faith communities have played in establishing the American educational system in both its public and private capacities. Although these two systems find themselves in tension with one another at times, the goal of this document is not to minimize the valuable role private and home school education can provide for many students, but rather to affirm the importance of public schools called to educate all comers.

Much of my education has been in private schools, and it was through these institutions that I gained the skills to research and articulate the case I make here for the strong support of public schools by people of faith. I recognize that a system that offers these opportunities only to the minority of students who can afford them is insufficient for a just and educated society. I hope that faith communities will recognize our call to serve all of God's children through public education.

Elizabeth Queen

I. A Brief Context of Public Education in North Carolina

Benefits of Public Education

In the United States, the value of education is a given for most people. Research and overwhelming public opinion both attest to the importance of the classroom as a laboratory for learning and skill development. Education is a doorway to resources that improve both the lives of students and their communities by providing them with social and cognitive skills that equip them for successful participation in society.

Unfortunately, there is no such consensus on the best method for providing education to children in the United States. American students now have a number of educational options, including public, private, charter, religious, or home schools. At first glance, this may seem like a positive and even necessary accommodation to the diverse needs and abilities of students. Many believe that these specialized schools, particularly private schools, provide a better education and increase students' subsequent educational and employment opportunities. However, social scientists note that the apparent discrepancy between the performance of private and public school students actually occurs because these alternative schooling options tend to serve students who are already academically and economically more advantaged than students in the general public school population.¹ In other words, children whose families have the resources to send them to a private school are already positioned to have greater access to opportunity than students whose families cannot afford the costs associated with non-public schools. Assessments that account for these difference demonstrate that, in fact, "public school achievement is roughly equal to or higher than that of other school types."² In reality, public school alternatives serve to increase the achievement gap between affluent students and their peers by providing greater resources to those already in positions of advantages and decreasing investment in public schools that serve students who would benefit most from greater funding, resources, and more highly qualified and well-compensated educators. While it's clear that this hurts students in traditionally disadvantaged groups, some may be surprised to learn that it is also harmful to students who leave traditional public education to attend private, charter, or home schools.

Public schools serve as the hub of many communities, offering the only opportunity for neighbors to come together across racial, socioeconomic, religious, political, and ideological lines in support of their children. Studies show that this kind of diversity has a positive impact on every child involved, both those considered privileged and those considered at-risk.³ For all students in these settings, "enrollment in racially [and socioeconomically] integrated schools is...associated with important social and psychological advantages that improve productivity in an increasingly diverse workplace" as well as more equitable student achievement across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups.⁴ North Carolina has a painful history of segregating schools; after all, *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg County Schools*, the Supreme Court case that upheld the use of busing to integrate schools, was brought on behalf of an African-American student in a North Carolina public school.⁵ With this and similar decisions, the courts ordered our state's "school boards to come forward with a plan that promises realistically to work...now...until it is clear that state-imposed segregation has been completely removed."⁶ Having worked diligently and established a vibrant public school

system in the years since then, it seems that North Carolina feels it has achieved that goal and has become complacent. The state is now experiencing a backslide into re-segregation through the privatization of public schools, which will be discussed further in the *Threats to Public Education in North Carolina* section.

Factors that Support Student Achievement in Education

Research suggests that smaller schools and small class sizes contribute to student achievement, presumably because students can receive more individualized attention in these settings.⁷ A nurturing school climate that supports parental involvement also improves student's academic achievement. Additionally, programs that promote teachers' professional development in both their subject area and in the theory and practice of education contribute to student success.⁸ However, student achievement drops when teachers are limited by traditional, teach-to-the-test curricula. Students and teachers perform better when they are allowed to use "reform-oriented practices" that involve critical thinking and application of lessons to real-life scenarios.⁹

The keys to success for our children in public schools are simple: qualified teachers educating small classes of students with the support of parental and family involvement. State policies should reflect these priorities that are empirically linked to increased student achievement.

Threats to Public Education in North Carolina

Despite this simplicity, North Carolina's education policies often do not support these basic needs of students and educators. Chris Hill, Director of the North Carolina Justice Center's Education and Law Project, noted that there are several threats to public education in North Carolina that widen the achievement gap between student groups and undermine the adequate and equitable education of all the state's students.

One major concern is the re-segregation of schools and the privatization of public education through private school vouchers, tax credits, and the explosive growth of charter schools.¹⁰ Vouchers, or government subsidies to help families offset the cost of private school tuition, will pull nearly \$12 million from the public school budget in the 2014-2015 fiscal year.¹¹ Despite their stated purpose of allowing low-income students to attend high-performing private schools they could not otherwise afford, these vouchers actually segregate schools by income. The modest vouchers are not sufficient to cover the entire cost of tuition for a low-income student; they can only supplement the cost of tuition for middle-income families who are already paying the cost of sending their children to private schools.¹² This segregation of schools by socioeconomic status leads to an increased test score gap across income levels.¹³ While private schools have the freedom to discriminate based on income, public schools are required to educate everyone in their district.¹⁴ This leads to a diverse student body, which benefits all students and decreases achievement gaps by race and socioeconomic status.¹⁵

Promotion of online education as a replacement rather than a supplement for classroom education is another growing threat to North Carolina's public schools. Such measures, which are gaining popularity as a low-cost alternative to traditional classroom education, exclude students in low-income areas who do not have access to personal computers and the Internet. This change in format also removes the important

socialization aspect of education, which is vital for building soft skills that help students succeed socially and professionally as adults.¹⁶

