



# **Educating All God's Children: What Christians Can--and Should--Do to Improve Public Education for Low-Income Kids**

*Nicole Baker Fulgham (Preface)*

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America strives to be a land of equal opportunity, but our nation's public schools are not leveling the playing field for the fifteen million children growing up in poverty. By the time kids in low-income communities are in fourth grade, they're already three grade levels behind their peers in wealthier communities. More than half won't graduate from high school—and many that do graduate only perform at an eighth-grade level. Only one in ten will go on to graduate from college. These students have severely diminished opportunities for personal prosperity and professional success.

Education expert Nicole Baker Fulgham explores what Christians can—and should—do to champion urgently needed reform and help improve our public schools. The book provides concrete action steps for working to ensure that all of God's children get the quality public education they deserve. It also features personal narratives from the author and other Christian public school teachers that demonstrate how the achievement gap in public education can be solved.

## **Educating All God's Children: What Christians Can--and Should--Do to Improve Public Education for Low-Income Kids Details**

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## **From Reader Review Educating All God's Children: What Christians Can--and Should--Do to Improve Public Education for Low-Income Kids for online ebook**

### **Laura LeAnn says**

Filled with personal stories from Nicole Baker Fulgham, the author, and others she knows or has met and shared with, this book is an easy read but highlights significant issues in the public school systems in our nation today. It is not just about urban public school systems, but about the inequity in public education across the nation. Fulgham's argument is essentially that there is serious inequity in our schools and Christians can do something about it and absolutely should be doing something about it. She provides a brief history of public education in the US as well as some Christian denominations in the US to highlight why Christians have gotten out of the public education systems in the US or why they continue to work to improve public education. She highlights three main areas that Christians can work in to help improve our schools, regardless of the choices you have made for your own children. It is important that we work alongside people in the neighborhoods that have low-income schools, providing information to them, and helping them to find their own voice to advocate for their own neighborhood schools. We can also work to help the students and teachers in the schools in the immediate, by finding out what the school needs to help themselves. We can also work in the realm of education policy reform. While we may not agree with one another on the policies or how to fix them, we can advocate for equity in public schools in the neighborhoods and districts our churches are in or work with churches in those neighborhoods.

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### **Bethany says**

Thrilled to read a book focuses on this issue by an evangelical. This is an issue that deserves attention within the church. As an educator with six years in very poor, minority schools, I am very passionate about the issues in education equity. The author has risen through TFA and sees vouchers, charters, and TFA as solutions. I would disagree and say they're band aids. I believe our moral imperative is to provide every child with quality education options, not just those with parents like Fulghams (or mine), who will make certain their child gets a great education.

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### **Beth Quick says**

We used this book in one of my research groups, as we thought about how congregations move from charity to justice in their outreach work. Even if you think you have no interest in education advocacy, I think Fulgham stirs up a desire and certainly compassion for the inequality in our educational system.

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### **Dr. Trent says**

This review, by Dr. Nicholson, has been provided courtesy of Desert Bible Institute ([www.desertbibleinstitute.com](http://www.desertbibleinstitute.com)).

The book *Educating All of God's Children* by Nicole Baker Fulgham is a well-researched, well-organized book that will prove useful to both educators and the church in examining what they can do to empower students to do better in their classes and to be more confident about their own abilities. Fulgham graduated from the University of Michigan and later joined Teach For America where she taught fifth grade in Compton, California. She received her doctorate in education from UCLA with a focus on urban education policy and teacher preparation. Her varied experiences and education are what add to the quality and academic clarity of her book.

Having been in education (both public and private: both secular and Christian) for nearly 20 years now, I have to admit a certain amount of trepidation in approaching this book. Over the years, my professional learning community has been regaled with books on how to fix the ills that plague our education system. In Southern California particularly, I have been approached by professionals representing virtually every minority and special-interest group telling me how their approach will "level the playing field." Most of these solutions are self-serving and at best put a bandage on the problem offering many complaints and few genuine solutions.

Fulgham's book, while suffering from some of the same problems, is probably the most useful that I have read for several reasons. First, she takes the time to break down each of the issues into manageable sub-sections. These allow her to be specific about the larger problems that she is talking about. This has the benefit of addressing specific concerns that her audience might have. Perhaps this was best handled in her section on low-income families. Additionally, the clear, well-chosen facts and statistics she regularly uses clearly relate to a particular issue rather than being loose and non-relatable. It is interesting that her study on low-income families is one of her best sections since she grew up in a middle-class household.

In issues of race and culture, I appreciated her up front nature when she openly admits that as an African American that she would explain some of "the academic achievement gap by playing the dreaded 'race card.'" She certainly gets much more prolific and animated on racial topics than she does others that touch a little less closely to her personal life and childhood. Nonetheless, she continues to handle this in the same logical, well-supported manner that she has handled other issues in her book. One area that seems to be lacking; however, is that she doesn't seem to address the issue of culture. She seems to side step the issue that different cultures have different values in relationship to education and those values are reflected in a family's daily life. Perhaps she does this because there is little that we can do to change an entire culture, but it is an important issue. Many minority families put far more stress on family (older siblings babysitting during school day) and provision (teens holding a part-time job to pay the bills) than on academic achievement. It is her position that all parents want their children to do well and to go as far academically as they are able: This is an overly broad generalization and just isn't the case. Examples: "I believe all parents hope that their children become well educated" and "I've found that almost all parents do want the very best education for their children." It also seems that she ignores the effects of "modeling" by the parents in not seeking out higher education (or even full-time employment) and the long term effects this has on students.

