

Because of Jesus

– by
Mary Elizabeth
Hanchey



I was milling about, adjusting my pastoral stole, preparing to be present with some of our local teachers at a press conference when the news reporter approached me.

Why was I there? I answered with a simple affirmation of our public schools and the teachers that serve in them. But he was asking a different question, and he persevered. Why are you here, as a faith leader, in support of public education?

I stared at him for a moment, summoning all of those things that are true about public schools and God's children who gather there. As stories about community and brokenness, wealth and poverty, injustice and restoration, passion and exhaustion, the love of discovery and the lack of paper, and the provision of care for the least of these swarmed, fighting for the spot on the tip of my tongue, I wondered if I might ought to simply say: because of Jesus.

Because of Jesus.

Those who undergird their strain against systems of inequity and injustice with the simple refrain that God is love are not wrong. But there is more:

Jesus taught about the impoverished and marginalized. His message was clear. Feed them. Eat with them. Heal them. Carry them to safety. Do not try to use rules of procedure to get out of it. Do not act like you don't know who your neighbor is. Do not let your love of prosperity or orderliness or possessions distract you from working for the kingdom of God here and now – on earth as it is in heaven. There is no need to cherry pick citations from the gospels because these admonitions fill them.

(attempt to) provide school social workers, school psychologists, school nurses, and breakfast and lunch. But there is not enough funding to do these things well. Because of that, the children in our care as a community are in danger.

Inadequate funding puts our children in danger.

I have had the opportunity to listen recently. I heard stories about:

- students falling on or being inappropriately disciplined on buses because their physical disabilities are not being addressed.
- schools where sinks don't work and hands cannot be washed and soap does not exist.
- schools that only see nurses for a couple of hours a week even though they have children with grave medical fragilities who need monitoring and medicating all day every day.
- hundreds of students on free or reduced lunch who must be fed something no matter how drastically child nutrition budgets are cut.
- teachers who show up to school exhausted and fragile because of the second and third jobs which they must work so that their own children can eat.

These stories are not outliers. They happen in every school district.

We are failing to care for our impoverished and marginalized because we are failing to adequately fund the schools that meet their needs today and educate them for tomorrow. In these failures we perpetuate inequity and injustice. With these failures, we jeopardize both the present and the future of our children.

The poignant reality is that this injustice jeopardizes all of us. Until all of our children have access to the food, clothing, and shelter required to live, all of us suffer from the sickness of our brokenness. Until all of our children can be educated in schools that are clean and safe and staffed with the most qualified educators who can give their full attention to the art of teaching because they are paid a decent wage, all of us suffer from the brokenness. Until each mind and each body is valued and accommodated – wheelchairs, crutches, processing disorders, language barriers, life-threatening allergies, autism, health disparities accounted for – then all of us suffer from the brokenness.

We must not believe the scarcity narrative. Because we worship a God of abundance.

There is enough. It may need to be budgeted differently. But there is enough.

Faith communities must commit to showing up as advocates for the public schools, to championing the common good, and to articulating a story more powerful than the narrative of scarcity.

Because of Jesus.

Mary Elizabeth Hanchey is a member of the CBFNC Faith Formation Ministry Council. She wrote this article in her role as the Program Associate for Legislative Advocacy and Interfaith Outreach for the NC Council of Churches. This excerpt is altered and reprinted by permission.



TIPS FOR ENGAGING WITH PUBLIC EDUCATION IN YOUR COMMUNITY

1. Consider the difference between charity and justice and do both.
2. Charity work will be most welcome and most effective if you work to meet stated needs of the schools. Consider how your mission group might form a partnership with a school or with the school system.
3. Justice work strives to change systems and realities. It heals the whole body rather than treating individual wounds. Consider how your mission group might engage in advocacy for justice within your own school system and for public education across the state.
4. NC Faith Leaders for Public Education (NCFLPE) would love to come to your region and lead a 2-hour training. Please contact us at ncflpe@ncchurches.org.
5. Connect on social media. These connections will expose you to data, events, resources, and discussion about public schools.
 - On Facebook you can follow @ncflpe, @PublicSchoolsFirstNC, @NCTestingReform
 - On Twitter you can follow @NCJC_Education, @EducationNC, and @PS1NC.

1 in 4 children in North Carolina live in poverty. More than 1 in 10 live in extreme poverty. More than 600,000 children in North Carolina do not have access to adequate food, clothing, and shelter. Children who are raised in poverty face struggles that their peers do not face. Their academic outcomes hang in the balance.

Our public schools are hubs of serving the impoverished and marginalized. Public Schools are required by law to provide transportation to and from school, and to provide transportation on specially equipped buses for children who are differently abled. They