

Education Reform Consensus Grows on Fixing Urban Schools

The ground in the battle for school reform is beginning to change

By *Mortimer B. Zuckerman*

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One of the most important yet least noticed rallies in Washington during Barack Obama's inauguration week took place at Cardozo High School, a struggling inner-city school located not far from the steps of the U.S. Capitol where the chief justice swore in the nation's first African-American president. The Martin Luther King Jr. Day rally at Cardozo's run-down auditorium drew a coalition of strange but influential bedfellows who spanned the political spectrum, from the civil rights firebrand Al Sharpton to Republican Sen. John McCain. All of the speakers were united by a single cause: A determination to tackle the nation's last, great civil rights battle—the shameful achievement gap between minority and white students.



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Despite its humble setting, the Cardozo rally helped mark a sea change in the battle to fix our ailing urban schools. Hosted by the Education Equality Project and its odd-couple cochairmen, Sharpton and Joel Klein, the reformist schools chancellor of New York City, it was a remarkable and riveting piece of political theater that would have been all but unthinkable just a few years ago. In a land where education opportunity is supposed to be the great equalizer, the average black or Hispanic 12th grader in the United States today has the reading and math skills of a white eighth grader. White parents would be up in arms if their 17-year-old sons and daughters had the cognitive skills of 13-year-olds, and Sharpton and African-American mayors like Cory Booker of Newark, Adrian Fenty of Washington, and Kevin Johnson, the former basketball star and new mayor of Sacramento, Calif., are equally fed up.

Yet what was most striking about the rally at Cardozo was not just Sharpton's call to responsibility but the bipartisan lineup that stepped up to challenge the education establishment. A parade of black, Democratic mayors declared they no longer would defend the practices that hurt minority students. The Democratic Party, Booker declared, had sometimes gone "the wrong way on education." He concluded: "I am no longer concerned with right and left. I just want to go forward!"

None of the speakers at the rally fell back on tired nostrums to excuse the poor performance of minority students or to justify the need for new spending. Not a single civil rights leader said that disadvantaged students are too burdened by poverty to perform well in school. They did not say that the solution to the achievement gap was to shower new money on urban schools. Nor did anyone suggest that achievement

tests were inherently unfair to minority students and should not be used under the No Child Left Behind

Act to hold schools, principals, and teachers accountable for student performance. In fact, this generation of school reformers believes that schools should be more accountable for student learning, not less.

No bipartisan tableau at the rally was more striking than the joint appearance of Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, on her last day in office, and her successor, Arne Duncan. Spellings and Duncan affirmed that they, too, believed closing the achievement gap was the nation's enduring civil rights challenge. Even in the face of poverty, great schools matter, Duncan suggested.

In his inaugural address, Barack Obama took on those people who are deeply skeptical of the possibility of change in many aspects of American life. "What the cynics fail to understand is that the ground has shifted beneath them—that the stale political arguments that have consumed us for so long no longer apply."

Mr. President, the ground in the battle for school reform is beginning to shift, too. Just ask them at Cardozo High.

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