Another threat to public education in North Carolina is the state's heavy reliance on standardized testing. High stakes testing to determine student achievement and the allocation of funding puts undue pressure on both students and teachers, fostering competition rather than cooperative learning and resources sharing. Under the Excellence in Public Schools Act, which went into effect for the 2013-2014 academic year, third grade students who score below a level 3 in reading proficiency will be forced to repeat the grade unless they meet certain exceptions.¹⁷ With these strict new state standards taking effect at the same time as the implementation of the national Common Core standards,¹⁸ our state is at risk of holding back over half of our third graders. This is because states that have already adopted the Common Core and administered its assessments have experience declines in proficiency rates of up to 30%.¹⁹ Without a grace period to adapt to the new standards and assessments, North Carolina's students are in danger of falling behind and potentially losing vital funding due to their decreased academic performance. Such pressure is damaging to both students and their teachers, who are in danger of losing their career status as legislators begin implementing changes to teachers' contract system in a manner that reduces job security for our already under-paid educators.²⁰

Lastly, lack of revenue to fund public schools is another major threat to education in our state. In fact, over the past several years North Carolina's investment in education has dwindle to shocking lows, allocating fewer and fewer state dollars to adequate classrooms and facilities, school supplies, teacher support, and other vital resources for student achievement.²¹ As of 2013, spending on education had fallen below our state's 40 year average of budget funding allocated to education, continuing the trend of decreasing resources even as schools struggle to provide fair, adequate education to North Carolina's kids.²² This lack of funding impacts educational programs at all levels, from pre-kindergarten where many at-risk 4-year-old students are not getting the head start they need to community colleges and the University of North Carolina System where young adults are struggling to finish strong in their vocational and educational training without adequate resources.²³ Additionally, the insufficient amount that is devoted to public education is not currently secure. During the 2013 legislative session the North Carolina General Assembly did away with the formula instituted when the Education Lottery was created in 2005 to guide the allocated on lottery revenues. Without the regulation of the formula, legislators can now divert this money from specific education initiatives (for example, reducing elementary school class sizes and providing scholarships to state institutions of higher learning) to fill other holes in the budget.²⁴ This year they have already decreased pre-kindergarten slots, allocating only 15.6% of lottery proceeds to early childhood education rather than the 50% directed by the original formula.²⁵ North Carolina's children can't afford to lose any more resources for public education.

II. Scripture and Public Education

The Value of Wisdom and Learning

Although it would be anachronistic to attempt to read something like the modern American public education system into the ancient texts of Scripture, there are themes throughout the Bible that support the values undergirding a public education system. These include the significance of wisdom and learning for both personal enrichment and community benefit²⁶ and the importance of mentorship and teaching for both relationship building and the passage of knowledge from one generation to another.²⁷ For example, Jesus serves as an educator to the masses, teaching all ages from children to adults. In his teaching, Christ does not merely worry about communicating information for memorization and cognitive understanding, but rather engages his pupils holistically, encouraging them to apply the lessons they learn to their lives in transformative ways. This teaching philosophy takes into account the barriers to education faced by many students and seeks to make it more accessible to them by addressing their needs comprehensively. In fact, Chris Hill, Director of the Education and Law Project at the North Carolina Justice Center, pointed this out when he reflected upon the story of Christ multiplying loaves and fishes to feed the crowds who had spent a long day learning from him when other sources of food were not readily available to them.²⁸ “That was the first free and reduced lunch program!” he commented in a conversation on the subject of public education and Scripture.²⁹ Though his remark was somewhat facetious, the recognition of the interconnectedness of all arenas in life is indispensable to a Christian understanding of humanity generally and humans’ ability to engage in meaningful education more specifically. In Scripture as well as in the United States public education system, we must recognize that education involves the mental, physical, and emotional formation of individuals across the lifespan, so our state and federal budgets must invest adequately in programs and policies that serve all these facets of students’ lives.

(In the passages which follow, brackets denote where gendered references to God or human beings have been altered to reflect gender-inclusive language. All emphases are those of the compiler, and all verses are taken from the English Standard Version translation of the Bible unless otherwise noted.)

- “The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding [the LORD] established the heavens; by [the LORD’s] knowledge the deeps broke open, and the clouds drop down the dew.” Proverbs 3:19-20
- “My [child], be attentive to my wisdom; incline your ear to my understanding, that you may keep discretion and your lips may guard knowledge... And now, O [children], listen to me, and do not depart from the words of my mouth... lest... at the end of your life you groan, when your flesh and body are consumed and you say, ‘How I hated discipline, and my heart despised reproof! I did not listen to the voice of my teachers or incline my ear to my instructors. I am at the brink of utter ruin in the assembled congregation.’” Proverbs 5:1-2, 7, 11-14

- *Discussion:* Lack of education carries long-term consequences that impact one’s ability to engage fully in society (to interpret the “assembled congregation” broadly)
- “In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god. Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, *youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king’s palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans.* The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. *They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king.* Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego... *As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.* At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king. *And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom.”* Daniel 1:1-7, 17-20
 - *Discussion:* Daniel and the three youths, members of the Hebrew racial minority in Babylon, receive praise from the king for their aptitude for learning. When he provides them access to a strong education, they excel even in comparison to their more privileged peers, the other members of the king’s court who are part of the racial, economic, and religious majority. Because of this, the young men are elevated to positions of power and influence in Babylonian society (which largely excludes and oppresses the Hebrew people) where they are able to promote positive social change for both the native Babylonians and the exiled Hebrew people (Daniel 2:46-49). Readers may notice some parallels between this story and the value of education for closing the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic achievement gap between students in the United States.
- “To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth— Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.” Proverbs 1:2-7

