

Roundtable News

Education for Democracy

COVID: The Fourth Great Crisis After the Civil War and Two World Wars



The spectacular choir from Clayton County's M.E. Stilwell School of the Arts kicks off the National Superintendents Roundtable gathering on October 14, 2022.

On the stunning campus of the Jimmy Carter Center in Atlanta, Georgia, three powerful themes emerged as the Roundtable gathered to examine “Education for Democracy.” The first: public education, which faces wolves at the school door, is essential to restoring faith in the nation’s faltering democracy.

The second, that powerful, gale-force demographic winds will overwhelm our political, economic, and educational institutions unless we prepare for them now.

The third? The chickens are coming home to roost now that the full effects of the nation's badly bungled desegregation efforts since the *Brown* decision have become apparent. These desegregation efforts, which

included handing out pink slips indiscriminately to highly competent Black teachers and administrators, practically guaranteed the reactions they provoked and the resegregation of schools.

In the face of these challenges, participants expressed optimism for the future and a willingness to develop the leadership strategies to respond.

Berj Akian, CEO of ClassLink, developed a river analogy to describe our weekend. The demographic information indicated the river’s flow and direction. Several of the speakers described foes lurking on the riverbanks. And the discussion of race defined the dangerous rapids ahead.

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Our Roundtable symposium was held on the handsome campus of the Jimmy Carter Presidential Center.

After an intense meeting bracketed by a choral performance from Clayton County Public School’s Stilwell School of the Arts and a learning circle, superintendents headed home alert to these challenges and turning over ideas in their minds about how to bring what they had learned back to their communities.

PUBLIC EDUCATION AND OUR FALTERING DEMOCRACY

“The future of American democracy and public education is something we can no longer casually depend on,” declared Valerie Strauss at the outset of her remarks. Strauss, an education writer at *The Washington Post*, expressed her bewilderment that CNN recently reported that some public schools have put litter boxes in classrooms to make students identifying as cats more comfortable. “I tip my hat to you, given the loony tunes you have to deal with every day.”



Valerie Strauss, *The Washington Post*

Light Amidst the Darkness.

Pointing to a host of problems—unfunded mandates, an obsession with test scores, funding schools at rates that are lower than before the Great Recession, wave after wave of reform “with little lasting value,” school privatization efforts under former Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos “who made no bones about her contempt for public schools,” a Supreme Court supporting religious education, and of course the pandemic, followed by a manufactured uproar over Critical

Race Theory and shortages of critical teachers—Strauss argued that amidst “all that darkness, there is the light” of recent PDK polls.

For 50 years, a representative sample of American adults have expressed their support for local public schools, and the most recent Phi Delta Kappa poll gave the public schools in their community the highest rating ever. “Most Americans express trust and confidence in teachers.” They don’t support an anti-public education agenda; and they want to see thriving support for public schools. “They want you to succeed.” She reported that, “What I hear from parents, teachers, and others in just about every state is that the public supports funding for inclusion, for racial justice, and for the right simply to teach the truth.”

Many districts are doing amazing things, she insisted: health clinics, contracts with online health providers, food banks, centers with washing machines and dryers for families without them, tutoring programs, and literacy and graduation coaches.

The Challenge Cannot be Overstated. But, Strauss warned, the challenge to public education and to our democracy cannot be overstated. “If you don’t think it affects you because your district doesn’t have a lunatic fringe, it still does.” Documentarian Ken Burns recently declared, “The U.S. is facing the greatest threat it ever has,” she said. It’s the fourth great crisis of this nation, after the Civil War and two world wars.

And the mid-term elections in a few weeks will tell us a lot about how and whether we can ride out this crisis, said Strauss. A lot of “dark money” is being poured into elections, including school board elections, a situation that erodes public trust. The goal: elect school board members promising to turn educational decisions over to parents, ban books, and make life difficult for LGBTQ students. Educators, she said, need to be clear about the threat your institutions are facing and the depth of that threat.

Note how frequently opponents of public schools refer to them as “government schools.” We all know that different families have different priorities and values. But when these issues are resolved through a political process of electing school board members, citizens and parents have to struggle against each other to have the school reflect their views. Inevitably, “some parents will lose in that struggle.”



