**AAUW, November 5, 2015**

**Fight to Save Public Education, Why and How?**

Let me say how privileged I am that you invited me here to share some serious concerns about our children. I want to thank you for your interest in public education---publicly funded, universally available, and accountable to the public.

I believe that a strong network of public schools is the optimal way to balance the needs of each particular child and family with a system that secures the rights and addresses the needs of all children. Tonight I’d like to talk with you about what that means.

A couple of years ago I retired from 15 years of advocacy on public education for the national United Church of Christ. I’d like to begin with the words of a religious leader, the Rev. J. Philip Wogaman, the retired pastor at Washington, DC’s Foundry United Methodist Church, because this is a matter of public morality, and Rev. Wogaman does a fine job of defining justice as it involves institutions like schools and their capacity to distribute opportunity.

“Justice is the community’s guarantee of the conditions necessary for everybody to be a participant in the common life of society. If we are finally brothers and sisters through the providence of God, then it is just to structure institutions and laws in such a way that communal life is enhanced and individuals are provided full opportunity for participation.”

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Rev. Wogaman’s words are a moral challenge for all of us, because in a democracy, we are responsible through our elected representatives for ensuring that our public institutions distribute opportunity to all, not just to some.

For me there is a sense of tragedy as we talk today, because our political leaders seem to have been heading so doggedly in the wrong direction across so many of our states---including Republicans---Governor Kasich, our legislature, and our state board of education here in Ohio, leaders in surrounding states like Pennsylvania and Michigan, and Democrats in the U.S Department of Education currently leading federal policy in public education. We must share our wisdom—yours and mine—and find a way to keep on keeping on lifting our voices to ensure educational opportunity for all of our children.

I want to explore four huge structural issues that threaten the capacity of public schools to distribute educational opportunity among all children, especially in communities where there is concentrated poverty, and there are significant examples in Ohio---Cleveland, East Cleveland, Youngstown and also some of our small rural communities. These four problems undermine the well-being of too many young people today and threaten the viability of the public schools which we have counted on for a long, long time as the foundation of our democracy and the basis of our story about the American Dream. This is the story we like to tell ourselves about America as a meritocracy where all children can rise according to their abilities and gifts if they work hard. Tragically this story has become a falsehood in today’s America, a place where it is very difficult for children isolated in poverty to find and climb a ladder out.

Our public education policies in states like Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Michigan, along with federal policy that is also directly impacting what the states are doing, are snuffing out opportunity for a mass of children across America’s big cities. Here are the four problems:

1. The United States tolerates an alarming child **poverty** rate well over20 percent, by far the highest rate of child poverty in any of the world’s so-called industrialized nations. We ought to be outraged but we almost never talk about this.
2. Our society is experiencing rapid segregation by economics and isolation of the poor and the rich. This growing **segregation by economics** overlays segregation by race and ethnicity. This trend is mirrored by a widening **income inequality achievement gap**.
3. A serious **crisis across many** **state budgets** endangers public schools and many other public services that affect the most vulnerable families.Citizens are going to have to be willing to tax ourselves more progressively and distribute school revenue more fairly, because funding of public education continues as an overwhelming problem.
4. And finally, our leaders are blaming teachers and their unions and compulsively collecting data, but we are not even talking about these other factors I have named. Instead leaders in both political parties are **pushing privatization** as though that were a solution to the real problems posed by child poverty, growing segregation by income accompanying widening inequality, and the crises in state budgets.

HISTORY

Let’s think about how we got to where we are in school reform. In Washington, political leaders in both major parties relentlessly pursue school reform dominated by a business-accountability strategy that is also embedded in the language, philosophy, and operation of the federal testing law No Child Left Behind. Such accountability systems pressure schools with (1) an official set of academic standards to define what all children should know at every grade; (2) classroom materials coordinated with the standards; (3) standardized tests to measure whether children have learned what the standards prescribe; and (4) punishments to pressure educators to bring every child to standard.

In 1989, President George H.W. Bush launched a movement based on standards, assessments, and accountability by convening an education summit of the nation’s governors, chaired by Bill Clinton of Arkansas, to agree on national education goals. Then in 2001, when Congress reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, with a new name, “No Child Left Behind,” the federal government mandated its own accountability reforms.