- “And all Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered, and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice.” 1 Kings 3:28
- “Happy are these your servants, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom!... Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. And all the kings of the earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind.” 2 Chronicles 9:7, 22-23
 - *Discussion:* Notice that the authors of Scripture attribute Solomon’s desire and ability to govern with justice to his wisdom. In a democracy, such as the modern United States, where elected officials govern as representatives drawn from the general population, education is vital. The wisdom obtained through a solid education is a prerequisite for creating a just government, which in turn makes education and other basic rights more equitably available to all people.
- “Wisdom is with the aged, and understanding in length of days. With God are wisdom and might; [God] has counsel and understanding.” Job 12:12-13
- “But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?...It cannot be bought for gold, and silver cannot be weighed as its price. It cannot be valued in the gold of Ophir, in precious onyx and sapphire. Gold and glass cannot equal it, nor can it be exchanged for jewels of fine gold. No mention shall be made of coral or of crystal; the price of wisdom is above pearls. The topaz of Ethiopia cannot equal it, nor can it be valued in pure gold.” Job 28:12, 15-19

God Assumes the Role of Teacher

In addition to praising the inherent value of wisdom and learning throughout Scripture, the Quran, Hebrew Bible, and Christian Bible all demonstrate that God also assumes the role of teacher. In all three Persons of the Trinity, God is a teacher for humanity throughout the course of human history, encouraging lifelong learning to grow in wisdom and in relationship with God and one another. God the Creator began nurturing wisdom in humankind from infancy in creation. Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, taught disciples from children to adults during his ministry on the earth and continues to teach through the written word of Scripture. The Holy Spirit has ministered as a teacher to the Church from its birth at Pentecost and will continue to do so until the end, when God brings all things, including wisdom, into perfect completion.

God the Creator as Teacher

- “Behold, God is exalted in [God’s] power; who is a teacher like [God]?” Job 36:22
- “Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day long.” Psalm 25:4-5
- “For they are well instructed; their God teaches them... This also comes from the LORD of hosts; [the Lord] is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in wisdom.” Isaiah 28:26, 29 (NRSV)

Jesus as Teacher

- “And he went throughout all Galilee, *teaching in their synagogues* and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.” Matthew 4:23
- “*And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues* and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction.” Matthew 9:35
- “When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities.” Matthew 11:1
- “At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? *Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me.*” Matthew 26:55
- “He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them.” Mark 2:13
- “And he left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan, and crowds gathered to him again. *And again, as was his custom, he taught them...* And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.’ And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.” Mark 10:1, 13-16
- “Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to him, saying, ‘Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.’” Luke 18:15-17
 - Jesus publicly rebukes those who seek to alienate children, even as young as infants and toddlers, from him and to prevent them from entering into a learning relationship with him as a teacher to the public.
- “About the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and began teaching. The Jews therefore marveled, saying ‘How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?’” John 7:14-15
- “Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom. And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, but supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him. *After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.*” Luke 2:41-47

Holy Spirit as Teacher

- “These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, [the Helper] will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” John 14:25-26

Social Justice

Scripture is not only filled with praise for wisdom and learning from the prophets to the disciples, but it is also overflowing with admonitions for God’s people to act with justice and equity because the God we serve is just. In addition to promoting wisdom, which is inherently valuable, education also serves as a powerful engine for overcoming poverty and promoting a healthy democracy that serves its citizens well. An educational system that leaves out the most vulnerable members of our community is simply unacceptable. Scripture is clear on this. God shows no partiality amongst God’s children based on income, race, geography, or any other characteristic, and people of faith must advocate for a just public education system that shows no partiality as well.

- “You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the Lord your God is giving you.” Deuteronomy 16:18-20
- “The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom, and [the righteous person’s] tongue speaks justice.” Psalm 37:30
- “The King in his might loves justice. You have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. Exalt the Lord our God; worship at his footstool!” Psalm 99:4-5
- “The LORD works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed.” Psalm 103:6
- “To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth—Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.” Proverbs 1:2-7
- “My [child], if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. *For the LORD gives wisdom; from [the Lord’s] mouth come knowledge and understanding; [the Lord] stores up sound wisdom for the upright; [the Lord] is a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice and watching over the way of [the] saints. Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path; for wisdom will come into your heart, and*

knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; discretion with watch over you, understanding will guard you..." Proverbs 2:1-11

- *Discussion:* Notice that justice and wisdom are inextricably bound to one another in these passages from Proverbs 1 and 2. One must obtain wisdom from teachers to learn to execute justice and promote equity, and the systems in place must be just if they are to allow equitable access to learning and wisdom for all. In this cycle, knowledge serves as a protective factor to guard against poverty and injustice.

III. Contemporary Religious Leaders' and Denominational Statements on Public Education

African Methodist Episcopal Church

“The African Methodist Episcopal Church has, from its earliest days, recognized and promoted the value of education. . . . The African Methodist Episcopal Church still advocates for quality education in a time when many schools are still separate and unequal in terms of funding, facilities, equipment and staffing and when many African-American students are denied a quality education. We support the efforts of the Obama Administration to see that educational reform comes to every corner of America, so that every child can be equipped to race to the top and achieve in life. We support the Congressional Black Caucus' emphasis on reviving the Educational Pipeline to Ensure Critical Training for Long Term Global Competitiveness. Therefore we urge those in Congress to support positive, well funded and well equipped schools where competent and committed teachers called to be educators can shape the minds of tomorrow's leaders.

