



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

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A Tiny Ripple of Hope

By UCLA IDEA

Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope.

-Robert Kennedy

More than 45 years after Kennedy spoke these words, they reverberated across the Washington D.C. Mall during the Save Our Schools March and National Call to Action. Education policy expert Linda Darling-Hammond quoted Kennedy for the 8,000 people who gathered to protest against injustice in the current school-reform environment. In particular, the educators, parents, students, and celebrities criticized aspects of standardized testing and their negative impacts on today's public schooling.

Pointing to an overzealous reliance on the tests, the protesters spoke of narrowed curricula along with pressure on parents, students, and teachers (sometimes leading to cheating). The speakers noted that the top-down reform strategies beginning with the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind, continue with President Obama's Race to the Top, and these policies do little to encourage the participation of teachers, parents, community groups and students.

"There needs to be more input by the local school community... and an end to top-down dictates by politicians and their campaign donors who have little understanding about the realities of classroom education."

One of those little-understood "realities of classroom education" is poverty and its strong link to educational success. In the United States, almost a quarter of children under the age of 6 live in poverty. Poor children are less prepared than their advantaged peers to begin school and, once they start, they are more likely to be hungry, tired or homeless. "But our leaders do not talk about these things," said Darling-Hammond. "They say there is no more money for schools—and of poor children, they say: *Let them eat tests.*"

It is doubtful that the protest will have immediate effects. The crowd was smaller than organizers hoped for. The event was largely overlooked by media that were, perhaps, preoccupied with a looming national economic catastrophe. Organizers could not meet with Obama administration representatives. But the protest did ripple the still waters of education policies that are patently unsupportive of underserved students and unfriendly to teachers.

The activists on the Mall signaled their willingness to advocate for their students and to preserve their own professional standing. They, along with education supporters in Wisconsin and elsewhere, appreciate the determination and strength in numbers needed to counter fantasies of quick and cheap education fixes. Anthony Cody, one of the protest's organizers, said, "One event alone will not accomplish these things—it will take a broader movement and sustained activism. But we have made an important first start."