NSR Executive Director, Dr. Steve McCammon

“What you are up against is that people do not believe that diversity is a fundamental American value.
(CONT’D ON PAGE 6)

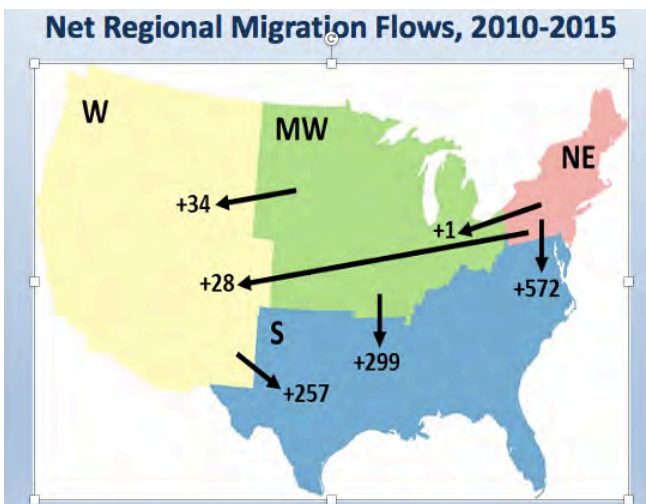
DISRUPTIVE DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

“We are in the midst of disruptive demographic change that will transform the workforce, transform business, transform our society, and our schools,” reported University of North Carolina demographer James Johnson, Jr.. He thinks of these changes as “gale force wind gusts” that will simultaneously “brown” and “gray” America.



UNC Demographer Dr. James Johnson, Jr.

We’re Moving. In a series of remarkable charts, Johnson demonstrated that since 1910, the South’s share of population growth in the U.S. has increased dramatically. (The South includes Texas.) Regionally in recent years, the population has moved from the Northeast and Midwest to the West and South.



- From 1910–1930 the South’s share of population growth was 27%.
- By 2010–2020 that figure grew to 51%.

- This growth was fueled in part by regional migration from elsewhere—the Northeast, the Midwest, and the West.
- Five magnet states accounted for much of this migration growth—Texas, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia.
- The South has, in fact, “risen again.”

We’re Browning. Most population growth in the U.S. represents people of color, much of it driven by immigrants.

- In 1910 the U.S. had 10.3 million immigrants; by 2018, that figure reached 44.7 million.
- The 2018 foreign-born population in the U.S. was 44% Hispanic, 27% Asian, about 18% White, and 9.5% Black.
- The multi-racial population in the U.S. grew by 276% between 2010 (9 million) and 2020 (33.8 million).
- The browning of America is immigration-driven, not only in terms of numbers, but also in terms of age as most immigrants are younger, with more women of childbearing age.

We’re Graying. A “silver tsunami” is about to hit us as our population ages.

- There were 2,300 centenarians globally in 1950; there were 82,000 in 2016, and 589,000 are expected in 2060.
- Life expectancy has increased from 47.3 years in 1900 to 78.3 today.
- From 2010–2019 the population aged 65 or older increased 34%, while the working-age population (18–64) increased just 3.5%.
- School leaders need to be prepared for more students of color, more multiracial children, more children traumatized by the loss of parents during the pandemic, and more children from single-parent homes.
- About 50% of females are now in the formal workforce with implications for policy around child care.
- Those in their prime working years (25–44) actually decreased by 3.4% from 2000–2010 and grew by just 6.6% from 2010 to 2019.

Implications. Interspersed throughout his presentation, Johnson offered several comments about the implications for society and for schools. (CONT’D ON PAGE 6)

JIM CROW'S PINK SLIP

Leslie Fenwick, recently retired as Dean of the Howard University School of Education and author of *Jim Crow's Pink Slip* (Harvard University Press, 2022), began her presentation by thanking educators for their “selflessness and service on behalf of our nation and the cause of democracy.” She said, “I was watching superintendents all over the country negotiate the storms with intelligence, and grace and courage, and goodwill. We thank you for breathing life into our state constitutions and working to see that the constitutional right to an education promised our children is actualized.”

She had us eating out of her hand!



Dr. Leslie Fenwick

While often not put into practice, the “poetic and inspiring” language in our state constitutions remains “living and breathing” in our founding documents. “They are not dead. And neither is our nation’s history.”

Fenwick urged superintendents to remember as they implement their responsibilities that they must educate their communities to remember we need a broadly educated citizenry to preserve our democracy.

If we are to avoid a racially divisive future, she argued, we need to understand our past. In that endeavor, she offered five recommendations about how to move productively forward.

First, to her surprise she found broad agreement among 13 leaders she consulted that what is needed in K–12 education is **revolution**, not reform, or restructuring, or transformation. We need, she said a reordering of foundational assumptions around “equity, increased educational attainment, and improved life outcomes for all students.” Why have we not acted on 30 years of research demonstrating that in schools serving students of color (with 50% on free or reduced-price lunch), these students are 70% more likely than their peers in other schools to have a teacher without certification or a college major in their subject? How, in short, can we continue to “educationally malnourish” so many students?