“We support the concepts of charter schools, school choice and innovation that do not embrace a hidden agenda of "separatism" and "elitism" or marginalizing students, but strive to give choices to help parents address the learning needs of their children as well as give special attention to the learning styles that differ from traditional methods.”

African Methodist Episcopal Church Social Action Commission, Education,
<http://www.ame-sac.com/education.html>

American Baptists

“We are in a time when criticism of our public schools is common, and when conversation and debate about public education is increasingly politicized. Yet the public schools are the primary route for most children - especially the children of poverty - into full participation in our economic, political and community life. As a consequence, all of us, especially Christians, have a moral responsibility to support, strengthen and reform the public schools. They have been and continue to be both an avenue of opportunity and a major cohesive force in our society, a society daily becoming more diverse racially, culturally and religiously.”

American Baptist Resolution on Church and Public Education (8209:3/00),
March 2000, <http://www.abc-usa.org/wpcontent/uploads/2012/06/Church-and-Public-Education.pdf>

American Jewish Committee (AJC)

“AJC believes there must be a rededication to public education on the national, state, community, and family levels so that the public schools can fulfill their promise as democratic institutions and launching pads of opportunity for all children. As a community of relatively recent immigrants, American Jews have been witness to the striking difference that public education has made in a short period of time, often in just one generation, in the professional, economic, and civic lives of their families. The high value that Jews continue to place on education is evident statistically in the

disproportionate numbers of American Jews who attain degrees from institutions of higher learning. The American Jewish Committee has historically regarded public education not only as a means of individual intellectual development and economic betterment, but also as one of the principal ways by which children learn the core values necessary to sustain a healthy and thriving American democracy.... Our public schools must fulfill the educational needs of all children, including the most disadvantaged among us, so that they may participate fully in the promise of American life.”

American Jewish Committee Policy Statement on Public Education, 2000,

<http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=7oJILSPwFfJSG&b=8510915&ct=12482817>

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

“In light of the essential role of public education in serving the common good of the society and in the face of continuing concern for the effectiveness of some public schools, the lack of equitable access for many students to high-quality schools, and the often inadequate provision of financial resources, the ELCA affirms and advocates for the equitable, sufficient, and effective funding of public schools....

“From the time of the Reformation, the Lutheran church has been a teaching and learning church. Martin Luther, a university professor, pursued the reform of education on all levels as an integral part of his reform of Church and society. With his teaching on vocation, Luther understood the Christian life to be one of service to God and neighbor in one’s everyday places of responsibility; education equipped Christians for this vocation. He taught that education served the common good of Church and society: In a move unusual for his day, he taught that schools for all — both those who were wealthy and those who were poor, both boys and girls — were necessary so that the Church would have learned and faithful pastors and the civil community would have wise and good rulers....

“The ELCA lives its calling in education today in a world that is increasingly interconnected and in a society that is becoming more pluralistic. Contemporary culture brings new marvels yet also conveys messages that hinder learning and clash with the Church’s beliefs. Science and technology continuously reshape our world, bringing new benefits as well as new dangers and creating new moral dilemmas and theological challenges. Many voices point to the crucial significance of early childhood education as well as to the need for and the possibilities of lifelong learning. Millions of men, women, and children in our affluent society live in poverty, and most young people who live in poverty do not have fair access to good schools. The needs of students with differing abilities are not always being met effectively. Recognizing how essential formal education is for living in today’s world, our society has developed an elaborate array of public and private schools from preschool through post-graduate. Yet performance of educational institutions in this society is often criticized, and many reform proposals are advanced.

“Within this complex, changing, and challenging context the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America claims and aspires to renew its calling in education. We are

grateful for and challenged by the legacy we have received, and we are aware that we too often fall short in our calling. We pledge to sustain, renew, and where need be, reform our calling in education for this time and place so that we will be a stronger, livelier, and more faithful teaching and learning church.”

A Social Statement on: Our Calling Education, 10th Biennial Churchwide Assembly, August 10, 2007, <http://www.elca.org/education/>

Friends Committee on National Legislation

“Education that provides sound basic knowledge and skills and fosters critical and creative thinking establishes a foundation for individual development, good health, satisfying employment and responsible participation in democratic society. In an environment of increased globalization and advancing technology, our education system must prepare individuals to be innovative, creative, adaptable, collaborative and analytical. A strong public education system depends on substantial resources, equitably distributed. The federal government has an important role to play in addressing the educational needs of underserved areas and disadvantaged populations. We support lifelong access to high quality, affordable education, including early childhood programs, public universities and community colleges, skilled trade apprenticeships and opportunities for paid community service. We encourage the development and expansion of high-quality educational and vocational programs accessible without burdensome debt. We support programs that promote peace, conflict resolution and global awareness. We oppose military recruitment in schools and military training of minors.”

Friends Committee on National Legislation Policy Statement, The World We Seek, Part 3: We Seek a Community Where Every Person’s Potential May Be Fulfilled, Section 2. Supporting People and Building Viable Communities, November 2013, <http://fcnl.org/assets/policy/policy2013.pdf>

Islamic Society of North America

“We also welcome the president's call for improving education opportunities at both the Pre-K level and for addressing the problems of student loan debt for many in higher education. Attaining knowledge and education is an obligation in Islam. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, 'Knowledge is incumbent upon every Muslim.' (Ibn Majah).”

