



## **An Open Letter: To Parents and Non-“Education Reformers”**

Dear Fellow Non-“Reformers”:

I have serious concerns about the current direction of education reform in this country. And I am not alone. Yet I think many of us who try and express these concerns feel like we are small voices outside of what has become an echo chamber of reform rhetoric. Money, relationships and opinions inside of this echo chamber have become increasingly insular over the last fifteen years. The end result is a self-proclaimed “Education Reform” community that comes across as self-righteously willing to dismiss the concerns of those of us who are not part of the inner circle. This reform community includes foundations; government agencies at the federal, state and district level; schools and advocacy organizations that hire and work primarily with people who “share their core values” or are a “good fit with their culture” - in other words, people who think the same way. At the end of the day, Education Reform has become a community that seems unwilling to critically examine its core values and the educational culture that its preferred policies have created.

I think it is fair for Reformers to be frustrated by critics who intentionally misrepresent their efforts by saying things like, “Common Core State Standards are a government conspiracy.” It is also fair to say that many efforts to push back on Reforms, such as the testing opt-out movement, do not get to the heart of the values that are being debated and, taken alone, feel counter-productive. In fairness, however, it took frustration rising to the level of widespread student and parent testing opt-outs for Reformers to start paying attention to the concerns that many of us have been expressing for years.

Finally, I accept that many of us who disagree with current reform efforts may not have adequately articulated our core values and beliefs; nor have enough of us laid out concrete alternatives to Reformers’ three decade-old conception of a better system. So let me offer a starting point by sharing some of my concerns and the values that drive them.

### **To begin with:**

I am tired of being accused of not having high expectations for all children.

I am tired of being told that I do not understand the urgency of the education problems in this country.

I am tired of being dismissed as being satisfied with the status quo.

I am tired of being told that I just don’t want to do the hard work it takes to create an education system that meets the needs of all children.

I am tired of hearing words like “data”, “equity”, “individualized”, “personalized”, “grit”, “student engagement”, “health and wellness”, “rigor” “critical thinking” and “collaborative” when the policies and solutions that Reformers are promulgating ensure that most students will never experience or be most of these things during the years that they are in our public education system.

I am tired of sitting through presentations about the numerous disruptive, innovative ideas touted by entrepreneurs who have little to no understanding of human development, psychology, sociology, neuroscience, pedagogy, children, and the complexities inherent in an endeavor that is about the inner and outer workings of human beings.

I am tired of attending fundraising events where keynote speakers like Ken Robinson and Yang Zhao are paid tens of thousands of dollars to talk about ideas that reflect my core beliefs about the purpose of education and receive standing ovations ... only to watch Reformers walk back to their offices to continue their work as though they hadn't just applauded speakers who told them that what they are doing is the wrong thing to do.

Mostly, I am tired of simplistic conversations and policies that try to reduce the field that I have been working in and learning about for the last twenty years into slogans like “No Child Left Behind” and “Race to the Top” and “Waiting for Superman,” and schools that claim to be about “democracy,” “power,” and “ideas” all the while unconsciously diminishing and demeaning the students and educators inside of them.

## **So here is what I know:**

### ***About Children as Human Beings***

I know that every single child is a sacred being with unique skills, dispositions, talents and interests. And I believe that what our country, and the world, needs is for each child's unique potential to be seen, valued, nurtured and celebrated. I worry that the system Reformers are building is myopically centered on standards, which, while better than what we have had in the past, still capture only a fraction of what it means to be human.

I know that human beings are “gritty” learners and problem-solvers from the moment of birth. I know that until they are taught to do otherwise, children ask questions, think critically, make connections, collaborate, take risks and persevere to accomplish their goals. I worry that the system Reformers are building has so narrowed the definition of what it means to learn and grow that students are increasingly “disengaged” at school even though they are enthusiastically engaged in lots of other things. I worry that Reformers do not understand that students are disengaged because what they are being asked to do is not meaningful and relevant to their lives.

I know that what happens in the early years of a child's life sets a powerful foundation for how she will live out the rest of her life. I worry that the system Reformers are building is one that selectively values some skills and dispositions, while ignoring or undervaluing others; and then judges, labels and sorts accordingly. I worry that this system does psychic damage to children that is having a profound impact on their health and wellness both during their time in school and most likely for the rest of their lives.

I know, and research confirms, that children from birth to about eight develop across a range of abilities and skills at different rates and in different ways. I worry that the system Reformers are building labels too many young children as having ADHD, behavioral problems, disciplinary problems, learning disabilities, or as being “at-risk” or “high needs” because they have not reached an arbitrary set of milestones in reading and math at an arbitrary point in time. I worry that they and an entire educational-commercial complex are convincing parents that this narrow set of skills is more important than running, dancing, singing, drawing, playing, making friends, building, daydreaming, cooking, exploring, imagining, rule-breaking, empathizing ... the list goes on and on.

