



Week of Jan. 23-27, 2012

Looking for the “Common” in “Common Sense”

By UCLA IDEA

In his third State of the Union address Tuesday night, President Obama grappled with America's need to solve important challenges in the midst of incivility and lack of shared focus. Obama drew comparisons with America's Armed Forces, whose successes in the field depend on placing the mission ahead of individual interests: *“Imagine what we could accomplish if we followed their example.”* Later in his speech, he added, *“We need to end the notion that the two parties must be locked in a perpetual campaign of mutual destruction; that politics is about clinging to rigid ideologies instead of building consensus around common-sense ideas.”*

Of course, one party's “common-sense ideas” can be another party's horrible ideas—which makes those ideas not at all common and nowhere near a consensus. The challenge is to identify what is truly *common* once one gets past the rhetorical generalities of our desires for a strong economy, fair taxation, innovative business climate, educational opportunities, and so forth.

Closer to home, California schools continue to be wracked by the pitched battles among stakeholders who have decidedly different notions of common sense. With this climate in mind, a new study from UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA) looks for promising consensus-building *common* ideas that may be obscured in the daily acrimony over strategies and proposals.

In *Finding Common Ground in Education Values*, IDEA researchers interviewed 50 influential Californians about their thoughts on the purposes of public education. The individuals included state legislators and legislative staff from both political parties, business and labor leaders, and representatives of civic organizations. Though they came from disparate political and ideological backgrounds, the white paper reveals strong points of agreement.

For example, respondents thought that “powerful learning” depended on personalized teacher-student interactions; respondents favored teaching that draws upon student interest and is project-based; they valued learning that can be used outside of classrooms. Experiences with technology, teamwork, problem-solving, analytic skills and civic participation were valued as inherently worthwhile rather than as means to other ends. Each of the values represents a productive starting point from which to develop not only “solutions,” but to gain the mutual trust and political climate needed to realize those solutions. Significantly, almost all of the survey respondents said that the current education system does not support these values.

The values reported in the white paper resonate with Gov. Jerry Brown's recent comments about the need for California to develop new forms of accountability that do not rely exclusively on standardized tests. But, more than that, the white paper brings attention to what California schools should be doing and why this matters.

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THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of Jan. 23-27, 2012

Page 2

In closing his address, Obama said: *"As long as we are joined in common purpose, as long as we maintain our common resolve, our journey moves forward, and our future is hopeful, and the state of our Union will always be strong."* Building such resolve and purpose in education policy requires common education values that are not so lofty as to defy disagreement and not so specific as to immediately draw oppositional boundaries. Common values have to reside in the body of our deliberations, not just in the introduction and conclusion of our speeches.

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