Why America Needs to Hate Its Public Schools

“T”he floggings will continue until morale improves.”
This sign has been on the office door of one of my colleagues for the last 10 years and there’s no reason to take it down. It reflects the humiliation of continuous browbeating that public school educators have suffered since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983.

But why is the rhetoric so venomous? Why is there such unanimity among the politically powerful, the press, and the general public that schools are so horrible? Why has the barrage of bashing continued unabated for so long? Why does America hate its public schools?

Here are some reasons to consider:

Public schools are easy to hate. Much of the contempt of those of us who were educated in public schools is rooted in a myopic view of what we saw there. We think we know all there is to know about education because we spent at least 13 years being educated. While we would never presume to possess medical expertise that trumps what our physicians tell us, we afford no such deference to schools, principals, and teachers. In the media, schools are represented as vapid places where inept people stumble through encounters with unmotivated, often violent, students.

It is ironic that those whose rhetoric about the failure of public schools to prepare citizens for the 21st century is most scathing are those quickest to advocate a return to pedagogical practices of 100 years ago, when public schools prepared students to work on farms or in factories. But the irony is lost on us because public schools have become fair game for attacks from any and all quarters, and those who would offer up a defense are labeled as delusional or self-serving. Public schools are an easy target for disdain because they are close by—and they don’t dare shoot back.

Public schools are populated by the underclass. Those who wield the most power in the United States are those least likely to send their children to public schools. Old-money families, the newly rich, and the wannabe-wealthy send their kids to private schools. Politicians, no matter their
political affiliation, almost never send their own children to public schools. So, by default, children and families who participate in public schooling are those with fewer resources and less political clout. Those who work in public schools are perceived to be second-class citizens and we treat educators as technicians instead of professionals, prescribing curricula and canned pedagogy that demean their professional expertise and judgment.

**Public school reform makes political hay.** We support politicians who blame schools and teachers for everything from the moral collapse of our society to our inability to compete in the global marketplace. Political leaders from all over the ideological map are quick to pile on abuse and offer quick-fix remedies. They threaten schools with severe sanctions if they don’t meet expectations, but offer as little support as possible. They make it impossible for schools to meet their unreasonable standards, then hammer public school educators again for their persistent failure. The No Child Left Behind Act is the perfect example.

**Public schools provide a way to displace guilt about America’s inequalities.** Americans need to hate public schools because the righteous indignation we direct at them displaces the unthinkable prospect of actually trying to do something about national issues such as racism, poverty, and inequality. We use schools as vehicles for offering “equal opportunity,” asking them to fix our social ills at the same time they are supposed to guarantee academic achievement for every child with few resources and scanty support. And when schools fail, we vilify educators and schools for not doing what we really don’t want done.

Yes, the floggings will continue. So long as public schools are easy targets, populated by those with little social capital or political influence, they will continue to fill America’s need to deflect criticism and defer responsibility for the deep structural problems that plague our society.

**HERE’S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT**

You just read an educator’s critical analysis of why public schools are subjected to a “barrage of bashing” by politicians, the media, and the general public. Do you agree with him? Or do you think he has exaggerated the situation and that the picture isn’t as bad as he paints it? Let’s hear your thoughts and comments at www.naesp.org/speakingout/.

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