

## District Leaders Must Empower Parents in Trump's America

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On the morning of November 8, 2016, Reuters announced that Hillary Clinton had a 90 percent chance of winning the presidential election.<sup>i</sup> Many people could be excused for not having studied Donald Trump's thoughts on education given the apparent unlikelihood of his victory or his scattered remarks about Common Core or privatizing education. Yet he won the presidency, and superintendents and school board members, like the rest of us, must figure out how to advocate for public education in the new political climate.

My advice to school leaders is to invite parents to help chart the course of public education or watch them switch to the side of school choice. As a result of No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and the Every Student Succeeds Acts, many families believe that key educational decisions about standards, testing, and accountability are made in Washington, D.C. rather than local communities.

Trump has tried to channel parental dissatisfaction with this state of affairs into support for vouchers and charters. The task facing district leaders is to forge alliances with parents and convince them that they can find a remedy within public education.

### Trump and His Education Policy Team

At the 2016 Republican National Convention, Donald Trump, Jr. criticized public education for depriving children of the opportunity to enter the middle class. Public schools, he announced, are like "Soviet-era department stores that are run for the benefit of the clerks and not the customer" and are "more concerned about protecting the jobs of tenured teachers than serving the students." In September 2016, the Trump campaign released a \$20 billion federal plan to support private, charter, magnet, and independent schools.<sup>ii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Maurice Tamman, "Clinton has 90 Percent Chance of Winning: Reuters/Ipsos States of the Nation," *Reuters* (November 8, 2016).

<sup>ii</sup> Andrew Ujifusa, "Appraising Trump's School Choice, Child-Care Plans," *Education Week* 36, no. 7 (2016a).

Trump has said that he would like to cut the U.S. Department of Education and that “there’s no failed policy more in need of urgent change than our government-run education monopoly.”<sup>iii</sup> In *Great Again*, Trump says that he believes in letting schools “compete for kids” through options such as school choice, charter schools, vouchers, and opportunity scholarships.<sup>iv</sup>

We can learn more about the likely direction of education policy during the Trump administration by studying the views of the two people he chose to lead his education team: Williamson Evers and Gerard Robinson.<sup>v</sup>

Williamson Evers is a research fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. Last year, he wrote an article arguing that the Common Core standards were created in secrecy and “increased the alienation of the public from schools as institutions worthy of loyalty.”<sup>vi</sup> As Mercedes K. Schneider shows in *Common Core Dilemma*, a small group of economic and political elites did craft the

Common Core behind closed doors.<sup>vii</sup> And as the test refusal movement shows, many parents are no longer going to do whatever the schools tell them they must.

Even if Trump does not display an intimate awareness of education policy, he does appeal to certain parents with his statement that he will get rid of the Common Core.<sup>viii</sup>

Trump’s other education team transition leader, Gerard Robinson, is a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. In a recent article, Robinson notes that black city leaders and state representatives helped launch Milwaukee’s voucher program in the 1990s.

The “goal of these school choice ‘patriots’ was to free teachers to practice their craft in new and innovative ways, including by opening their own public or private schools, and to empower parents with greater choice and influence over their children’s education.”<sup>ix</sup> Like Evers, Robinson thinks that school choice can be a remedy for the ills that many parents see in public education.

<sup>iii</sup> Cory Turney and Eric Westervelt, "Donald Trump's Plans for America's Schools," *nprED* (September 25, 2016).

<sup>iv</sup> Donald Trump, *Great again: How to Fix our Crippled America* (New York: Threshold, 2016), 53.

<sup>v</sup> Andrew Ujifusa, "See Who's been Tapped to Lead Trump's Transition Team for Education," *Education Week* (September 19, 2016b).

<sup>vi</sup> Williamson M. Evers, "Exit, Voice, Loyalty-and the Common Core," *Education Week* 34, no. 17 (2015).

<sup>vii</sup> Mercedes K. Schneider, *Common Core Dilemma—Who Owns our Schools?* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2015).

<sup>viii</sup> On how public support for the Common Core plummeted between 2013 and 2015, see Michael B. Henderson, Paul E. Peterson and Martin R. West, "The 2015 EdNext Poll on School Reform," *Education Next*, no. 1 (2016), 8-20.

<sup>ix</sup> Gerald Robinson, "School Reform Family Feud," *EducationNext* (October 13, 2016).

## The Choices Facing District Leaders

At this critical juncture in the history of American education, district leadership must think carefully about how to address the anger about top-down education reforms. If parents are going to fight for public education, they need to be partners who have a meaningful voice in conversations about standards, curriculum, and accountability mechanisms. Otherwise, parents may reject the public education system and join the school choice movement.

Here are two examples of public education leaders alienating parents who could be their allies, and a positive example of superintendents building an army of advocates.

The first negative example is from the spring of 2016 when a New York supervisory district sponsored a workshop on “dealing with critics at public meetings.”<sup>x</sup> The speaker offered to “help school leaders handle the chronic critic, relentless gadfly, and anyone else who seeks to use your district as a forum to promote their own agenda.”