Overall, I liked what Fulgham had to say about Christian involvement in public education. While understandably many churches are limited in what they can do within the public school system, Fulgham offers a number of facts and statistics that should lead readers to think about what their churches could do to get more involved in students' education. There were two drawbacks I ran into with this. This first is that much of the practical information seemed to center around elementary students. This makes a great deal of sense since many of the problems, as Fulgham's research clearly shows, happens by age nine. What I did have a problem with was her innuendos that white Christians were uninterested and uninvolved in public education. An example of this is where she asserts, "While many White evangelical Christians have avoided public schools other Christians— including Catholics, African Americans, Hispanics, and many Protestants—

have been actively engaged in the work of quality education for the poor and minority children for decades.” Statements like this will undoubtedly turn off many evangelicals (not to mention Whites) to the otherwise good, supported, and academic information that she is offering.

I would suggest this book to the students at my college or the teachers in the local public school system with the caveat that there are some heavily slanted racial and doctrinal underpinnings that the reader will have to deal with. My advice would be to set these aside temporarily and to delve instead into the solid, useable areas of the book where the author is not trying to further her own biases. This is a good book academically speaking, unfortunately like many books of its ilk; it carries with it a bit of baggage.

Trent Nicholson, Ph.D., D.Min.  
Desert Bible Institute, President

Dr. Nicholson reviews academic, Christian living, and fiction books for a variety of publishers in an array of formats. He is never paid for any of his reviews. He writes these strictly as a courtesy to his students at Desert Bible Institute and for any other readers that might find his insights valuable. For more reviews or information, visit Dr. Nicholson’s blog at [drtnicholson.wordpress.com](http://drtnicholson.wordpress.com).

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### **Cindi P. says**

Great and timely premise, and a good summary of issues and responses. Nice listing of resources at the end. Left me wishing instead of planting more local churches, churches would plant more effective neighborhood public schools.

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### **Caitlin says**

As a Christian who believes that FAITH is an action word, I was a little skeptical about Fulgham's book. I was worried that it would be evangelical in the negative sense of the word. I was pleasantly surprised, and as a teacher- inspired to step up the work I already do, and encouraged to more fully engage my faith community. I am very impressed with this book!!

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### **Liz says**

I wish there was a 3.5 star, because that's more of what I'd rate it. It has some great thoughts and tons of

information and solutions (which is why I chose 4 over 3). But it can be dry and at times it comes across a little negative, especially towards upper and middle class white people.

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### **Cynthia Kepler-Karrer says**

The book is about 50% too long on enthusiasm and promises and 100% short on comprehensive analysis of the education achievement gap. The author gives an almost complete uncritical review of many reform efforts, lumps different kinds of schools together under the heading "public", and asks surface level questions that are supposed to get to the heart of the matter.

I wish a book that examines this had been written by someone who had spent a lifetime actually educating kids in low-income schools.

Some of the anecdotes were potentially helpful, all were meant to be heart-warming or heart-string tugging. I agree with the original premise that Christians ought to be doing something to improve education, but I think that her solutions obfuscate many of the ways in which we can make a long-term difference, not just white-wash over the problems. Read this alongside critiques of TFA. Read it also alongside books like "The Wealth of Poverty" to get a different perspective on what it means to the community to lift children out of generational poverty. Ask second-level questions like, "If this percentage end up going to college, how many end up with some kind of degree?" If our effectiveness in closing the achievement gap is to be judged on stats, then we have to have a comprehensive list of the stats that might show that gap has been closed. I found the stats here to be cherry picked.

I believe that teaching is a calling, much like my own career in ministry. Teachers are so often denigrated as the problem (which this book does obliquely), but I have found that the vast majority of teachers I have worked with deal with far more complex issues year in and year out. There are absolutely teachers who have no business being in the classroom, but I know so many who have a special calling to do it and are shackled and chained by unappreciative parents, administrations and local governments as well as the difficulties of their individual classrooms. The elementary school in my neighborhood has to deal with 14 different language groupings--and another 20 refugee students arrived over the winter break. There is no funding except the occasional private grant for summer-time skill retention and no affordable opportunities for kids to maintain their hard-won achievements throughout the summer months.

This is a lot of my problem with many of her anecdotes which involve teachers who manage to do great things in a single year and consider themselves successful in "closing the gap". For someone who says that this is a long-haul problem and we shouldn't expect immediate gratification, this is the ultimate irony. It would be intriguing to follow up with how many of those students, who don't have access to continued programming over the summer lose much of their gap-closure by the next year (in which case, the next year's teachers can, like her, bemoan the fact that he/she is receiving kids who are woefully far behind). The problems that exist outside of the system (which her book very carefully doesn't address) put kids at far more risk. Any solutions which do not take into account things outside the immediate education system will not be long-term solutions but the same "bandaids" she decries.

