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America's Best Idea

Not long ago, I happened to watch a few episodes of Ken Burns' documentary on America's National Park System. The film bills national parks as America's best idea. We surely owe the preservation of these treasures to visionary thinking and brilliant policymaking. But America's *best* idea? Not by a long shot. That accolade belongs to America's public education system.

In public schools from coast to coast and border to border, principals and teachers steadfastly carry on the critically important work—many see it as a calling—of educating our children to live and work in a world most adults can scarcely imagine. For 25 years, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) has been honoring exemplary principals in its National Distinguished Principals program. This year's celebration, this week in Washington, D.C., honors 62 exceptional principals, including 54 from public schools. Collectively, their stories demonstrate a profound commitment to children. Individually, their accomplishments run the gamut from using student achievement data to foster a culture of accountability to integrating the arts in classrooms and the larger community to working with parents to create optimum learning conditions for their children.

They, and the vast majority of their colleagues, lead effective schools with little fanfare, even though the job grows tougher and the rewards shrink. The principalship stands out in bold relief against a complex backdrop—conflicting federal guidelines and state requirements, skimpy funds to cover outsized mandates, and now, unfortunately, an increasingly one-sided and often ill-informed discussion about the effectiveness of public schools and how to “fix” them.

There's no question that underperforming schools must be transformed into effective learning communities as quickly as possible. Not one educator I know disagrees with this urgent imperative. Further, there's no question that every public school must constantly improve. Our children deserve it, our society requires it, our world depends on it.

That said, there's an undeniable difference between *fixing schools* and *improving schools*. NAESP does not believe that every school in the United States is failing. The fact of the matter is this: In the 2008-2009 school year, nearly 49.3 million students attended 88,000 public schools. Do we

really believe that all those schools required fixing and all those students received a substandard education?

Millions of educators and children go about the business of teaching and learning every day. But we have always demanded that public education fulfill larger ambitions. Simply put, public schools are crucibles where our society carries out the sometimes painful, always messy job of making democracy work, of putting public policy and law into practice. Today, for example, we ask our schools to teach “21st century skills”—thinking critically, solving open-ended problems, communicating and collaborating across cultures, and using information to create new opportunities.

The 19th century wisdom of public education advocate Horace Mann still rings true. Education, he wrote, is the “balance wheel of the social machinery.” Lightly scratch our lasting values, bedrock principles, and greatest social achievements of the past 150 years, and you'll find public schools: educating waves of immigrants and preparing them for citizenship, teaching children who were otherwise doomed to dangerous workplaces, providing equal access to millions of girls and minority children, fighting the war on poverty, and a renewed emphasis on advancing education itself as a civil right, one of today's just and fitting priorities. The promise of public education endures throughout these grand social agendas: An equal chance at education means an equal chance to realize prosperity, success, and fulfillment, especially during difficult economic times.

We all have a stake in stewarding this promise. At the national level, association representatives, elected leaders, policymakers, and the media set the tone of the conversation about public education. Will the conversation move us forward, or will it divide us along ideological fault lines? At the local level, every person inside the orbit of a neighborhood school is invested in and dependent upon its success. Will we acknowledge the positive role that most public schools have in building our cities and towns and strive to make them better, or will we continue to paint all schools with the same tarry brush?

It's time to stop the circular firing squad where schools and children are caught in the crossfire. Instead, let's get serious about reforming underperforming schools, and learning from, strengthening, and celebrating effective schools. Most important, let's give credit when and where it's due: our public education system.