

March for Equality
Speech by Kim Coco Iwamoto
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The ongoing discussion about “nature” versus “nurture” has been misdirected – the focus should be on “bigotry”. The inquiry should be: “whether bigotry is the result of nature or nurture?” Are children born to be bigots? Or is bigotry something that is taught.

What are law-makers teaching our children when they enact or uphold discriminatory laws? Laws of separation and exclusion provide our children with the textbooks of hate and lesson plans of prejudice.

Although it may be of little consolation, school boards across the country are adopting more comprehensive anti-discrimination policies. In Hawaii, for instance, my colleagues and I recently expanded our state policy to prohibit discrimination and harassment on the following bases: race, religion, sexual orientation, color, national origin, sex, gender identity and expression, socio-economic status, physical or mental disability, and physical appearance and characteristic.

Students hear these promises of equal access in school – yet they observe law-makers failing to uphold these same principles. Since actions speak louder than words, the message becomes: “Do as we say, Not as we do.”

Through government action and inaction, our laws and lawmakers are modeling for our children just how to bully, harass and discriminate. By example, our children are learning how to criminalize the homeless or those who may need mental health services. By example, our children are learning how to silence immigrant families and how to scream when they see someone who looks Arab or Muslim. By example, our children are learning how to deny equality to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals and families. Perhaps the most tragic lesson of all - is that some of our children are learning how to hate themselves.

In the face of all this government-sanctioned bigotry – let us not forget the everyday heroes. I am talking about TEACHERS! Every day teachers equip our children with skill sets needed to become critical thinkers. Every day teachers fortify our youth to be able to challenge hypocrisy and remedy injustice. Every day teachers reinforce self-esteem, resiliency and imagination.

TEACHERS! Compassionate, fair, and effective TEACHERS empower our children to critically examine the irrational and fear-based underpinnings of bigotry. In a democracy such as ours, real social change requires a critical mass of critical-thinkers.

As cities, counties and states across the country face budget shortfalls, please support your local public schools. And support the many amazing teachers who instill truth, reason, and courage in our children. Truth, reason and courage are the antidote to bigotry. Let’s support our teachers as they prepare our children, all the children in America, for a society that truly delivers on the promise of liberty and justice for all.