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### **Ruth Ann says**

This book will only be helpful for those who are completely uninformed about educational achievement and the ways the community can support public schools. It is very general and includes more personal experience stories than hard data and concrete action plans.

Fulgham taught two years in an inner city 5th grade with Teach for America. Her major was English and she does not have a "teaching degree" although she did have a summer of training with Teach for America before she entered the classroom. I agree with her that the classroom teacher is the most important "inside school" factor in a child's education, but I don't think Fulgham emphasized enough that the number one predictor of student achievement is socioeconomic status. Is this a teaching problem or an economic problem? Christians will make a difference by donating supplies and volunteering, but wouldn't they make a greater impact by working to change school funding formulas? If local government contributions are based on income from property taxes, is it any wonder that schools in poorer neighborhoods have fewer resources?

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### **William says**

It's no secret that many evangelicals stand to the side when it comes to public and especially urban education. Fulgham makes a good first step to trying to bridge this gap. The book is divided in two sections, the first covering the challenges facing the low-income, urban school, and then a set of chapters suggesting various approaches Christians can make.

For those familiar with the challenges of urban education, her introductions will seem like well-worn territory. She processes much of her thinking through the lens of Teach for America where she had served as the president of their faith community relations. In her resources section she links to several important books (but there are so many others).

In the second half, she provides a useful theological primer, then turns to various approaches individuals and churches can take.

Her background from TFA biases her towards charter schools -- not entirely wrong -- but this only covers part of the problem. There is a danger of slipping into an easy, sentimental solution to the education of children from low income households. The problems have significant structural roots, not least being simply the headwind of poverty. One would also have liked to see more attention to the Christians already at work in the schools. It is all too easy to make this an us-them equation, with existing teachers and schools the villain. A bigger, broader Christian response will be to see how teachers may also be believers may be burnt out, unrecognized and so much more.

In short, Fulgham gives a basic starting point. the next step is to begin to walk alongside the teachers, the principals and parents as they work to build a future for the children in their care.

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### **Jane Lanser says**

Found this really interesting and inspiring. The beginning had lots of information on why schools are failing. I especially appreciated the last section that gave some tangible ways to engage and work toward

improvement.

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## **Drick says**

When I first came across the title of this book, I was overjoyed that someone in the Christian evangelical world was speaking up for public education. Fulgham definitely does that, but in the end I was left frustrated and disappointed. Let me start with my concerns and then I will conclude with some hopeful signs. First, like way too many evangelicals, Fulgham makes the assumption (implied) that the "real" Christians are the evangelicals, and while she mentions Catholics and Lutherans who have long been involved in urban education, she seems to discount their contribution (not to mention all the Christian already working in the flawed public education system). Second, she treats the issue of the "achievement gap" (her main focus) as simply a matter of poverty (i.e. let's help these poor kids in these poor schools) rather than a systemic issue. Third, when speaking of the church, she seems to be thinking only of large megachurches with lots of people and resources to share with schools. Finally, and I think most serious, Fulgham's insights into education seem to have their roots in a few years as a Teach for America teacher and then staff member. While TFA has its proponents, it also has its detractors, because like Fulgham, they treat the educational challenges largely without really addressing the systemic issues.

Now having gotten those concerns off my chest, let me say I am thankful that someone within the evangelical world is speaking up for public education at a time when big business and state governments seem intent on selling off as much of the responsibility and privatizing education. This will only leave those who are poor worse off. Charters, Vouchers, special magnet schools and the like will all likely be part of the mix in education reform. All the well meaning, even Christian teachers and administrators can't succeed in a flawed system. In fact Baker seems to largely ignore the thousands of committed Christians already in public education. However, she has many practical ideas for individuals and churches to partner with local schools and make a difference. She challenges young people to consider a career in teaching, and she makes a strong Biblical case for why evangelicals should not abandon public education, especially in poor communities.

To her credit Fulgham does mention the systemic issues in the last chapter of the book, but this is where she should have started. The book lacks any clear historical and systemic analysis, and seems to operate on the assumption that well meaning people alone can improve education; I wish it were so, but I don't find myself persuaded by her argument.

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## **Curtis says**

Really enjoyed this book. Lots of information and stories about public education and narrowing the education gap (between the haves and the haves not). I wished she would have included more data and less of the personal stories. She also focused a lot on how large churches and teachers can positively impact the gap. Not as many ideas for the individual person (like me) who is neither a teacher nor belongs to a large church. Would have liked some encouragement for individuals doing what they can. But, I especially enjoyed the fact that Nicole is encouraging Christians to help narrow the education achievement gap rather than running away (with their children) to suburban, homogenous, well to do schools. We are called by Jesus to love and look after those who are vulnerable - and that especially includes children and those living in poverty.



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**Danny Brister Jr says**

**A great introductory book**

God's book was beer well written, and is a great introductory to the issue of the achievement gap. I would recommend this book to pastors, lay leaders, and any who is willing to step up to help our students.

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