I know it should be acceptable to acknowledge that not every child will excel at the limited types of thinking and skills that we currently fixate on in schools. I know that math and science in the real world look different than the materials curriculum developers have chosen to include in their textbooks and materials – even if these materials are dressed up in “real world performance tasks.” I know that reading and writing should not be the primary leading indicators of success in school and life in an era when technology can translate writing to speech and vice versa. I worry that the system Reformers are building leaves no room for the type of nuanced conversations we would need to have to address these types of questions and possibilities.

I know that children are capable of more than we give them credit for and will rise to meet challenges that they consider worthy of their time, talent and passion. I worry that, despite grand statements about engaging all students, the system Reformers are building has no capacity to adapt to the concerns students convey, through their words or their disengagement, about the education they are receiving. I worry that Reformers’ actions send the message that students are incapable of making legitimate judgments about what they need.

### ***About the Purpose of Education***

I know that people find fulfillment and success in countless ways. I worry that the system Reformers are building defines “success” and “opportunity” in limited ways that demean the many ways in which people pursue opportunities and achieve happiness in life.

I know that actions are more powerful than words and that children become what they experience and do. I believe that children should grow into self-confident, courageous adults, who are not afraid to fail and get back up; who have a sense of wonder about the world and a desire to keep learning about it. I believe the world will benefit most from children becoming adults who are willing to dig deep to discover the things that matter most; who appreciate the value of long-term outcomes; and who are willing to stand up for their beliefs. I worry that the system Reformers are building punishes failure and sends the messages that it is better to succeed at easy things than risk failing at harder things. I worry that the system is squeezing the joy out of the learning process and leading students to believe that school is a task to be endured rather than an experience to be savored. I worry that this system keeps telling students what should matter, rather than empowering them to make decisions that reflect their unique talents and passions. And I worry that this system prioritizes short-term outcomes in the name of data collection and accountability rather than longer-term achievements that are harder to measure. Ultimately, I worry that our children will grow into adults who embody all of the small things they experience inside of the system Reformers are building, rather than the expansive potential they actually have.

I know that the universe of data and evidence and research we should be considering as we build an educational system that takes on the enormous task of meeting the complex needs of human beings is far larger than what many Reformers currently fund, reference and promulgate. I worry that in their urgency Reformers have neglected to consider the interdisciplinary research that provides important insight into the diversity of human capabilities, the nuances of healthy human development, and the needs of a changing world. I worry that the system Reformers are building reflects this lack of understanding and perpetuates an educational system that is essentially the same as it was in Europe in 1875.

I believe that just because groups of white men decided over the last two hundred years that reading, writing and a limited range of mathematical skills were the right indicators of “intelligence” we should not propagate that myth. I worry that the system Reformers are building perpetuates this status quo definition of what it means to be intelligent and educated.

I know that children should not spend dozens of years in higher educational or work environments that do not passionately engage them. I worry that the system Reformers are building focuses too much time telling children what they should know and do, and impressing on them all of the ways in which they aren't who Reformers think they should be. I worry that too many children will spend precious years conforming to those expectations rather than discovering who they are and what they want to do in life.

### ***About Schools, Teachers, and the Work of Teaching and Learning***

I believe that having “high expectations for all kids” means working with each child to identify the unique potential that lies at the intersection of her natural skills, dispositions and passions; and to support each child in exploring the ways in which that unique potential can help him to live a fulfilled life and contribute to society. I worry that the system Reformers are building reduces our expectations of students to the lowest common denominator of what is easy to measure in standardized ways so that we can gather lots of “data.” I worry that most of this data tells us very little about the things that matter the most.

I know that providing an “equitable”, “individualized”, “personalized” education doesn't mean getting all kids get to the same place, just at different rates. I believe it means recognizing that students need and want to get to different places in life, and providing them the skills, resources and supports needed to get there. I worry that the system Reformers are building is so centered on standardizing outcomes that it will never be able to meet the individualized needs of all students.

I know, and research demonstrates, that learning happens at the boundary of what a person thinks he can do and what he doesn't yet know he can do; but I also know that each person has limits at which learning stops and frustration ensues. I believe that “rigor” in education is about supporting each child individually as he discovers, examines and pushes against his real or perceived boundaries. I believe that since each child is unique, “rigor” looks different for different children in different aspects of their education. And I know that it will never be possible for every student to reach the same bar as every other student across all subjects. I know that this is not having “low expectations of children” but rather acknowledging that people are complex and that neurodiversity is a good thing. I worry that the system Reformers are building ignores these types of subtleties so that people can feel good talking about the “rigorous” education students are getting - even though we see that children aren't learning or thriving.