True, there are occasions when unreasonable people speak too long at public meetings. At the same time, these “chronic critics” and “relentless gadflies” are often concerned parents who will do anything for

their children. Talking about parents as objects to handle is wrong in itself and a missed opportunity to create public education lobbyists.

A second negative example of engaging parents is the New York State Education Department (NYSED) “Assessment Schoolkit.”<sup>xi</sup> The purpose of the toolkit is to give districts resources to convince families to take the Common Core tests. A sample letter from a superintendent to parents offers reasons to take tests, including the need for teachers to acquire “a fair and accurate assessment of your child’s learning.” The letter, however, does not mention the Common Core or high-stakes testing, two of the main reasons that parents refuse these tests.<sup>xii</sup>

The Common Core’s emphasis on “close reading,” for instance, gives children few opportunities to share their own thoughts, and high-stakes testing has the practical effect of narrowing the curriculum to the tested subjects. District leadership should acknowledge informed critiques of the Common Core and listen respectfully to parents who point out the flaws with the standards themselves and not just their implementation. Today, test-refusing families are among the most knowledgeable, connected, and passionate about education in the district.<sup>xiii</sup>

<sup>x</sup> Jeff Oleson, *Dealing with Critics at Public Meetings* (Putnam | Northern Westchester, New York: The Center for Educational Leadership PNWBOCES, 2015).

<sup>xi</sup> “Assessments Toolkit.” New York State Education Department, <http://www.nysed.gov/assessments-toolkit> (accessed November 10, 2016).

<sup>xii</sup> Oren Pizmony-Levy and Nancy Green Saraisky, *Who Opts Out and Why? Results from a National Survey of Opting Out of Standardized Tests* (New York: Teachers College Columbia University, 2016).

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid.

A positive example of district leadership mobilizing parents is the iRefuse rally at the Comsewogue school district in the spring of 2014.<sup>xiv</sup> The superintendent, Dr. Joseph Rella, hosted the event and invited state politicians, local teachers, activists, social workers, principals, and parents to speak about the harm of high-stakes Common Core testing.

People became inspired by the cause and informed and mobilized others. Dr. Rella and other superintendents on Long Island changed the national conversation about Common Core testing, and many people in the test refusal movement continue to campaign for candidates sympathetic to public education.

District leadership should also encourage teachers to exercise free speech about education policies. In the spring of 2016, the *New York Times* ran an article on how the city's education department was telling teachers not to talk with students about refusing the tests.<sup>xv</sup> Silencing teachers, however, comes with a cost: teachers feel disempowered and may not be inclined to speak up on behalf of public education when you need them. Superintendents and school boards should defend teacher tenure as a safeguard for free speech.

University of Massachusetts-Amherst political science professor Jesse H. Rhodes makes an important argument in his article, "Learning Citizenship?" Rhodes combined data from a survey of public school parents and information on states' policies on standards,

testing, and accountability. His research shows "that parents residing in states with more developed assessment systems express more negative attitudes about government and education, and are less likely to become engaged in some forms of involvement in their children's education, than are parents who live in states with less developed assessment systems."<sup>xvi</sup> In other words, top-down education reforms such as the Common Core and high-stakes testing induce parents to give up on public education and politics in general.

In states that have gone the farthest down the road of education reform, you see parents stop running for the school boards, volunteering for the PTA, or participating in community affairs. The same principle applies to teachers: if you discourage them from speaking about education policy in public, they will stop, even when they could be your best advocates.

We would be having a different conversation if Hillary Clinton had been elected president. Clinton and her education team envisioned a strong role for the federal government in reforming public education.

A Trump administration, by contrast, will try to channel rage against high-stakes Common Core testing into support for privatizing measures. Public school leadership must now decide whether to become allies with parents upset by education reform or risk watching them join Trump's team in its mission to dismantle public education.

<sup>xiv</sup> The flyer is here: [https://deutsch29.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/irefuse\\_rally-flyer.pdf](https://deutsch29.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/irefuse_rally-flyer.pdf)

<sup>xv</sup> Kate Taylor, "Teachers are Warned about Criticizing New York State Tests," *New York Times* (March 24, 2016).

<sup>xvi</sup> Jesse H. Rhodes, "Learning Citizenship? how State Education Reforms Affect Parents' Political Attitudes and Behavior," *Political Behavior* 37, no. 1 (03, 2015), 181-220.

*(Author's note. This article was written before Donald Trump nominated Betsy DeVos as the United States Department of Education Secretary of Education. Given her prominent advocacy for school choice, the main point of this article remains: public educators need to reach out to parents, including those in the test refusal movement, as allies in the fight against privatization.)*

### **Author Biography**

Nicholas Tampio is an associate professor of political science at Fordham University. He is presently writing a book on democracy and national education standards for Johns Hopkins University Press. Tampio has a TEDx talk on the test refusal movement and has written about education for Aeon, Al Jazeera America, and the Huffington Post. E-mail: [tampio@fordham.edu](mailto:tampio@fordham.edu)