After President Obama took office in 2009---in what became a terrible disappointment to many of us--- the U.S. Department of Education pursued the very same philosophy by making a portion of the huge federal stimulus, intended to shore up the economy after the 2008 economic crisis, available to states for school reform. These programs **required states to compete** for billions of dollars through Race to the Top, Innovation Grants, and School Improvement Grants, **but strings were attached**. To qualify, states had to agree to adopt additional standards-based reforms prescribed by the U.S. Department of Education. States earned points:

* if their legislatures rewrote laws to permit rapid growth in the number of charter schools;
* if they promised to implement specified models for school “turnaround”—plans that included firing the principal and half the staff in so-called “failing” schools without hearings or individual evaluations, closing low scoring schools and moving the students elsewhere, and turning over low-scoring schools to charter management organizations or education management companies; and
* if their legislatures changed laws to tie teacher evaluation and pay to students’ test scores.

The No Child Left Behind waivers that the U.S. Department of Education has been offering the states to help them escape the unworkable Adequate Yearly Progress requirement of NCLB, demand the same punitive reforms. Education Secretary Arne Duncan’s policies continue to epitomize test-and-punish. (I know that Secretary Duncan announced two weeks ago that he is reducing standardized testing, but in fact the 2 percent cap he proposed---that students won’t spend more than 2 percent of time in school on mandated testing---is not much changed from today’s average. And though he ways he’ll modify the testing, if you read the fine print, you find that he still plans to insist that students’ scores are used to evaluate their teachers.)

The standards movement has become the education policy of both political parties and all the recent Administrations—Bush, Clinton, Bush, Obama. **And it hasn’t worked.** The National Assessment of Education Progress scores for 2015 came out last week. They have entirely stagnated. Here is what Carol Burris, the director of the Network for Public Education and a retired New York school principal said about the 2015 scores: “NAEP is a truth teller. There is no NAEP test prep industry, or high-stakes consequence that promotes teaching to the test. NAEP is what it was intended to be—a national report card by which we can gauge our national progress in educating our youth.  During the 1970s and ’80s, at the height of school desegregation efforts, the gap in scores between our nation’s white and black students dramatically narrowed. You could see the effects of good, national policy reflected in NAEP gains. The gaps have remained, however, and this year, the ever so slight narrowing of gaps between white and black students is due to drops in the scores of white students—hardly a civil rights victory.”

This test-based accountability agenda is based on demanding better outcomes without significant additional public investment—asking teachers to work harder and smarter and do more with less. One result has been the widespread **scapegoating of school teachers** because they have been unable quickly to raise scores in very poor communities. To qualify for NCLB waivers, states must incorporate students’ standardized test scores to at least some degree in the formal evaluations of their teachers. There are no proposals to change this mandate.

Even though philanthropies and the U.S. Department of Education have been funding consultants to develop value added measures, that supposedly compute the finite amount of learning teachers have imparted during any one school year to each child, there is all sorts of evidence that these VAM ratings are unreliable for any teacher from year to year and that the VAM ratings fail to account for things like family mobility, chronic absence among some children and other issues for very poor children.

We’ve reviewed the history. Now let’s look at the four problems.

POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

This federal political agenda has particularly dire implications for places like the poorest schools in Detroit and Chicago and Cleveland. Educator Mike Rose and historian Michael B. Katz describe the greatest problem for public education in America: “Throughout American history, inequality—refracted most notably through poverty and race—has impinged on the ability of children to learn and of teachers to do their jobs.”

We know from Thomas Timar at the University of California at Davis that, and I quote, “While manifestations of the achievement gap are to be found in rural, suburban, and urban areas, the evidence is rather compelling that the achievement gap is largely a problem of urban education.”

The federal poverty level is $24,000 for a family of four. Although 12 percent of white children in the United States live below the federal poverty line, 39 percent of Black children and 35 percent of Hispanic children live in poverty—more than a third in both of those groups. These data document shocking disparities. In a city like Cleveland or Youngstown there are many children who live in extreme poverty, that is half the federal poverty line. Children in extreme poverty live in families where annual income is below $12,000 for a family of four. Children in such circumstances are very likely to struggle at school.

Standardized test scores have always served in large part as a wealth indicator in the aggregate. Of course individual children vary in their accomplishments, but according to academics writing for the Oxford University Press: “(A)s a group, students labeled as economically disadvantaged or poor never score higher on standardized tests than their non-disadvantaged peers in any state on any grade level currently tested under NCLB.”