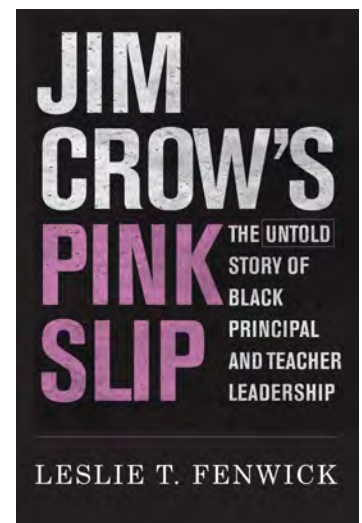
Second, our revolution must be oriented around the basic **principles of democracy and commonly acknowledged cornerstones of democracy**. The rule of law, the common good, human dignity, and respect are widely accepted values and can frame a conversation to move the country forward in productive ways.

Next, we need to attend to **structural inequalities tied to outdated cultural attitudes and school funding mechanisms**.

All of that needs to change, she argued, citing old “diversity training modules as *vacuous benevolence* that ignored historical achievements of which people of color were justly proud.

Fourth, let’s **divest from the deficit perspective** about Black and Latinx students. Unfortunately, “We’ve been trained to be skeptical and question positive information because so little positive information of consequence is disseminated.”

How many of you, she asked, believe that there are more Black men in prison than in college? Research at Howard University debunks this claim. In fact there are nearly three times as many Black men in college as in prison (1.6 million to 640,000). “So, I encourage all of us to dump the litany of negativity.” (CONT’D ON PAGE 6)

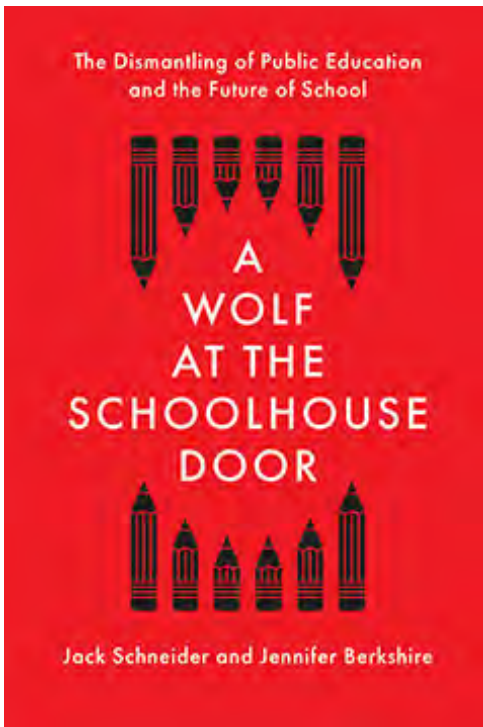


WOLF AT THE DOOR

It was a tipping point many years in the making.

For a small but vocal band of neo-liberals and libertarians, the 2017 appointment of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education opened the door, after 40 years of struggle, to school privatization and vouchers championed by the Federal government.

Remember, said Jack Schneider, co-author of *A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door* (and an associate professor at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell), that President Reagan “wanted to introduce a Federal voucher in the 1980s. There was tremendous opposition to it from groups all over the ideological spectrum. What the advocates of vouchers learned from that was that it wasn’t their time. . . . They needed to bide their time.”



Explaining the title of the book, Schneider’s co-author, journalist Jennifer Berkshire, who teaches at Yale University, said that the vision of charter and voucher advocates “was very simple. Take state funding and give it directly to parents. Let parents spend the funding on whatever they see fit to spend it on. . . . It just so happens that we’re now at the moment where their opportunity has arrived.”



*Valerie Strauss (l) leads discussion of *A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door* with Jennifer Berkshire and Jack Schneider.*

In the introduction to their book, Berkshire and Schneider point out that when asked if the “Coronavirus pandemic was an opportunity to advance the cause of private school choice, DeVos responded, ‘Yes, absolutely.’ Then as schools across the country confronted the crisis and its unprecedented financial consequences, DeVos remained single-mindedly focused on the privatization agenda . . . [and] in the weeks after schools shut down encouraged states to use Federal funds to help parents pay private school tuition. She demanded that school districts share millions of aid dollars with wealthy private schools.”