Excerpt from “ISNA Responds to the State of the Union Address,” January 30, 2014, <http://www.isna.net/isna-responds-to-state-of-the-union-address.html>

National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA

“We affirm that each life is infinitely precious, created in the image of God, and therefore, that every child should be given opportunity for fullness of life, including a quality and affordable education. We further affirm that our society’s provision of public education—publicly funded, universally available, and accountable to the public—while imperfect, is essential for ensuring that all children are served. 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. We know that such a system will never be perfect, and we pledge as faithful citizens to continue to improve the schools in our communities

and to make our system of schools more responsive.”

An Alternative Vision for Public Education, A Pastoral Letter on Federal Policy in Public Education: An Ecumenical Call for Justice, May 18, 2010,
<http://www.nccusa.org/elmc/pastoralletter.pdf>

Presbyterian Church (USA)

“As Presbyterians, we believe that ‘an education of high quality for all children is an obligation of society and indispensable to the political and economic health of our democracy,’ and that ‘we are called to respond in every possible way with measures that seek to evidence love and justice in the education of children and youth.’”

A Call to Church Involvement in the Renewal of Public Education (199th General Assembly, 1987), <http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/publiceducation/>

“That Presbyterians be called upon to confront the stubborn continuance of racial prejudice, particularly the persistence of societal attitudes that discourage academic achievement among economically disadvantaged and children of color students and others at risk.”

On Improved Education for African American and Other Students placed at risk for an Excellent Education (216th General Assembly, 2004)

Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism

“The public schools were the ladder that we [Jewish American people] used to climb from poverty to affluence in American life, and how dare we deny it to others. And I tremble for our nation when I hear the constant drumbeat of attack on our public school system. The public schools take the poor and the handicapped, the abused and the foster children, the Christian and the Muslim, the Roman Catholic and the Jew. They do more of God's work in a day than most institutions do in a lifetime. If our public schools are broken, then let's fix them, but let's not destroy them in the name of a highfalutin principle [private school vouchers] that is often nothing more than naked self-interest dressed up as caring.”

Excerpts from Rabbi Eric Yoffie's President's Message at the 66th URJ Biennial, Dec 8, 2001, <http://rac.org/advocacy/issues/issueed/schools/>

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

“...It seems to me that education has a two-fold function to perform in the life of [humanity] and in society: the one is utility and the other is culture. Education must enable a [person] to become more efficient, to achieve with increasing facility the legitimate goals of [one's] life.

“Education must also train one for quick, resolute and effective thinking. To think incisively and to think for one's self is very difficult. We are prone to let our mental life become invaded by legions of half truths, prejudices, and propaganda.

“At this point, I often wonder whether or not education is fulfilling its purpose. A great majority of the so-called educated people do not think logically and scientifically.

Even the press, the classroom, the platform, and the pulpit in many instances do not give us objective and unbiased truths. To save [humanity] from the morass of propaganda, in my opinion, is one of the chief aims of education. Education must enable one to sift and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, and the facts from the fiction.

“The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. But education which stops with efficiency may prove the greatest menace to society. The most dangerous criminal may be the [person] gifted with reason, but with no morals.”

Excerpts from “The Purpose of Education,” Morehouse College Maroon Tiger student newspaper, January-February 1947, http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_470200_000/

“... For most of the past decade the field of education has been a battleground in the freedom struggle. It was not fortuitous that education became embroiled in this conflict. Education is one of the vital tools the Negro needs in order to advance. And yet it has been denied [to them] by devices of segregation and manipulations with quality. Historically, to keep Negroes in oppression they were deprived an education. In slave days it was illegal to teach a slave to read or write. With the ending of slavery and the emergence of quasi freedom, Negroes were only partially educated—sufficient to make their work efficient but insufficient to raise them to equality.

“It is precisely because education is the road to equality and citizenship that it has been made more elusive for Negroes than many other rights. The walling off of Negroes from equal education is part of the historical design to submerge [them] in second-class status. Therefore as Negroes have struggled to be free they have had to fight for the opportunity for a decent education...”

“...The richest nation on Earth has never allocated enough resources to build sufficient schools, to compensate adequately its teachers, and to surround them with the prestige our work justifies. We squander funds on highways, on the frenetic pursuit of recreation, on the overabundance of overkill armament, but we pauperize education.”

Excerpts from John Dewey Award acceptance speech, United Federation of Teachers, March 14, 1964, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/notes-uft-address#>

Roman Catholic Church

“In imitation of our Master, we Christians are called to confront the poverty of our brothers and sisters, to touch it, to make it our own and to take practical steps to alleviate it....How many people no longer see meaning in life or prospects for the future, how many have lost hope! And how many are plunged into this destitution by unjust social conditions, by unemployment, which takes away their dignity as breadwinners, and by lack of equal access to education and health care.... May the Holy Spirit, through whom we are 'as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything', sustain us in our resolutions and increase our concern and responsibility for human destitution, so that we can become merciful and act with mercy.”