And from l[ong-time education researcher David Berliner](http://www.schoolleadership20.com/forum/topics/effects-of-inequality-and-poverty-vs-teachers-and-schooling-on-am):  “For reasons that are hard to fathom, too many people believe that in education the exceptions are the rule… These stories of triumph by individuals who were born poor, or success by educators who changed the lives of their students, are widely believed narratives…  But in fact, these are simply myths that help us feel good to be American… But the general case is that poor people stay poor and that teachers and schools serving impoverished youth do not often succeed in changing the life chances for their students.”\

SEGREGATION BY INCOME

Our society continues to become increasingly segregated not only by race but also by income with the rich living near each other and the poor concentrated in intergenerational ghettos.  Stanford University educational sociologist Sean Reardon documents that the proportion of families in major metropolitan areas living in either very poor or very affluent neighborhoods increased from 15 percent in 1970 to 33 percent by 2009, and the proportion of families living in middle income neighborhoods declined from 65 percent in 1970 to 42 percent in 2009.

Reardon also demonstrates that along with growing residential inequality is a simultaneous jump in an income-inequality achievement gap.  The achievement gap between the children with income in the top ten percent and the children with income in the bottom ten percent is 30-40 percent wider among children born in 2001 than those born in 1975, and is now twice as large as the black-white achievement gap.

PUNISHING SCHOOLS IN POOR COMMUNITIES

And yet, with all this research to demonstrate that poverty and inequality are serious problems, we continue to have a school reform policy being pushed across the states from the U.S. Department of Education that punishes urban schools in impoverished neighborhoods where standardized test scores continue to lag.  Our school reform policy continues to be driven by the conditions required for states and school districts to apply for federal funds through the Race to the Top, School Improvement Grant and No Child Left Behind waivers.  To qualify, school districts must promise to institute punitive turnarounds for schools unable to raise scores, turnaround plans that include school closure, rapid privatization through the opening of charter schools, and punishments for teachers based on their students’ scores. For example, over 90 percent of the students affected in Chicago by the closing a couple of years ago of 50 elementary schools and the relocation of the students are poor and African American.

Here is what Diane Ravitch warns : “The federal regulations are like quicksand: the more schools struggle, the deeper they sink into the morass of test-based accountability.  As worried families abandon these schools, they increasingly enroll disproportionate numbers of the most disadvantaged students, either children with special needs or new immigrants….  Low grades on the state report card may send a once-beloved school into a death spiral.”

FUNDING

I need to mention one final problem: **our elected officials fail to address the crisis in public funding of many of the services our society has traditionally supported—including public education.** According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: 30 states are spending less on public education (in inflation adjusted dollars) than they did before the 2008 recession hit. Thirteen states have cut school funding by more than 10 percent. While recent news indicates that some state budgets are beginning to spring back, too many governors, including Governor Kasich, are responding by proposing tax cuts instead of restoring budget cuts that have been made since the recession began.

**I believe our most urgent educational priority as a society must be to invest in improving the public schools of our poor communities---especially big city school districts where poverty is concentrated---rather than punishing them, punishing their teachers, closing these schools or privatizing them.**

PRIVATIZATION

Instead today’s school reform emphasizes competition, rewards and punishments, and privatization, which occurs when public schools, previously accountable to public boards of education, are turned over to private managers or private owners. State legislatures, which had tried to proceed cautiously in the experimentation with privatization by setting caps on the authorization of new charter schools in any one year, eliminated these caps in 2009 as a federal requirement for states to enter the competition for Race to the Top grants. Race to the Top thereby opened the floodgates for privatization.

School privatization schemes today include: **vouchers,** public funds turned into scholarships to cover private and parochial school tuition; **private contractors** that design, analyze and manage standardized testing, test grading, data collection and analysis and provide other services like food preparation and security guards; **charters and charter management organizations**; and **virtual e-schools**, a subset of charter schools---often for-profit companies---that serve home-schoolers over the internet. In Ohio our legislators have embraced all of these reforms.

**OHIO** --- Privatization has been moving forward in Ohio and across the nation. Here is this past summer’s story of Ohio: Two important things happened in Columbus in June, right before the Ohio legislature went on summer break.  The legislature did fast-track a bill to take over and charterize the public schools in Youngstown.  The legislature didn't follow through on a promise to regulate Ohio's notorious charter schools and their sponsors.

