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The Crucial Voice of the People, Past and Present: A Second Edition of Education's Missing Ingredient

Victoria M. Young

***Foreword***

Gary M. Ratner

In this remarkable book, Idaho veterinarian, parent, school volunteer and education advocate, Dr. Victoria Young, raises some of the most fundamental questions confronting the future of American public education. Do the American people genuinely believe in providing equal educational opportunity for our millions of children in low-performing schools? Do America's citizens understand what public policies have resulted in severely unequal and inadequate education, particularly for disadvantaged children? Since the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) high-stakes testing strategy has widely failed to turn around our low-achieving schools and is causing serious harms, is there an alternative strategy that works? What will it take to profoundly redirect America's fundamentally flawed and destructive "tests and sanctions" laws and policies toward actually helping schools improve and providing all our children a good education?

At root, The Crucial Voice of the People: Past and Present is a call to action for America's citizens to stop being passive about the test and sanctions strategy that many politicians and the education establishment have imposed on our public schools nationwide over the last two decades. Young powerfully reminds us that we, America's citizens, are the ultimate source of political power and public policy in our democracy. We, the people, need to learn about what "reform" policies have been imposed, what's wrong with them, and how they need to be changed. Then, we must speak out publicly and work together to make sure that our lawmakers and the education establishment stop perpetuating our failed high-stakes testing strategy. Instead, they must concentrate on helping schools improve. The key is doing what works in school leadership, instruction, curriculum, school climate and parent and community involvement and support.

How, you might ask, did an accomplished veterinary doctor from Idaho - whose profession involves diagnosing and treating cattle and horses - become knowledgeable about the history and policy of American public education and committed to trying to improve America's low-achieving public schools? After getting her bachelor of science and doctoral degrees at Michigan State University, Young and her husband moved west, ultimately to the city of Caldwell, Idaho. As a grateful beneficiary of a good education, Young was anxious that both of her children received a good education, too.

She chose to enroll her son and daughter in Caldwell's Title I, low income, public schools. Like American parents generally, Young wanted to have trust in her children's schools and teachers. But then the trouble started.

After getting her son on the bus for the first day of kindergarten, Young drove to the elementary school and discreetly watched to be sure he made it safely into the building. What she found were kindergarteners and first graders dropped off - by themselves - into a partially unfenced school yard, exposed to the street, without any adult supervision. Although she repeatedly raised concerns with the

school's administration about the lack of security and supervision in the school yard, 18 years later there was still no security fence.

While volunteering two days a week in her son's second grade class, Dr. Young noticed that about "20-30 percent of the kids were exhibiting various signs of having learning difficulties." When she mentioned this to the teacher, the teacher resignedly said: "I think you are looking at our future dropouts." Apparently, she did not realize that Young's son was in that group.

As a result of such experiences, Young spent 11 years volunteering in her children's schools. Concerned not just about her own children, but for all the children who were similarly being denied a high quality education, Vicki went further. She devoted 18 years advocating in her children's schools, school district and the Idaho legislature, focused on improving school safety, curriculum and instruction and against high stakes-testing.

Armed with extensive personal experience as a parent, volunteer and advocate, and after extensive reading of important education and related texts, Young wrote the first edition of this book, published in 2009. The book's goal is to overcome our nation's longstanding denial of equal educational opportunity to millions of students, especially those in thousands of low-achieving schools and districts nationwide serving concentrations of disadvantaged children. Its approach combines the tradition of Biblical prophecy - to call upon Americans' deepest moral duty to "do unto others as we would have them do unto us" - with our deepest democratic principle - to provide equal rights for all citizens. Its message is directed to you and every individual American: our economic, political and social strength and well-being as a nation depend on *you* to overcome the blight of grossly inadequate public education for millions of our nation's children!

Continuing to read widely in the field after publishing the first edition, one of the things Young found was my own work critiquing NCLB and advocating dramatic shifts in its policies. Young initially contacted me in spring 2011 in her capacity as Chair of the Information Coordinating Committee of the national Save Our Schools (SOS) March and Rally. I was immediately intrigued by her unusual interest, experience and knowledge about school improvement issues. Finding much common ground in our respective interests and concerns, in summer 2011 we co-led a workshop at the SOS Conference on how to lobby Congress to restructure NCLB. Working together highlighted the depth of Young's grassroots experience, her knowledge, enthusiasm and dedication.