The book was a “response to a puzzling question,” the authors noted in the introduction. “Why had conservative policy ideas, hatched decades ago and once languishing due to lack of public and political support, suddenly roared back to life in the last five years or so?” A major part of the answer is that “lawmakers, state officials, think tanks, and advocacy groups endlessly repeat claims about the shortcomings of the existing system, hiding their racially conservative vision of schooling beneath banally familiar language.”

“‘Education reform’ is a baggy, ill-defined concept that means both everything and nothing. It mostly focuses on transforming the governance structures of schools,” the authors wrote. “Market advocates . . . push for privately run schools with merit pay for teachers because they maintain that the private sector is a more efficient delivery mechanism.”

During a panel discussion led by *The Washington Post*’s Valerie Strauss, Berkshire and Schneider made several observations: (CONT’D ON PAGE 6)

FALTERING DEMOCRACY (CONT'D)

They do not believe in the melting pot. They don't believe in the America that you do." Betsy DeVos once referred approvingly to Margaret Thatcher's statement that, "There is no such thing as society." Enemies of public schools, said Strauss, believe that nothing is accomplished except through individuals. "There's a pervasive selfishness to it all."

We do need more civic education, she argued. "The country spends \$50 per student on STEM fields and just five cents on civics. People need to develop the ability to explore complex issues and deal with multiple points of view. It would be valuable if students had a role in school governance.

She concluded: "You are on the front lines. Remember that most Americans want your schools to succeed. I'm not ready to give up hope that schools will."

***DEMOGRAPHY (CONT'D)***

- Men are selectively withdrawing from the labor market.
- Corporations' difficulty in attracting workers is not only that people don't want to work for the wages offered; it's that the pool of prime-working-age adults is very shallow.
- Deaths of despair (suicide and substance abuse) are rising.
- Up to 5 million children have lost parents during the pandemic.

Check out the data [on the UNC webpage](#). You, your board, and your community will be richly repaid with a careful study of these graphs.

WOLF AT THE DOOR (CONT'D)

- Other than choice and competition, we don't have a way of talking about our schools. How can we better market public schools in our communities?
- Inequality is growing starker and the stakes for parents are increasing sharply. Parents have a sense that one wrong step can derail a child's future.
- We have to interrogate the meaning of school failure. We are dealing with students of color, many of them living in poverty, or whose parents don't speak English, or who have disabilities of one kind or another. You don't see these challenges in non-public schools.

- Solid research shows that public schools actually have better outcomes than private schools when income is held constant.
- Everyone understood how damaging testing under *No Child Left Behind* was, but the education community was afraid to talk about it.
- Polling and focus groups show that the general public is shocked when citizens learn that vouchers turn the treasury into a piggy bank for people who have never sent their children to public schools.

In the two years since the book was published, vouchers and charters have emerged as a litmus test for conservatives and advocates of choice. They feel they have the wind at their back.

"Educators," Berkshire and Schneider concluded in their Q & A with Strauss, "need to understand these issues, because they are coming and they are coming to your state."

JIM CROW'S PINK SLIP (CONT'D)

"Let's see where more nuanced research and reporting leads Black students and adults and the nation." Instead of looking at what's wrong, let's start looking for what's right.

Finally, **learn the lessons of the failed desegregation efforts** that followed *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. The *Brown* decision did not require that Black schools be closed, with students bussed to White schools. It didn't require that roughly 100,000 Black principals and teachers be automatically (and illegally) handed a pink slip, while "they were replaced by less qualified and less experienced White educators."

There was no reason to implement *Brown* in that way, said Fenwick. Interpreting desegregation as something that related only to students was a fundamental mistake. The right way to implement *Brown* would have been to integrate students, administrators, and teachers.

Fenwick closed by quoting President Lyndon Baines Johnson, who started his career as a teacher and never imagined he'd sit in the Oval Office. "Somehow," said Johnson, "you never forget what poverty and hatred can do. . . . But now I have the power and I'll let you in on a secret. I mean to use it!"

So should we, concluded Fenwick.

PANEL OF SPEAKERS

One of the highlights of the meeting was a panel, made up of all the symposium speakers with the exception of Leslie Fenwick, who had to leave early for another engagement. The panel opened up new avenues for discussion as these experts answered questions from the superintendents.

How to respond to negative ads? Look at Phi Delta Kappan's polling about public attitudes toward public schools, said **Schneider**. The closer respondents are to real public schools, the more they like them.

"You need to understand," **Berkshire** said, "that the angry voices of parents right now represent a small minority. People are almost universally opposed to banning books. When you consider how divided we are, it's pretty amazing to see that kind of universal agreement."