Excerpts from Pope Francis, Lenten Message for 2014,
<http://ncronline.org/blogs/francis-chronicles/full-text-pope-francis-lenten-message>

United Church of Christ

“As we think about whether American society embodies Jesus' teaching that we should love our neighbors as ourselves, we need to be concerned about public schools, the primary institution where we have agreed to nurture and shape God's precious children. Public schools are our largest public institution, serving nearly fifty million children. In the national conversation about public education, our role in the church is special. We are concerned about our schools as an ethical and public policy matter. How do they embody attitudes about race and poverty, power and privilege, and cultural dominance and marginalization, and how do disparities in public investment reflect these attitudes? The United Church of Christ has spoken prophetically to name poverty and racism as among the primary causes of injustice in our nation's schools. General Synod 15 warned: ‘While children from many areas have comfortable schools with all the educational trimmings, poor and ethnic minority children often face overcrowded and deteriorated facilities, and a lack of enrichment programs or modern technology.’ General Synod 18 cautioned: ‘Because the poor and their children are disproportionately people of color, the educational inequities in our public schools reinforce the racial/ethnic injustices of our society.’ General Synod 23 proclaimed public school support - and advocacy for the same - as one of the ‘foremost civil rights issues in the twenty-first century.’ General Synod 25 called all settings of the UCC to do justice and promote the common good by strengthening support for public institutions and providing opportunity for every child in well-funded, high quality public schools’.”

Justice in Public Education, 2013, <http://www.ucc.org/justice/public-education/>

“Today in the United Church of Christ we must act on our heritage of social justice. In the tradition of at least a dozen resolutions that endorse education as a project of the public and that have been passed by the UCC’s General Synods since the merger of several communions into the United Church of Christ in 1957, General Synod 18 upheld the principle of a democratically controlled public system of education: ‘The public schools belong to us, the people, and are controllable by democratic means. If we have the will, we can act to ensure that all schools offer equal education for all children, that the funding, multicultural and academic offerings, and enrichment programs which exist in one school system exist in or are accessible to all schools and all children. We can and must act to protect the public schools against those who slander them out of hidden anti-democratic, racial or class biases. But most particularly, we must protect the children in those schools, for such is not only the kingdom of heaven but also the future of our country and of the yet-to-be-realized democratic dream of equal opportunity for all...’ General Synod 25 explicitly affirmed: ‘the role of public institutions paid for by taxes for ensuring essential services and protecting the good of the wider community,’ including providing ‘opportunity for every child in well-funded, high quality public schools.’ The resolution continues: ‘The Tax code should be progressive, with the heaviest burden on

those with the greatest financial means.’ These are hollow statements unless, in this new gilded age, we can learn to speak with one voice to turn the attention of our political leaders to the urgent necessity for improving public schools in our poorest communities.”

Excerpts from *Message on Public Education, United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries: The Public Purpose of Public Education* by Jan Ressenger, Minister for Public Education and Witness, 2013,
<http://www.ucc.org/justice/public-education/pdfs/Message-13-web-version.pdf>

United Methodist Church

“We believe that every person has the right to education. We also believe that the responsibility for education of the young rests with the family, faith communities, and the government. In society, this function can best be fulfilled through public policies that ensure access for all persons to free public elementary and secondary schools and to post-secondary schools of their choice. Persons should not be precluded by financial barriers from access to church-related and other independent institutions of higher education. We affirm the right of public and independent colleges and universities to exist, and we endorse public policies that ensure access and choice and that do not create unconstitutional entanglements between church and state. We believe that colleges and universities are to ensure that academic freedom is protected for all members of the academic community and a learning environment is fostered that allows for a free exchange of ideas. We affirm the joining of reason and faith; therefore, we urge colleges and universities to guard the expression of religious life on campus.”

Book of Discipline, Social Principles, The Political Community, Education (§ 164.V.E), 2012; <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/political-community>

“John Wesley greatly emphasized the importance of education and he specifically focused on making education available for the poor. Public education has taken on greater significance in a pluralized world as a means of socialization and a force for cohesiveness and equality. The public school still represents the primary way for children in society to learn to fully participate in the social, economic, political and communal realms of life.”

United Methodist Church General Board of Church and Society, Education,
<http://umc-gbcs.org/issues/education>

“The United Methodist Church has issued statements supportive of public education, and now at a time when public education has become a political battleground, the church is called to remember, first and foremost, the well-being of all God's children. Education is a right of all children and is affirmed by Scripture which calls us to ‘train them in the right way’ (Proverbs 22:6). Furthermore, the Social Principles affirm that education ‘can best be fulfilled through public policies that ensure access for all persons to free public elementary and secondary schools and to post-secondary schools of their choice’ (§164D). The public school is the primary route for most children into full participation in our economic, political, and community life. As a consequence of

inequities in our society, we have a moral responsibility to support, strengthen, and reform public schools. They have been, and continue to be, both an avenue of opportunity and a major cohesive force in our society, a society becoming daily more diverse racially, culturally, and religiously.”

2004 General Conference Resolution #263, Public Education and the Church,
<http://umc-gbcs.org/resolutions/public-education-and-the-church-263-2004-bor>

Walter Rauschenbusch

“When a minister speaks to . . . people about child labour or the exploitation of the lowly by the strong; when [a minister] insists on adequate food, education, recreation, and a really human opportunity for all, there is response. People are moved by plain human feeling and by the instinctive convictions which they have learned from Jesus Christ. . . . Being the realm of love, the Kingdom of God must also be the commonwealth of cooperative labor, for how can we actively love others without serving their needs by our abilities? If the Kingdom of God is a community of highly developed personalities, it must also be an organization for labor, for none can realize [oneself] fully without labor. A divinely ordered community, therefore, would offer to all the opportunities of education and enjoyment, and expect from all their contribution of labor.”