The second edition follows the basic structure of the first. The early chapters describe serious school problems that Vicki confronted involving school security and reading, math and science instruction, and her attempts to improve the situations. The middle chapters expand the inquiry nationwide by exploring basic deficiencies in the federal NCLB law and various states' high-stakes testing requirements. The last chapters focus directly on solutions: what policies should be adopted instead, and what must citizens do to change public policy?

The book provides a wide range of valuable information and insightful ideas and recommendations. Key themes include:

- The reasons unequal educational opportunity persists include the lack of transparency and exclusion of the people by America's political and educational leaders, the people's failure to hold the education system's leaders accountable, and the self-serving role of the "educational-industrial complex."
- Substantially improving low-achieving schools cannot be done just by adding discrete "programs," but requires a comprehensive "change process" or "theory of action."
- A lot is already known about the contents of what works to improve low-achieving schools, including the common elements of successful school turnarounds.
- "Community education coordinators," housed in, and drawing on the expertise of, the Cooperative Extension Service, should be employed in communities with "chronically low-performing schools" to help educate citizens about school improvement problems and solutions and to facilitate change.
- The federal role in elementary and secondary education needs to change profoundly: (i) from imposition of "tests and sanctions" to helping schools improve, returning toward the "community schools" concept of the original (1965) Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA); (ii) from mandating tests and improvement goals for all public schools to restricting mandates to schools in "dysfunctional communities" and focusing especially on providing "experienced experts to assist them in evaluating their problems and their solutions;" and (iii) from holding schools accountable for continuously raising state standardized test scores to holding states and low-performing schools and districts accountable for implementing systemic educational improvements known to work.
- To enable such profound changes in American law and public policy to occur requires first changing public opinion to support the changes. (So far, politicians and the education establishment have not listened to urgings for the fundamental changes that are necessary.)
- To change public opinion, we, the citizens, must educate ourselves to gain knowledge about the real causes and solutions for low levels of student learning, especially in schools and school districts serving concentrations of disadvantaged children.
- Then, we, the people, must organize together and take democratic "social action" to demand that politicians and educators make the necessary profound policy and legal changes ("revolution") at the federal, state and local levels.

The book strengthens its case with powerful quotations from outstanding thinkers about American education and democracy over the last 250 years. For example, it highlights John Adams' insight that "knowledge alone ... can preserve [the people] from tyranny" and Horace Mann's observation that "in this country...[i]t is only by enlightening and concentrating [public] opinion that powerful effects [in promoting education] can be produced."

I believe that The Crucial Voice is particularly timely right now for two major reasons. First, though NCLB's test and sanctions strategy has itself demonstrably failed, Congress has likewise failed for more than four years past the due date to replace it. While the Administration's "waivers" temporarily relieve participating states of some of NCLB's most egregious mandates, the waivers themselves are much too test-driven, fail to concentrate on helping schools improve, and leave some states still subject to NCLB in its entirety. Citizen action is desperately needed now to break the stalemate between Republicans and Democrats over reauthorizing ESEA and to direct both parties what the proper federal role should be.

Instead, the people must come forward and finally say: this American "Emperor" of tests and sanctions - which has been dominating America's so-called "school reform" for the last 20 years - "has no clothes!" This is the critical time to do it: while the ESEA is still awaiting reauthorization and its direction can still be profoundly altered.

Second, from the "Orange Revolution" to the "Arab spring" and the "Tea Party," this is an extraordinary historical period in which citizens - in both democracies and autocracies around the world - have been organizing and speaking out to demand changes in leadership and public policy. Most relevantly, in mid-2012, a dramatic grassroots movement against high-stakes testing has begun in the U.S., spearheaded by school boards in Texas and Florida. This citizens' movement should be seen as a significant step toward the bedrock reforms that The Crucial Voice is advocating.

This is a critical moment in the history of American public education. Will the United States perpetuate its demonstrably failed and harmful test and sanctions-driven "school reform" strategy, unknown to the leading "education" nations? Or will we instead shift our strategy to helping our low-achieving schools improve, and our students learn, by doing what works? Whether or not millions of our children will receive a good education - sufficient for them to successfully participate in, and contribute to, America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century - hangs in the balance.

If you'd like to learn first-hand about real problems encountered by one caring parent and her children in schools serving concentrations of poor students and difficulties encountered in trying to solve them, this book will give you valuable insights. If you'd like to learn what you could do to help greatly improve the education these children receive by transforming America's current test and sanctions school reform strategy, this book will give you valuable guidance. If you're willing to consider actually jumping in and working to redirect our school reform strategy to a successful one that works *with* the people - not *against* them - this book will give you invaluable support and motivation to get started.

