

In Search of the Educated American



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PEGGY COOPER CAFRITZ: At Duke Ellington School of the Arts, our parents expect that their students should be fully prepared for college, or be fully prepared to enter the world of the arts. And the school is about 99 percent successful in delivering and meeting that expectation.

This school system has not had a curriculum in years. It went through a 20-year period where teachers who were hired were not tested. So the expectations in the school system are extremely low, and in part because we have such a high poverty index, the parent body in D.C. public schools is easily bamboozled. They do not know what to expect. Many of them are victims of the same school system that we're now trying to fix. One of the things that we're going to try to do is make a manual for parents saying, "This is what your kid should be coming home with in first grade," and make it very graphic and diagrammatic, because creating an army of people who understand that education is their kids' way to economic empowerment is the only way we're going to get the parents on board.

There are 70,000 kids in the Washington school system, and we have 15,000 more in charter schools.

Washington is in the Stone Age with regard to technology, but all of our schools are now wired. Not many of our teachers really know how to use the Internet, but I would really like the Internet to be incidental to teaching, like a dictionary. We should be able to introduce it to kids immediately when they come to school. We have to realize that in Washington and the 23 other largest school districts, many of the kids don't have the Internet

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at home, so we have to have it at school. It should be a key learning tool, an overlay.

In the African-American community, there were a number of brilliant teachers, people like Jean Toomer. They taught because of segregation, and that began to die out in the early to mid-1960s, but in every city and every town, the most brilliant people were often teachers.

There was a limited Golden Age in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Teachers in black, segregated schools in the South basically came together and committed themselves to educating a populace that could compete twice as hard. We see that in the tremendous numbers of people who have come out of the South into positions of leadership.

A lot of teachers lost their jobs in favor of white teachers. And slowly, between people joining this new middle class, and moving out to suburbs, and ceasing to care about what was going on in cities, they lost sight of the mission. And the great teachers left in disgust.

We need a standard curriculum to protect kids who don't have the privilege of having a good and inspired teacher. The biggest problem in terms of teaching is at schools of education. There may be three or four schools of education in the country that get anywhere near.

I think that you absolutely must teach everything. The population in the largest city school districts is brown and black. We know that in order for those kids to become full participants in American society, they're going to have to have broad exposure, broad frame of reference. We have to be able to teach everything, and they have a right to know it. That's actually a good segue into high schools, which, as I've been arguing for years, need

to be completely and totally redone.

We need teachers to become literate in what they're teaching, to really become specialists in their course work. We also need to rethink where high school students are. By tenth grade, most kids, if you've educated them properly, know what they're going to need to know to take their SAT's and do well, et cetera. Kids should be able, at that point, to go to their community college or city university and take courses and receive a joint degree when they graduate, one reflecting graduation from high school and the other, credits from their local university or community college.

I think that the main reason kids drop out of school is boredom, sheer boredom. And we have got to fix that.

It's possible to have a secular-based education, as long as your teaching force is sophisticated enough to understand what that means, and that it still allows for morals and mores to be taught. I think it was Jefferson who said one of the reasons for education is to teach a child his rights and another one is to teach a child about defending his rights.

We have to be realistic. If we don't do it in schools, it's not going to get done anywhere. It is why schools really need support. We need the physical buildings of schools need to become the anchors of their neighborhoods. We have to stand in for parents.

In cities, it's very important that parents understand that the schools are for them, and the school system mantra has to be "We are here to serve." Parents need to be taught to speak out. One of the things that we're going to try to do here in DC as we develop schools as neighborhood centers, particularly in low income communities and as we work with other city

agencies to offer the kids wrap-around services, is to create places where parents feel more comfortable.

In Washington, we've started developing the school as the neighborhood anchor, putting all of the services that children might need in the school, involving the surrounding neighborhoods in the school. We plan to have after school activities that extend well into the evening and to invite community groups to use the school at night. In another program in one of our schools, a barbershop started. And why can't the kids make some money and give haircuts to the community after school, and on the weekends? Things like that are a natural part of people's lives and are more useful than trying to create something new and different.

I've read the British curriculum and the French curriculum. And I've had conversations about the curriculum that's used in Nigeria, which is really a permutation of the British curriculum. I find that their curricula are much more instructive than ours, but there's not much room for self-expression. They are far more rigid in what they expect children to know about their culture, their society, their history and their political structure. And I think that what we can take from those curricula is what they have proven over the years in terms of children's ability to digest information.

Our Superintendent has begun discussions with the National Faculty, a group that brings in college professors who are on leave from universities from all over the country, and places them in classrooms to work with teachers on content. The idea is to put some intellectual mettle in the schools that the kids or the teachers might not have access to.