Excerpts from Walter Rauschenbusch, A Theology for the Social Gospel (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1922).

www.historytools.org/sources/Rauschenbusch.pdf

(In the quotations above, brackets denote where comments have been edited to reflect gender-inclusive language.)

IV. Suggestions for Action and Resources for Faith Communities

Scripture and tradition provide a strong mandate to promote social justice and education, and this includes strongly supporting public education for all children. What can people of faith do to respond to this calling? Congregations and denominations can take a number of actions to invest in local public schools, teachers, students, and their families as well as to advocate for a system that better serves all of North Carolina's kids.

1. Celebrate a Public Education Sabbath to honor teachers, students, school administrators, and parents using liturgical resources developed by the National Council of Churches. The North Carolina Council of Churches prepared a comprehensive guide to planning and implementing a public education Sabbath in 2005 that continues to be relevant for our churches and state today. To access this resource, go to www.ncchurches.org/programs/public-education and click on the Resources tab. Additionally, "A Litany for Education and Schools" from the National Council of Churches is available here: <http://www.nccusa.org/gifs/Litanyhandout.pdf>
2. Incorporate current information and theological reflection about public education in North Carolina into sermons, Sunday school curriculum, and other church discussions to educate congregants and create opportunities for public discourse about this issue.
3. Develop a public education committee to learn more about public education in North Carolina and to explore opportunities for your congregation to support schools in your community and across the state.
4. Provide opportunities to discuss the importance of a strong, fair public school system through community meetings, discussion groups, and interdenominational or interfaith programs. Utilize the resources provided in this booklet or invite students, families, teachers, administrators, and/or advocates of the public school system to facilitate these events.
5. Develop a partnership with a local public school in your community to provide support for after-school and vacation events, tutoring, mentoring, enrichment programs, and meeting student and teacher needs for school supplies.
6. Hold an interfaith advocacy day with other faith communities, encouraging community members to meet with state legislators, write emails and/or letters, or participate in phone banking to advocate for policies that support equal access to quality public education for all children. Partner with local school boards, Parent-Teacher Associations, student groups, and other allies to lobby policymakers to provide an education system that serves all North Carolinians. Encourage and empower children and youth to participate in these events. This not only serves to develop their self-confidence and teach them about civic engagement, but for policymakers, "their voices and first-hand experiences in the public schools may have a powerful effect."³⁰ Provide participants with talking points about some of the major issues facing North Carolina's public schools from organizations such as the North Carolina Justice Center's Education and Law Project. These resources are available here: <http://www.ncjustice.org/?q=education/resources>

7. Encourage people of faith who care about public education – both clergy and laity – to run for school board or Parent-Teacher Association positions to establish a presence in the decision-making process for your local public schools.³¹
8. Stay informed about what’s going on in your local public school system by monitoring reform efforts in public schools, including policies regarding charter and private school creation and oversight, public school class sizes, and other changes.³²

In advocacy efforts with local and state officials, encourage reforms that promote student achievement and honor the work of parents, teachers, and administrators who are so essential to student success. These include:

- Eliminating publicly-funded private school vouchers and tax breaks for charter schools, which hurt overall student achievement and re-segregate schools by race, socio-economic status, and/or religion. If your church has a school, ensure that it provides transportation and free or reduced lunches to make it accessible to low-income families.
- Increasing tax support to adequately invest in public education rather than relying heavily “on school fundraising and alternative revenues, such as gambling, for financial support.”³³
- Investing in pre-kindergarten programs for all children to provide students with a solid foundation for lifelong academic achievement through early childhood education
- Honoring teachers’ commitment to education through fair contracts that provide them with adequate salaries, appropriate job security through tenure status, opportunities for professional development, and merit-based raises for Masters degrees and effectiveness in the classroom
- Eliminating high-stakes testing that places schools in competition with one another for funding and forces teachers to “teach to the test.” Replace standardized testing with alternative assessments that encourage innovation in learning and student engagement with the subject matter
- Prioritizing evidence-based practices that promote student achievement in the state budget, including smaller class sizes and access to adequate learning resources, such as up-to-date textbooks

V. Discussion Guide

The goal of this section is to facilitate discussion in Sunday school classes, evening Bible study meetings, or other gatherings within the life of your faith community about the subject of public education. Drawing upon each of the sections above, this guide offers some open-ended questions to supplement conversations on this topic. Please feel free to use and adapt it as a tool for engaging your community in conversations and actions to support education for all of North Carolina's kids.

Context:

- How has education played a role in your life? Were there particular classes, teachers, or other opportunities that were especially important in shaping your life now? Were there things that you felt were missing from your education that would have helped you better achieve your goals now?
- What are the most important things you want for children today to experience in their education? In answering this question it may help to think about specific children you know and love (such as your own children, nieces, nephews, grandchildren, neighbors, or children within your faith community) or to consider the next generation in general.
- What do you think are the biggest obstacles for all children to receive the kind of education you described? If the children you know are not receiving this kind of education, what barriers are they experiencing to prevent this? If they are receiving the kind of education you want for them, what resource have made their quality education possible?

Scripture and Theological Reflection:

As a discussion leader please select a handful of Scripture passages listed above and read them with the group. You may choose to discuss each passage individually or to address several together. In either case, invite participants to answer the following questions:

- What does this passage (or these passages) tell us about the relationship between social justice and education?
- What is God's role in education according to this passage? What is the role of God's people in education (students, teachers, outsiders, etc.)?
- Is there a call to action in this passage? If so, what is it?

