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Senator Nicole Mitchell (SD47)

Representative Amanda Hemmingsen-Jaeger) (SD 47A)

Governor Tim Walz and Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan

Congresswoman Betty McCollum

Senators Amy Klobuchar and Tina Smith

President Joe Biden and Vice-President Kamala Harris

Regarding Education of the public

Dear Representatives:

I write as one of the billions of ciphers* on this planet that we humans occupy.

At the end I have some very brief recommendations. But first, I wish to identify myself as a distinct individual with a history. Currently, Gov. DeSantis actions, and other right-wing actors, take me over the edge. I respect all of you, and I'm not asking for anything, nor do I need a response. I need to get my concerns off my chest.

Background: I come from ordinary and very rural roots (North Dakota). The oldest grandparent I remember, was born 1872 and raised in Quebec. He died when I was 17, in 1957. His wife, my grandma, was 8 when her home, Oakwood, Dakota Territory, became part of the new state of North Dakota in 1889. Their formal education was sparse. He had first grade; she grade 6. He was chief engineer of the Grafton flour mill and stories about him suggest that he was a gifted engineer – he just didn't have the opportunity for more formal education.

The other set of grandparents, both born in Wisconsin, came to North Dakota to farm virgin prairie in 1905. Grandpa was always politically active on the local level. For many years he served on the local one room school board, from the time their oldest child was in first grade (1913) likely until the school consolidated into a town district from which their youngest child graduated in 1945. Grandpa had three U.S. Patents, perfected in his farm shop. He was one of the founding class of the North Dakota Farmers Union in 1928. Both grandparents went through 8th grade, I think.

My Dad was second child and grew up and graduated from High School in Grafton ND (1927). He wanted to go the University of North Dakota, but the same month he graduated the flour mill closed and the bank holding the family savings went under. Change in plans...wages and savings ended at the same time.

Mom was also the second child. She skipped a grade (common in country schools), graduate of Catholic High School in Jamestown ND (1926). Her school, St. John's Academy, was staffed by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet (St. Kate's order).

Both Mom and Dad were career public school teachers, from about 1928 to 1972, 70 years in all. They met at Teacher's College summer school. Mom took some years off till five kids were school age. Our schools were all tiny. My senior class was 8. My senior year there were three high school teachers, one my dad. I never had even algebra in school years.)

In 1955 I stood in line for the Polio vaccine. I was a senior in high school when Sputnik ignited the space race in 1957. In 1966 and again in 1971 I was a beneficiary, of Sputnik, getting National Defense Education Act grants to summer schools at UofIllinois (Normal) and Oregon College of Education.

Of my uncles and aunts, six became public school teachers, four for a career. Among my siblings and cousins there were five career public school teachers, including myself, a junior high school teacher in the 1960s into the early 1970s; another a university professor.

After that came 27 years as staff for Minnesota Education Association/Education Minnesota (1972-2000). From 1987 to 2001 I was a Board Member of MinnSPRA (the Minnesota School Public Relations Association, President of the group in 2000.

My oldest son turns 59 this month. He's lived in Denver area for years and graduated from Roseville's Alexander Ramsey high school.

One daughter has been in public education for about 30 years now, about half of that as school administrator in Minnesota Elementary and Middle Schools, currently in 5th year as Principal at Oltman Middle School in South Washington County #833. Another daughter is currently basically a full-time substitute at a Middle School in Mendota Heights – I keep encouraging her to complete her teaching credential. One of my sisters, and one of my daughters have served terms on their local school boards. My youngest child, now 47, is Down Syndrome. She graduated from Burnsville HS in 1995. This Christmas her sister presented her with a 1995 Burnsville HS yearbook, which we autographed for her. (Photo enclosed.)

There are, additionally, nine grandkids 16-36. I guess I could say I've had some experiences with public school.

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During my years in teaching (1963-72) and union staff (1972-2000), I observed and learned a lot.

We old people do tend to look at the past through rose-colored glasses; nonetheless there is some accumulated wisdom! I have watched public education for my entire life. **I think we're at another crisis point which has everything to do with power and control issues. Florida, among others, are in the spotlight**

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In the period 1968-72 several of we junior high geography teachers in Anoka-Hennepin undertook a major conceptual geography project with the Department of Geography at the University of Minnesota.

It was an incredibly enriching time, including conferences in Houston and Atlanta. Part of the process was getting it cleared with the Anoka-Hennepin School Board, since ours was an innovative and experimental program. The school board then was non-partisan but clearly conservative in orientation. Still, it approved the program, which, I understand, was used for many years.

In 1983 came "A Nation At Risk", a well-meaning (I think) critique of public education, but quickly adapted into a weapon against public education and educators generally.

In the late 1980s came more storm clouds. I was in the Hibbing High School Auditorium when Gov. Rudy Perpich came back to his hometown to announce what was to be Charter and Home Schooling as public education options. Recently, attention was called to an article in the Washington Post about misuse of this privilege in Ohio by neo-Nazi advocates ("Ohio officials are investigating pro-Nazi home schoolers" Laura Meckler WaPo 2/2/23.

In the MEA staff years, in the mid-1980s I became involved with a new program of the National Education Association which came to be called Family-School-Community Partnerships. It became a primary focus for me nearer the end of my career. The culminating activity was CCAPS (Community Conversation about Public Schools) with in the ISD 833 community ca 1997-99. It worked well. I think it should be reprised, but given the present climate, I'm not so sure how it would work in these days.

In the early 1990s I was in Apple Valley-Rosemount when the flap over "Values and Choices" erupted – another harbinger. What I call the evangelical right wing was all in favor of values and choices, so long as they chose and enforced what those values and choices were. Gov DeSantis might think he's a pioneer, but it's very old news.

In about the same time came the obsession with testing, which really has nothing to do with learning, rather with competition. Of course, who would want their kid in a 'bad' school, or what teacher would want to have to teach there. It is no fun to look at publicly posted rankings and see your school is at or near the bottom.

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About all I can recommend is that your 'eye on the prize' should be public education as a community, rather than competitive. enterprise. An enterprise that encourages and enables all kids to grow into responsible and productive members of society.

Sixteen years ago now I did a brief essay on this general topic. You can read it at <http://www.outsidethewalls.org> . About "cipher*"? Years ago, I watched a short film for educators. It seems still to be available on-line: "Cipher in the Snow". It spoke to me then, and it particularly speaks to me now. It's a 21-minute YouTube from 1974: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8gilSEOteE>

*Sincerely,
Dick Bernard*