

Education Policy & Reform: What do YOU Think?

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The new school year is upon us, compelling the decision to highlight education policy in our first report to NASW-NJ members for 2015.

We want to raise awareness on the topic of education and policy and we hope to shed some light on this

crucial topic that affects our greatest resource – our children. As in most situations, there are no easy

answers. We don't propose to take a stand on solutions at this point, but we do believe that the issues warrant the attention of NASW-NJ members and leadership.

You may have noticed far more talk in the past year about public schools: education reform, common core standards, charter schools, and PARCC testing.

We believe the issues are important to all social workers because the children are our future whether you work directly with them or not and these issues are impacting their lives not only at school, but at home and in our communities.

Why should I care about education reform?

Policies on governing and funding public schools are being legislated at the state and national levels. Public school students, educators, employees, administrators, mental health professionals, special education advocates, and parents are seeing drastic changes occurring in public schools. Teacher accountability is highly emphasized for student test scores. There's more demand for data collection, and a more demanding curriculum.

Proponents of education reform say that dramatic changes are needed in order to make American schools produce graduates that are going to be prepared for employment in the global competitive market. They cite American students' test scores in math and science as compared to other countries' students, as evidence that our public schools are in need of major change. They believe that in order for students to achieve better outcomes, the curriculum needs to be more rigorous—especially in areas of math and science.

Critics of education reform say that although American public schools are not serving all students well, one reason why American test scores do not measure up, compared to our global peers, is that our system of public schools allows for and encourages the development of well-rounded students who are creative and innovative.

Countries whose focus is more on math and science test scores do not prioritize creativity and a social, emotional curriculum. Critics of education reform also believe that societal problems including poverty, distressed and violent communities and racism are larger underlying issues that contribute to poor school outcomes.

Why should I care about the common core?

These more rigorous standards were designed to ensure that students nationwide are achieving the same educational goals regardless of where in the country they live – urban, rural, or suburban. Criticisms of the

common core include that standards are developmentally inappropriate, and that the standards fail to take into consideration individual differences and learning needs.

For example, children in special education must be working toward the same standards as their typically developing peers. Critics also note that private schools, that often have much better educational outcomes, do not follow common core standards.

Proponents of common core standards say that many American students, including students with special needs and students living in poverty, are set up to fail when lower standards are established for them.

Charter schools are not a new phenomenon; however their presence is growing rapidly in this time of education reform. Charter schools are privately run, with public funding. When approved in a district, charters can enroll public school children, and tax dollars follow them. While charters are publicly funded, they do not answer to local boards of education and are not held to the same state and federal accountability measures.

Proponents of charter schools say that freeing up schools from the burden of teacher unions and tenure rules enables charters to do a better job, especially in historically failing districts.

Critics of charter schools say that charter schools take precious tax dollars away from already struggling districts, and they have concerns that not all students have equal opportunity to benefit from charter school attendance.

Some believe that charter schools take the best behaved students and leave behind those who are more difficult to educate with fewer resources, including students with

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special needs. Critics also argue that charters demonstrate their success by improving standardized test scores, but do not actually provide a better educational experience.

What is PARCC testing?

This is the topic that you're probably most likely to have heard about even if you don't work with children.

Initiated last school year, Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) testing is designed to assess students' mastery of the common core.

While standardized tests are not new in public education, critics of PARCC testing are concerned that the test was designed by a for-profit company and that its computer based format is problematic.

School districts spent precious resources on computer and Internet infrastructure in preparation for PARCC testing, and many believe that the teaching has been dramatically influenced by PARCC preparation.

Since PARCC focuses specifically on math and English language arts, many have expressed concerns that arts, social studies, and other important subjects have been neglected.

Critics of PARCC note that tying teacher evaluations to student PARCC test scores is unfair, as there are many factors that influence scores on standardized tests, including socioeconomic status.

Proponents of PARCC testing believe that school and teacher accountability for student achievement will result in better educational outcomes.

They propose that the higher standards

mandated by the common core must be assessed in order to ensure public schools are improving.

Do you want to learn more, add to this conversation, or bring other topics to the attention of our members?

We are a newly forming group, and are looking for members to join us in discussing these, and any other issues that may be of interest to those working with children and adolescents.

To join our special interest group email listserv, please email Renee Koubiadis, Advocacy Coordinator at rkoubiadis@naswnj.org with Children and Adolescents SIG in the subject line.

In our inaugural Children and Adolescents Special Interest Group (SIG) meeting on July 30, 2015, members passionately discussed a variety of issues, including poverty, child welfare, DSM5, education policy, and other areas of concern.

So You've Been Subpoenaed...Now What?

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Adapted from <http://www.naswdc.org/ldf/default.asp>

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