

Legislative History:

- February 6, 1986: Position statement on Public Education Issues adopted by the Board of Directors.
- April 16, 1996: Updated position statement to replace 1986 version recommended by the Education Subcommittee of the Domestic Public Policy Task Force.
- May 2, 1996: Recommended by Domestic Public Policy Task Force.
- May 8, 1996: Recommended by the Executive Committee.
- May 15, 1996: Board of Directors referred draft back to Task Force for revisions.
- October 2, 1996: Revised position recommended by the Domestic Public Policy Task Force.
- October 9, 1996: Amended and recommended by Executive Committee.
- October 16, 1996: Amended and adopted by the Board of Directors.

PRINCIPLES FOR EXCELLENCE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

A commitment to education is deeply rooted in Jewish tradition. From early rabbinic commentary to the contemporary American Jewish experience, schools have assumed a central role in creating and maintaining community. The importance of schooling is cited in the Talmud by teachers such as Simeon Ben Lakish who wrote "A town without schools is doomed to destruction" (Sabbath, 119b). Beyond the institutional role of the school, rabbinic literature provides insights into both the structure and methods for teaching students. This includes commentary on issues ranging from the acceptable number of students in a classroom to the style of instruction. Solomon Ibn Gabirol, a medieval Spanish philosopher and poet, underscored the necessity of educating children when he wrote "Learning in old age is like writing in sand, learning in youth is like engraving on stone."

More recently, writers, historians and sociologists have documented the significant role education has played in the American Jewish experience. In the United States, access to public education afforded immigrants Jews, as well as other newcomers, the foundation for future opportunity. For Jewish immigrants, historian Howard M. Sachar wrote, "All but closed off to them in Tsarist Russia, equality of educational opportunity ranked among the most treasured of the New World's blessings" (History of the Jews of America, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992, page 159).

The American Jewish community's continuing support of public education has been based upon the longstanding conviction that quality education is vital to preparing young people for full and productive participation in American society. Public schools provide an integral arena for bringing together the diverse groups which make up the population. They remain the "public spaces" where principles of pluralism and democratic participation are instilled and internalized.

The Milwaukee Jewish Council for Community Relations affirms that every child is entitled to quality public education regardless of geographic residence, economic status, or other life situations. We recognize that the educational achievement of each student affects society at large. Therefore the community as a whole has a responsibility to become involved in ensuring the success of public school students. Collaboration of students, parents, families, teachers, administrators and the community-at-large is an integral component in this effort.

The Council also recognizes that public schools, particularly in urban centers, are not consistently fulfilling their mandate to provide all children with the level of academic achievement and performance necessary to prepare them for the responsibilities of life and work. It recommends that efforts to improve the quality of public school education address the following principles:

- Enhancing school governance and decentralization.
- Developing and maintaining standards.
- Encouraging parental, family and community involvement.
- Promoting equitable financial support from government.
- Preparing students to learn.

While the Council endorses each of these as principles as necessary, we believe that no individual component is alone sufficient to resolve the issues and problems confronting public education. These criteria are set forth as broad principles rather than specific proposals. We recognize that they are neither exhaustive nor exclusive. Central to each of these principles is the involvement of the entire community in advancing these goals. Without it, real change is not possible.

The Council's positions on specific education reform proposals will be evaluated and judged using these five criteria. Support for any particular proposal will be considered within the framework of these principles, and reflect the degree to which they advance these goals.

- ENHANCING SCHOOL GOVERNANCE AND DECENTRALIZATION

Governance structures that remain as close as possible to the local school level are essential to successful school reform. Maintaining governance of schools close to the local level will enhance academic achievement because students, families, teachers, administrators and the community will have an increased level of ownership, responsiveness and accountability. The term "local school level" should not be limited to geographic boundaries. Rather, it should reflect the interests of those consumers of a specific educational institution. Decisions at the local level must not, however, diminish the strict separation of church and state critical to public education. Decision-making regarding issues within specific

institutions, including the allocation of financial resources, must be inclusive of the needs of the community served providing access to all responsible scholarly knowledge and ideas. Parental involvement in these decisions is crucial. Parents and families must be the school's primary partner, and schools must provide them with meaningful opportunities for involvement in decision-making, program design and implementation that impact their children's education.

• DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING STANDARDS

Educational standards have an important role in promoting school quality and reform. These standards need to be clearly articulated and based on sensible criteria. Further, standards should not be developed in a purely hierarchical manner, but rather should include those individuals or groups impacted by those standards. Standards must be developed which address assessment and evaluation, curriculum and instruction, staff development, leadership, school organization and climate. Providing the means and resources to reach these standards is as necessary as setting the standards. Students, teachers, administrators, families and the community will have a role in assuring that the standards are met.

• SUPPORTING PARENTAL, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Educational reform needs the support, influence, and activism of the community in addition to family involvement. Schools are highly dependent on and vulnerable to citizens who can support or impede change. Parent and community leadership can validate the need for reform and can provide appropriate forms for exploring the importance of education and school improvement issues, generating interest in education and reform in the community-at-large.

The impact of parent/family/community involvement has many dimensions. Whether that impact is felt directly by individual students, or in classrooms, schools, districts, community or state and national policy reforms, involvement provides the rationale, motivation and action necessary for school reform. Many tasks involved in restructuring schools, including setting goals and allocating resources are best achieved through collaborative problem-solving that includes parents, community members and educators. Closer collaboration between families, schools and community resources will result in shared consensus around education issues.

• PROMOTING EQUITABLE FINANCIAL SUPPORT FROM GOVERNMENT

We believe that excellence in education for some children cannot be made available at the expense of other children. Excellence

without equity is incompatible with the goals of a democratic society. Funding for all public schools must be adequate to reach at least an acceptable baseline for academic achievement. Communities must be educated to understand the complexity of funding formulas at the national, state and local levels. Simply providing the same number of per-pupil dollars to every school will not result in equity.

- PREPARING STUDENTS TO LEARN

Quality education can only be assured if students are prepared to learn. Many children enter school with inadequate nutrition, shelter, health care, conditions caused by poverty, and other related problems. These interfere with their ability to learn, and put them at a profound disadvantage. Families, schools and communities cannot often meet these growing challenges, precisely at a time when social and economic changes make it increasingly imperative that schools be more effective in educating children. The remedy to this is not found in one source or location. We recognize the value of parents taking responsibility for their own children, but also believe that the community has a fundamental responsibility for preparing children and their families for the task of learning. This involves a commitment to early childhood education, parent education and the availability of other social and community resources which assist families in their own efforts. In addition, schools and communities must be safe and physical facilities maintained to provide an environment conducive to learning.

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