Board disruptions. What to do about board disruptions, was another issue. Limiting people to two minutes or ten speakers, said **Strauss**, isn't a good solution. Alternatively, suggested **Schneider**, find other spaces for people to have these discussions, so that board meetings are appropriately limited to the board's business.

What about background issues? Above the iceberg waterline, we can have discussions about the purposes of schools, but below the waterline we have innumerable difficult issues including race, class, and income inequality.

Johnson said educators needed to be clear about who their "parents" are. A lot of children are being raised by grandmothers in their 80s. How do you organize a parent-teacher conference in that situation, he asked.

Engage, he said, in what is known as "motivational interviewing." When something crazy is said, "Ask the speakers, 'What's the basis of your point?' They figure out pretty quickly that what they are saying is stupid." "I'm not sanguine about that," said **Strauss**. "Ideologues aren't open to persuasion. They don't change their minds. How do you contain the crazies?"

Big questions superintendents should ask. What is the most important question superintendents should be asking in their communities? **Berkshire** responded with a statement of her delight in interviewing rural superintendents. Rural superintendents know their communities will wither away if they don't provide what their kids need.



Equity was the issue that framed this for **Johnson**. Superintendents need to ask what their institutions need to do to deal with the structural inequities that exist in our society and in our schools. **Strauss** suggested asking a simple question: "How can you help me?"

What about the U.S. Department of Education? **Strauss** observed that the Federal department doesn't set education policy. That's determined in the White House Domestic Policy Council, while funding is set by Congress.

A lot of what we are fighting about around education is the view that the revolution to expand individual rights went too far, said **Berkshire**. Others think it didn't go far enough. "The terrain on which that battle will be fought is through the civil rights arm of the department."

How to counteract ALEC? The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) puts out a lot of draft state legislation encouraging charters, vouchers, and privatization. How do we counteract that? **Schneider** urged forging closer relationships between districts and local schools of education. Universities can help a lot with research, he thought.

Coming down the pike. Apart from vouchers and charters, what other issues are coming our way with potential to further harm public schools?

- **Berkshire:** efforts to weaken or eliminate teacher licensure requirements.
- **Strauss:** efforts to eliminate teacher pay based on experience and replace it with merit pay.
- **Schneider:** deepening resegregation of American schools that is already well underway.

ROBERT H. KOFFAWARD

Henry Pettiegrew, superintendent of East Cleveland City School District, received the Robert H. Koff Award, named in honor of one of the founders of the Roundtable. The award recognizes educators committed to supporting excellent schools, healthy families, and strong communities.



A LEARNING CIRCLE

On Sunday morning, weary superintendents gathered to make sense of what they had heard in the previous two days, in a learning circle led by George Thompson, former CEO of the Schlechty Center.



A number of points were made as superintendents were asked to reflect on what they had heard that influenced their role as leaders:

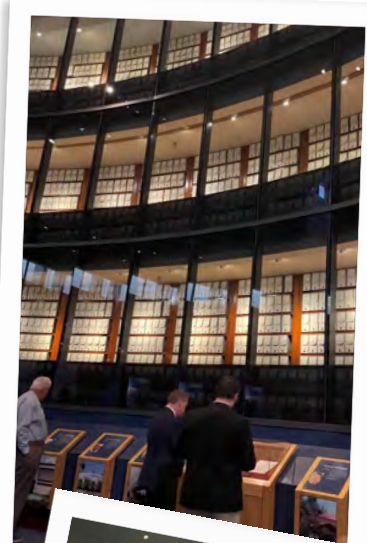
- Universal agreement on the value and power of the presentations made over the prior two days.
- The importance of educating local citizens on the significance of public schools as community assets.
- Be the thermometer, not the thermostat. It is vital to listen first to community leaders, including student leaders.
- Develop some strategy to deal with the negative stories out there. Let people know that our schools do things that draw the community together.

- Understand that 1954 and its *Brown* decision were not that long ago.
- We have to reteach civics, understanding that the marginalized in our society are now a majority in schools.

- As a Black boy, I never thought of myself as a minority. It was only when I came into contact with the White majority that I began to understand the demographics of this country.
- I wish the work was just about literacy and math. It's not. We need to continue the work of helping people understand the racial history of the United States.
- Where are the rest of us? In White, conservative states, educators do not want to step up.
- Leslie Fenwick should be leading the educational discussion in this country. She was able to discuss the problems in a realistic yet optimistic way.

THE CARTER CENTER

Here are some of the highlights of our tour showing what a wonderful center this is, superintendents imagining themselves in the Oval Office, the Carters' wedding outfits, and gathering on the Center grounds.



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