I know that teachers matter more than Reformers think they do. I know that each child is unique and needs different things; and that educators need to be unique and do different things well. I know that no one teacher can be everything for every student. I know that there is no uniform way for a teacher to be “effective” and that there is no good way to measure the complex impact a single teacher has on a single student – either in the short or long-term. I worry that the system Reformers are building will create a pipeline of teachers that does not reflect the diversity of personality, passions, skills, age and experience that we need to help all students thrive. I worry that the system Reformers are building pretends to know what “effective” looks like and is costing us millions of dollars to provide only the illusion that we are creating and retaining “effective” educators.

I know that the work that teachers and students do as they engage in deep, meaningful learning experiences is messy, subjective, non-linear, hard to reduce into easily measurable outcomes, and impossible to capture at the rate Reformers’ current notions of “accountability” demand. I worry that the system Reformers are building makes educators and students fearful of diving into the ambiguous yet rewarding space that constitutes real learning. I worry that this system is costing us precious time and money that could otherwise be spent building better learning experiences for students.

### ***About Improving the System***

I know that we need to do what is best for students even if it feels as though we will be undoing some of Reformers’ most recent efforts at systemic change. I worry that responses to current grassroots protests against the Reformers are inadequate, and include things like: “We need to stay the course” and “We should not do anything that jeopardizes the system we have built over the last ten years.” I worry that Reformers will keep trying to salvage what they have built even though it is not working for our children. I worry that Reformers have still not learned that we cannot tinker our way to a solution.

I know that what began as reform twenty years ago no longer qualifies as “Reform” and that many Reform organizations and advocates have become the institutionalized entities that they decried all those years ago. I know that what is needed for education to truly meet the needs of all students is a fundamental Transformation of the system. I worry that the solutions Reformers propose and the system they envision and are creating reflects the status quo of their prior ideologies and ideas.

I know that data is only useful if it helps us answer the questions we consider important. I know that everything we see, hear, experience and do is “data” and that our problem today is not a lack of data; it is that we are not clear on what questions we want to answer. I worry that the system Reformers are building has been focusing on a limited set of questions, which they think can be answered by “objective” and “quantifiable” data. I worry that discomfort with subjective and qualitative data will lead Reformers to reduce skills and dispositions like creativity and resilience into “data” that will completely undermine the essence of these complex human endeavors.

I know that every child should have access to a quality school where the approach to teaching and learning reflects the values of a child’s family and meets the needs of the child. I know that children from poor and minority backgrounds deserve the same range of educational options that children from wealthier and more privileged backgrounds enjoy. I worry that the system Reformers are building has been so narrowly concerned with test scores in math, reading and writing that it is

replicating “good” schools for poor and brown children where educators behave and students are treated in ways that would be entirely unacceptable in richer more privileged communities. I worry that the soft bigotry of low expectations means that these students are not being afforded the same opportunities for progressive, enquiry-based educational opportunities that the majority of Reformers do or will seek for their own children.

I know that there is great urgency around changing our education system but I also know that we cannot experiment with children’s lives. I worry that the system Reformers are building reflects a haphazard response to an urgent need. I worry that Reformers have tried small schools, charter schools, new standards, new assessments, accountability, educator effectiveness, more new standards, more new assessments, technology in schools ... the list is long ... with very little to show for the time and money spent. I worry that in their urgency Reformers have neglected to provide the time and resources needed for true change to take root. I worry that although Reformers have urgently done a lot, the repeated failure of their many efforts has cost two decades of students the most important years of their lives.

I know our children deserve more than what we are giving them today and more than the system Reformers claim staying the course will create. I worry that Reformers are not willing to live in the hard, messy, ambiguous space that it will take to build and maintain a system that will truly meet the individual needs of all children.

### ***About How We Move Forward***

I know that there are ways for our country to move from the system we have to one that reflects our highest hopes for our children’s education. I know that these are not solutions that can be encapsulated in catchy phrases and three-page policy briefs. I know that to move forward Reformers must stop behaving as though theirs are the solutions the rest of us have all been waiting for; and accept that many of those who disagree with their ideas have desires and expectations for children that are just as high, if not higher, than what current Reforms exemplify. We are mothers, fathers, students, educators and citizens who want to be – need to be – part of the conversation as we work to transform our system into one that respects, nurtures and works for all of our children.

I invite you and others who share these beliefs to join me in exploring solutions together at: [EducatingPotential.com](http://EducatingPotential.com) and on Twitter [@Ulcca](https://twitter.com/Ulcca).

Sincerely,

Ulca Joshi Hansen  
[ulca@educatingpotential.com](mailto:ulca@educatingpotential.com)