On the Wednesday before the legislature adjourned for the summer, without prior warning in the middle of a a committee hearing on a bill to expand wonderful full-service, wraparound schools (with health and dental clinics and social services) in Ohio, Senator Peggy Lehner introduced a 66 page amendment to establish state takeover of the Youngstown schools by an emergency manager—and a takeover in the future of any school district with three years’ of “F” ratings—rendering the locally elected school board meaningless.  Within hours the bill had passed the Senate, moved to the House for concurrence, and been sent to the Governor for signature.  There was never a full public hearing on the amended bill.

But in June the legislature took a pass on approving a long-debated bill to improve state oversight of the charter school sector in Ohio.  The Senate had passed the bill, and the House had been asked to concur, but instead the bill was not brought to the floor.  Everybody speculated this was a move to ensure that the bill would eventually be sent to a conference committee where Ohio's charter school czars who have invested millions in campaign contributions to Ohio Republicans would have more power to soften the regulations intended to make Ohio's charter schools more accountable, both academically and fiscally. Then over the summer it was exposed that the Ohio Department of Education’s director of charters---David Hansen---had cheated in the rating system he had developed for charters by omitting the failing scores for the dismal, for-profit online academies like the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow and Ohio Virtual Academy.

The Ohio legislature did return in the last week of September and sent the bill, as predicted, to a conference committee for further work. Because of extraordinary pressure from the press---the *Plain Deale*r, the *Beacon Journal* and the *Dispatch*---and because of the David Hansen scandal---in October we got a minimal regulatory bill that increases transparency, limits the power of the big charter management companies to take advantage of the charter schools they supposedly manage, and prevents what happened earlier this year with White Hat, whose contract with ten schools that tried to leave the network had been written by the management company and left all the furniture and computers to the management company rather than returning assets to the public whose tax dollars had purchased them. Governor Kasich signed the bill last Sunday, November 1.

**FEDERAL PRIVATIZATION**---It turns out that Ohio’s failure to regulate charters, while among the worst in the country is not really an anomaly. The federal government has been incentivizing the expansion of charter schools without providing really any oversight. The U.S. Department of Education has provided $3.7 billion in grants to expand charter schools since 1995, but there are no federal regulations. Just last week the Center for Media and Democracy published a scathing report explaining that really nobody at any level of government is adequately regulating the charter school sector. The federal government has relinquished oversight to the states receiving federal grants, and states have then turned over regulation to charter school authorizers in what the Center for Media and Democracy calls, “a classic example of ‘industry capture’ of the agencies charged with oversight by the industry they are tasked with overseeing.” Here is what the Center for Media and Democracy concludes: “This is due in part to the way laws governing charters have been built by proponents, favoring ‘flexibility’ over rules…  Charters are policed—if they are policed much at all—mainly by charter proponents….”  “Theoretically, the charters are held ‘accountable’ to charter authorizers.  However, enforcement of standards by charter authorizers appears lax in many instances, and states have said they lack legal authority under statutes that created the charter option to demand compliance.” “As a consequence, the public does not know how much federal seed money each charter has received and does not know how it has really been spent…” “Unlike truly public schools, which have to account for prospective and past spending in public budgets provided to democratically elected school boards, charter spending is largely a black hole.”

Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown and Representative Tim Ryan have provided courageous leadership by proposing a federal bill to regulate charter schools. It isn’t likely to pass in this Congress, but it at least introduces a much needed reform.

And in Ohio, it now turns out this is all connected to a huge, $71 million grant awarded earlier this month by the U.S. Department of Education to expand charter schools, specifically in academically distressed school districts. Ohio’s grant proposal to the federal Charter School Program was for the Takeover of the Youngstown schools. The idea is that the entire district or specific schools in Youngstown will be operated by private charter school management companies. But there is no evidence that such Charter Management Companies or state takeovers in New Orleans, Newark, or Detroit have been able to improve the schools. In each case, top-down state takeovers and massive charter experiments have, however, abrogated democracy by undermining local school boards and nullifying contracts with teachers.

School choice---via expansion of charter schools---is designed to allow some children to “escape” so-called “failing public schools,” but the children who leave tend to be children whose families can play the system. What we have seen in New Orleans and what we see happening in Chicago and New York and other places that have used school choice as the centerpiece of school reform is that somehow the most privileged and desirable children and their parents get into charters, even despite lotteries. They know how to apply early before charters reach enrollment caps. And they are less likely to be pushed out if their scores will be a discredit to the charter school. It has been repeatedly documented that charters serve fewer disabled children particularly those with serious disabilities, fewer English language learners and fewer homeless children and those living in extreme poverty---the children who are then relegated to what becomes a public school district of last resort for the children nobody else wants. I once heard the Rev. Jesse Jackson describe this reality of school choice, and I will always remember what he said: “There are those who would make the case for a race to the top for those who can run. But ‘lift from the bottom’ is the moral imperative because it includes everybody.”

