

Every Kid Deserves an Equal Opportunity

November 12, 2006 - Plattsburgh Press Republican, by Jerry McGovern

"My grandfather was a cook, a domestic servant to the British. But my grandfather had larger dreams for his son. Through hard work and perseverance, my father got a scholarship to study in a magical place, America, that shone as a beacon of freedom and opportunity to so many who had come before."

That's Barack Obama telling the Democratic National Convention in 2004 about his grandfather in Kenya. "The Audacity of Hope" was the title of Obama's speech, and now it's the title of his book.

Born to a black Kenyan father and a white Kansan mother, he grew up in Hawaii and Indonesia. Such a diverse background led him to tell the convention audience "that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all those who came before me, and that in no other country on earth is my story even possible."

A few months later, while America chose President Bush over Sen. Kerry, Illinois voters chose Obama to be their senator. Now there is serious talk about him being the 2008 presidential nominee for the Democrats. He's 45 years old.

Obama is part of that mythic America we hope is true — that in a generation or three, hard work can lift a family from the bottom to the top, from a life with very few choices to a life filled with options. Or as Obama said, that there is a place in America even for "a skinny kid with a funny name."

Obama is a product of private schools, but public education is part of that myth. Good public schools for everyone gives us all a chance, leveling the playing field so that success in America depends more on how hard we work and how much we learn than how prominent our family is.

That was the hope, but it doesn't seem to be working.

The Future of Children's "Opportunity in America: The Role of Education," from Brookings-Princeton, reports that public education in America is not leveling the playing field at all.

Some of the report is not news. The distance between the rich and the poor is larger now than it has been for 50 years. (According to the AFL-CIO, CEOs in 1980 made 42 times the average worker's salary; in 2005 they make 411 times what the average worker makes.) If that is a problem, however, the report says public education is not a solution. That's because the school system reflects and reinforces the very unequal family realities outside the school.

Because mostly state and local revenue fund K-12 public schools, where parents live impacts the quality of the school their children attend. Or, a higher family income provides a better public school.

That upward trajectory over a few generations is becoming less likely.

In fact, comparing upward mobility in America to other countries, The Future of Children is especially depressing for native-born Americans: those "born in the United States have no greater chance to succeed than children in other advanced countries — and probably less."

A report from the 21st Century School Fund is also depressing. In the last 10 years, almost \$600 billion has been spent to build and renovate U.S. Schools. But the least amount of money has been invested in the poorest schools. And while wealthy districts spent money to enhance their facilities, poorer schools spent it to remove asbestos or put on a new roof.

So, many poor children are still in poor schools.

Maybe the federal No Child Left Behind law, which mandates all kinds of examinations to monitor student progress, should mandate something about the buildings where kids take those exams.

Fancy new school buildings and equal opportunity will not turn all students into serious learners any more than new gymnasiums will turn everyone into Michael Jordan. And there are, and always will be, kids squandering opportunities in wonderful schools, both public and private.

Still, every kid deserves the same chance. Let the schools be of equal quality — in fact, give kids a voucher so they can go to any public school they want. Then their success or failure will depend more on them and less on the neighborhood.

In that 2004 speech, Obama said "we can make sure that every child in America has a decent shot at life, and that the doors of opportunity remain open to all." We can, but we haven't.

Jerry McGovern, the Press-Republican's coordinator of Newspapers-in-Education, taught for many years in New York state's public schools. He writes about his various experiences in education, as well as about current educational issues. He can be reached at gmcgovern@pressrepublican.com or 565-4126. This column is the opinion of the writer and not necessarily of this newspaper.