If a statement from your denomination or faith is included in this resource, read it with the group. If your denomination or faith is not included here, find out if it has a statement, and read it with the group. If you can't find such a statement, select one or two statements from other denominations/faiths or from the theologians featured above and read them together. Feel free to incorporate other relevant sources affiliated with your denomination/faith or familiar to your particular faith community. Invite participants to answer the following questions:

- What does our faith community emphasize as most important in how we as members think and act regarding education?

- What in our history contributes to this statement calling us to support public education? In other words, why us?

Suggested Action Steps

Pass out handouts of the Suggestions for Action section to members of the discussion group or simply read this section aloud together. Invite participants to respond to the following questions:

- What is our faith community already doing to support education for all of God's children in our community, our state, and our nation? Note that this may include activities not listed in the handout.
- If your faith community is already active in supporting public education, why did the ministries currently in place begin? Why have they continued? What values urge members to continue supporting the ministry through donations, volunteering, etc.? In what ways has this ministry been a challenge to your community and to the school(s) involved? In what ways has it been a blessing to both groups?
- If your faith community is not active in supporting public education or would like to take your current ministry a step further, what factors have kept you from participating in this kind of ministry? Is there a desire to overcome these barriers to begin a new ministry (or strengthen an existing ministry) in support of public education? If so, which of these action steps are logical, relevant starting points for this kind of ministry in your community?

Endnotes

¹ Lubienski, Christopher A. & Lubienski, Sarah Theule, *The Public School Advantage: Why Public Schools Outperform Private Schools*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 2014.

² *Ibid.* 64.

³ Siegel-Hawley, Genevieve. National Coalition on School Diversity, *How Non-Minority Students Also Benefit from Racially Diverse Schools*, 2012. <http://school-diversity.org/pdf/DiversityResearchBriefNo8.pdf>

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Hill, Chris. North Carolina Justice Center Education and Law Project, Personal Communication. January 30, 2014.

⁶ *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (No. 281), <http://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/402/1>

⁷ Lubienski & Lubienski, 2014.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Hill, 2014.

¹¹ Ellinwood, Matt. North Carolina Justice Center Education and Law Project, *2013 Education-Related Legislation*. 2014.

¹² North Carolina Justice Center Education and Law Project, *Factsheet: Oppose Private School Vouchers*, 2013.

<http://www.ncjustice.org/sites/default/files/VoucherFactSheet.pdf>

¹³ Brookings Institute, *Housing Costs, Zoning, and Access to High-Scoring Schools: Raleigh-Cary, NC metro area*. 2012,

<http://www.brookings.edu/research/interactives/school-access-interactive>

¹⁴ Hill, 2014.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Ellinwood, 2014.

¹⁸ At the time of this writing – May 2014 – the Common Core standards are under attack in the General Assembly.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Wagner, Lindsay. North Carolina Justice Center Policy Watch. *Can teacher tenure be saved?* [Web log] (March 13, 2014). Retrieved from:

<http://www.ncpolicywatch.com/2014/03/13/can-teacher-tenure-be-saved/>

²¹ Johnson, Cedric & Ellinwood, Matt. North Carolina Education and Law Project. *Smart Money: Investing in Student Achievement*, November 2013,

<http://www.ncjustice.org/?q=education/nc-justice-center-report-smart-money-investing-student-achievement>

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Queen, Elizabeth. North Carolina Justice Center Education and Law Project (intern). *At the schoolhouse door: Building a strong workforce starts in early childhood*, November 4, 2013, <http://www.ncjustice.org/?q=education/schoolhouse-door-building-strong-workforce-starts-early-childhood>; Sirota, Alexandra Forter, Prosperity Watch, Issue 31,

No 3: *Community colleges see reduction in state dollars through formula change*, March 11, 2014, <http://www.ncjustice.org/?q=budget-and-tax/prosperity-watch-issue-31-no-3-community-colleges-see-reduction-state-dollars-through>

²⁴ Robertson, Gary D., News and Observer, *NC Lottery Proceeds No Longer Linked to Formula*, September 22, 2013, <http://www.newsobserver.com/2013/09/22/3218508/nc-lottery-proceeds-no-longer.html>; Mitchell, Tazra *2013-15 Fiscal Year Final Budget*, 2013, <http://www.ncjustice.org/sites/default/files/BTC%20Reports%20-%20Final%20Budget%20-%202013.pdf>

²⁵ Mitchell, 2013; Ellinwood, 2014.

²⁶ Proverbs 1-2, 5:1-2, 7, 11-14; Job 12:12-13, 28:12, 15-19

²⁷ Psalm 25:4-5; Isaiah 28:26, 29; Matthew 4:23, 9:35, 11:1, 26:55; Mark 2:13; John 7:14-15; Luke 2:41-47; John 14:25-26; 2 Thessalonians 2:15; Hebrews 5:11-14

²⁸ Mark 6:34-44; Luke 9:11-17.

²⁹ Hill, Chris. North Carolina Justice Center Education and Law Project. Personal communication. January 30, 2014.

³⁰ Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, *Protecting the wall, Supporting our schools: The Reform Movement's campaign for public education*, <http://rac.org/advocacy/issues/issued/schools/>

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² United Methodist Church, *Public education and the church*, 2008, <http://umc-gbcs.org/resolutions/public-education-and-the-church-263-2004-bor>

³³ *Ibid.*