

Presbyterian Support for Public Education

As our Presbyterian/Reformed ancestors in faith came from Europe to what is now the United States, they brought with them not only a variety of hopes and dreams but also a support for education. They had Calvin's understanding that clergy must be well-educated and laypeople must be literate so that they, too, can understand God's word. Calvin believed that leadership for both church and society requires a comprehensive education so that people may deal well with all aspects of life. God and the common good were to be served by people using well the gifts they had been given. Doing this required an education that helped people to be good stewards of creation and to develop a just society. This covenantal understanding also led to the view that the responsibility for education lies with the whole of society.

Whether in the 1746 founding of the College of New Jersey (later known as Princeton), establishing elementary schools in northern New Mexico (well before New Mexico became a state in 1912), supporting public schools when those systems were established, creating initiatives to improve education, developing studies and reports, serving as public school teachers or on school boards, or lobbying at various levels of government for improvements in public education, U. S. Presbyterians long have shown their belief that a broad education and an education for the whole of society (not just an elite few) are important for the well-being of both church and society. The 219th (2010) General Assembly approved the recommendation from the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy that the GA affirm the long-standing commitment of the PC(USA) to public education as an essential institution contributing to the common good in a democratic society by its commitment to equip all children to be effective citizens, capable of living full and meaningful lives and contributing to their society.

In recent years public education has become a partisan political issue. In Iowa and around the US, public schools have been characterized as indoctrination centers for a liberal agenda. Legislators have sought to root out "divisive concepts" and material that might cause discomfort for white students. Funding for public schools has been limited, while large amounts of public funds have been devoted to non-public schools. Local control of education has been overtaken by the state with respect to curriculum content, banning of books, etc. Many who have supported these ideas do so as an expression of their Christian faith. Today we turn to four long-time educators who have approached their work with a faith perspective, in order to learn more about how we might regard the role of public education in our current context.

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Panelists:

Julie Gentz -- BA in elementary education from Wartburg College; MA in educational administration from the University of Iowa with 20+ post graduate hours in education. Taught in every grade K-12 for at least one year, including Gifted/Talented K-12 and At-Risk high school students. Served on state boards for gifted education. Worked as the assistant director of Distance Learning/ELL Department at Wm Penn University, as an adjunct professor in the teacher education classes, Principal of Seton Catholic Elementary in Ottumwa for 3 years, Adjunct professor online for graduate-level classes in English Language Learner certification programs for Morningside and Grandview Colleges, Adjunct professor for dual enrollment/Sr. Year Plus courses for high school students at Kirkwood Community College. Completed theology classes at Wartburg Theological Seminary.

Bill Peters – BA secondary education in Social Studies and MA in Educational Administration at U. of Wyoming; 10 years teaching Social Studies and English in public schools in California and Wyoming; 4 years as Associate Principal and 2 years as Head Principal at Campbell Co. HS in Gillette, Wyoming; 20 years as Head Principal at Newton, Iowa, Sr. High School; 2 years as Executive Dean at DMACC Newton. Member of First United Methodist Church in Newton.

Kathy Peterson – Attended one-room country school in N. Dakota, graduated high school, attended Junior College in Oregon before finishing BA in education at Central Washington U. Taught 7th and 8th grade in Lewiston, Idaho before earning a Masters in Counseling at North American Baptist Seminary and her doctorate at Iowa State. Taught psychology at Grand View Univ. for 34 years. Member of First Baptist Church in Newton.

Cheri Doane – Graduated from Newton High School, received AA in Liberal Arts at DMACC, BA in Communication Studies at Central College, and MA in Education, emphasis in Higher Education, at Iowa State. As Director of Civic Engagement at Central College oversaw academic service-learning, which involved developing partnerships with nonprofit organizations, collaborating with faculty to adapt courses to include a service-learning component. Traveled multiple times to study abroad programs in Europe and Mexico to provide professional development for program staff. Represented the college at conferences in the US and Europe, conducted faculty workshops across the US.