Opportunity to Learn

All children in our nation---no matter who their family or where they live or what their race or ethnicity or economic level---deserve an opportunity for a quality education. That opportunity to learn should include:

* **a quality early childhood education**
* **highly qualified teachers**
* **a curriculum that will prepare students for college, work and community**
* **equitably distributed instructional resources that include** school funding, adequate libraries, computers, enough counselors to assist with college placement, and small classes.

AMERICAN DREAM

As our time winds down I want to go back for just a few moments to think with you about the story of the American Dream. Our society tightly holds this narrative—the idea that we live in a meritocracy where all can succeed if we work hard—where we all play by one set of rules and if we are strategic and patient, we can all win—where we rise or fall pretty much on our own. Sociologist Heather Beth Johnson and a group of researchers conducted in-person interviews to explore how citizens explain the narrative of the American Dream. Here is one transcript:

\*Interviewer: “Do you think there are some ethnicities, races, groups in this country that are more disadvantaged than others? \*Responder: “Yeah.” \*Interviewer: “So you think there are certain groups… as a whole that have a harder time making it today?” \*Responder: “Sure. Definitely.” \*Interviewer: “Okay, now, what about the American Dream? The idea that with hard work and desire, individual potential is unconstrained… everyone gets an equal chance to get ahead based on their own achievement?” \*Responder: “That’s a very good definition.” \*Interviewer: “Do you believe that the American Dream is true for all people and that everybody does have an equal chance?” \*Responder: “Yes. Everybody has an equal chance, no matter who he or she is.”

Again and again interview participants voice both conflicting beliefs: some people have it much harder in America, and everyone has an equal chance. Johnson explains how privilege is passed from generation to generation, often through relatively small gifts—a thousand dollars here and there to help out with a car payment, airplane tickets for family visits, and the more substantial gift many middle class parents continue to provide: college tuition.

But today, a significant gap is solidifying across America between those who can pass along wealth and those who can’t. According to Nobel Prize winning economist, Joseph Stiglitz, “There’s no use in pretending. In spite of the enduring belief that Americans enjoy greater social mobility than their European counterparts, America is no longer the land of opportunity.” (265)

If we are to become a just society:

* We must develop the political will to address poverty.
* We must find a way to recognize and address growing segregation by economics and isolation of the poor and the rich.
* We must also insist that our elected officials address the crisis in public funding of many of the services our society has traditionally believed we need to support—including public education. This will likely involve paying more taxes.
* We will also have to persist in confronting rampant privatization that just keeps popping up again and again and again from state to state, and in federal policies from the U.S. Department of Education.
* Addressing our children’s needs will involve ongoing work to bring public support back to improving public schools, where we must insist that all children are provided the opportunity to learn.

An education program based on privatization and school choice will be data-driven with accountability accomplished through widespread standardized testing. It will be based on values like competition, efficiency, deregulation, and creative disruption.

Historically in our society we have instead envisioned public education as having a public purpose. We have believed public schools should be democratically governed by elected school boards and publicly regulated. We have agreed that public schools should be free, universally available and accessible to all with equitable provision of services.

Schools have never fully realized all these ideals, but because our education system has been public, we have been able, through public debate and wrangling, to try to ensure that public schools have increasingly realized the ideals we have held.

Tonight I have explored with youwhy our society’s historic commitment to public education matters. I want to conclude by challenging you with some words from the political philosopher Benjamin Barber. In a 2007 book about our society’s consumer culture, Barber writes:

“Privatization is a kind of reverse social contract: it dissolves the bonds that tie us together into free communities and democratic republics.  It puts us back in the state of nature where we possess a natural right to get whatever we can on our own, but at the same time lose any real ability to secure that to which we have a right.  Private choices rest on individual power…. Public choices rest on civic rights and common responsibilities and presume equal rights for all.  Public liberty is what the power of common endeavor establishes, and hence presupposes that we have constituted ourselves as public citizens by opting into the social contract.” (Consumed, pp. 143-144)