



A Wake Up Call: Choosing Community Over Comfort Zones

Kelly Allin Butler, Executive Director

Like the wake up call that rings through the dark morning in a strange hotel room, citizens in this democracy of ours need a wake up call to pierce the potentially darker day for public schools. Some will say that it couldn't get any darker for public schools, but there are many places where public schools are excellent and many people have rallied and are working to turn around those that need help.

One such group is Parents for Public Schools (PPS), a national organization of grassroots parents who is sounding a legitimate and important wake up call to their communities – for the sake of their communities. No longer satisfied to observe from the sidelines, PPS members are shirking the parent involvement paradigm from **external, casual participants** to **essential, active partners**.

A similar wake up call came a decade ago, warning that we were a “nation at risk.” In some public schools violence persists, graduates’ proficiencies are still questionable, and the trend toward racial and economic isolation has been documented. But you will also find, many good public schools in towns across America – schools that are safe, that uphold high academic standards that embrace the racial and economic diversity of their communities.

What do the good schools have in common? Good schools enjoy some core of community support and recognition that the public school is an essential building block of that community. Good schools enjoy positive action, not just politically correct lip service.

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The spirit of public school reform must be adopted by the whole community if it is to make a difference. We will continue “at risk” as long as public schools are abandoned by the very constituencies they need to survive. These grassroots activists – parents and others – are essential to reversing erosion, promoting excellence and demanding equity.

How long must the wake up call echo before it is heeded by the citizenry as a whole? In towns all across America, persistent criticism, massive flight and despair – especially by the middle class – continue to drain our public schools and our urban centers of important energy, resources, and diversity. How long before we agree that equity in education (i.e., good public schools for everyone) is the solution to most of our ills. And how long before community-minded individuals, not just public school parents, begin to own this problem?

Some worry about handing our children the national debt. I believe a more tragic legacy will be the racial and economic segregation that today's actions and apathy are fostering. The growing isolation between the “haves” and the “have nots” means some retreat to comfortable comfort zones, while others struggle to make ends meet.

It starts with the privilege of denial: The privilege of some to flee to protected isolation and personal solutions, denying that we are all important parts of a shared community – indeed, we need each other. But the wake up call is signaling the once-safe, still posh neighborhoods that are falling prey to angry crime. And it is echoing in the halls of many public schools. This is a wake up call we cannot afford to ignore. Too many have already pulled the covers over their heads. Or worse, have climbed out of bed to the perception of higher ground.

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The conversation is painful and familiar. “How can you send your children to public schools?” Yet, when asked if the public schools were good would they choose them, the answer is always a resounding “yes”! Okay, so why is it my job to fix the schools and when did you last visit a public school to see for yourself? We cannot pretend that public schools only serve and only affect those children who go to them. The quality of public schools affects each of us – whether or not we have children in these schools. All of us who own property, who need skilled workers, who want productive citizens. All of us who value community should be active in public school improvement.

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There are other prevailing assumptions. That public schools are inferior and cannot be fixed, and that those of us who choose public schools are sacrificing our children. Not so. Many of us choose public schools, even when other options may be available, because we know first hand that the quality of the education is really fine – and we've worked to make it so. We choose public schools because we want our children to contribute to and benefit from the diversity that is best revealed there. We know that our persistent involvement can make a difference, not just for our own child, but for all children.

Don't push that snooze button. Just because you are privileged enough to exercise another option, doesn't mean you should. Even if your local school is less than satisfactory, consider what might happen if a whole community of citizens and parents organized to make changes. Changes from the inside out. Bureaucracy, after all, is just a collection of people.

It can be your job to help fix the schools, because it can be in your interest. At least to the same degree that making sure you have a responsive fire department and regular garbage collection is in your interest. Aren't these benefits (and shared responsibilities) of living in community? If these things don't exist, don't we all suffer?

Has personal sacrifice for the common good been replaced by survival of the fittest? It is true some will graduate if not to a "private" world, at least to an economically insulated one. The economically fittest do survive, but not without some expense and significant casualties to the whole. Interdependence is a good thing and our children will need to master it to survive in the world of tomorrow. We, as adults, must embrace it first.

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So how do we answer this wake up call? First, we must stop dreaming about the good old days and believing that we tried to fix what was not broken. The public schools have always been broken for some. We must get on with helping all schools handle the complex lives of our

children and we must believe it is possible. We must heed the call by not assuming that all public schools are bad or dangerous or inferior. In fact many, many public schools provide the very best education available. We must replicate these successes, and we must encourage parents to make informed decisions that can happen only by visiting public schools to see for themselves.

Next, we must know that the wake up call is for each of us. Making changes from within – as part of the system and without creating another system – is far more effective than leaving and heaving criticism from the perimeter and diluting already scarce community resources. This wake up call is to stop laying blame and stop bailing out. If you are a parent in the public schools, the job is yours. You must be accountable, and you must get involved in a meaningful way. Productive involvement can take many forms: educating local Realtors[®], enlisting corporate support, filling in classroom gaps, building a bridge to the school board, enlightening the media.

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If you have no school-age children or are a parent that has opted out, you are not absolved of your responsibility to deliver whatever resources you can (personal and community) to strengthen the educational opportunity for all those community members who depend on the public schools to become productive citizens. If for no other reason, it is in your self-interest. No one is fully protected from the impact a bad public school system can have on a community.

Today 43.5 million children attend public schools. We can no longer tolerate their abandonment – whether physically (by flight) or psychologically (by neglect). It takes very little imagination to see where this trend will take us. If you are a parent, your voice is needed on the front lines.

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Butler is a parent of three public school children and the Executive Director of Parents for Public Schools, Inc. a national, grassroots organization based in Jackson, Mississippi that advocates community-wide support of public education.

***For information about Parents for Public Schools, Inc.,
please call 1-800-880-1222 and put your interest into action.***