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Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: 80th Convention of the American Federation of Teachers

Chicago, IL | July 13, 2008

Hello, everybody. I'm sorry I can't join you all in person today, but thank you for letting me say a few words. First and foremost, I am honored to have your endorsement, and I appreciate the commitment you're making to help us win in November.

I want to thank your president, Ed McElroy, your Secretary-Treasurer, Nat LaCour, and your Executive Vice President, Toni Cortese. Ed and Nat, congratulations on your retirements. We are all grateful for your steady leadership and tireless efforts to guarantee our students their fundamental right to a quality education. And I look forward to working with your new officers.

And I want to say hello to my friends from Illinois – Ed Geppert, the President of the Illinois Federation of Teachers; Marilyn Stewart, the president of the Chicago Teachers Union; and AFT Vice President Jim Dougherty, and all my allies with whom I've worked so closely.

Over the course of this campaign, I've had the opportunity to visit schools and talk to teachers and students; paraprofessionals and support staff; college faculty and employees; public employees, nurses and health care workers all across this country. But so much of what informs my visits comes from an experience I had a few years ago at Dodge Elementary School in Chicago, not far from where you're assembled today.

I asked a young teacher there what she saw as the biggest challenge facing her students. She gave me an answer I had never heard before. She talked about what she called "These Kids Syndrome" – the tendency to explain away the shortcomings and failures of our education system by saying "these kids can't learn" or "these kids don't want to learn" or "these kids are just too far behind." And after a while, "these kids" become somebody else's problem.

And she looked at me and said, "When I hear that term, it drives me crazy. They're not 'these kids.' They're our kids. All of them."

She's absolutely right. These children are our children. Their future is our future. And it's time we understood that their education is our responsibility.

I am running for President to guarantee that all of our children have the best possible chance in life. And I am tired of hearing you blamed for our problems. I want to lead a new era of mutual responsibility in education, where we all come together: parents and educators, the AFT and leaders in Washington, citizens all across America; united for the sake of our children's success.

Bringing about that future begins with fixing the broken promises of No Child Left Behind. Now, I believe that the goals of this law – educating every child with an excellent teacher, closing the achievement gap, ensuring more accountability and higher standards – were right. But promising all this while leaving the resources behind is wrong. Labeling a school and its students as failures one day and then abandoning them the next is wrong.

We must fix the failures of No Child Left Behind by providing the funding that was promised, giving states the resources they need, and finally meeting our commitment to special education. But that alone is not an education policy. It's just a starting point.

Now, John McCain is an honorable man and I respect his service to our country, but he won't even get us to that starting point. For someone who's been in Washington nearly 30 years, he's got a pretty slim record on education, and when he has taken a stand, it's been the wrong one.

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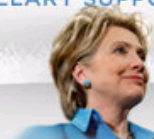


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He voted against increased funding for No Child Left Behind to preserve billions in tax breaks for the wealthiest Americans – tax breaks he wants to extend without saying how he'd pay for them. He voted against increasing funds for Head Start, and Pell Grants, and the hiring of 100,000 new teachers again and again and again.

In fact, his only proposal seems to be recycling tired rhetoric about vouchers and school choice. Now, I've been a proponent of public school choice throughout my career. I applaud AFT for your leadership in representing charter school teachers and support staff all across this country, and for even operating your own charters in New York. Because we know well-designed public charter schools have a lot to offer, and I've actually helped pass legislation to expand them. But what I do oppose is using public money for private school vouchers. We need to focus on fixing and improving our public schools; not throwing our hands up and walking away from them.

Real change is finally giving our kids everything they need to have a fighting chance in today's world. That begins with recognizing that the single most important factor in determining a child's achievement is not the color of their skin or where they come from; it's not who their parents are or how much money they have. It's who their teacher is. It's the paraprofessionals and support staff and all of you in this room. It's those who spend their own money on books and supplies, come early and stay late comparing lesson plans, who devote their lives to our next generation and serve as role models for the children who need one most because you believe that's what makes the extra difference. And it does. After all, I have two daughters. I know what their teachers mean to them.

So it's time to start treating our teachers properly. That means residency programs that supply exceptional recruits to high-need schools. That means mentoring programs that pair experienced, successful teachers with new ones. That means service scholarships that say if you commit your life to teaching, America will commit to paying for your college education.

And when our educators succeed, I won't just talk about how great they are; I will reward them for it. Under my plan, districts will be able to give teachers who mentor, or teach in underserved areas, or take on added responsibilities, or learn new skills to serve students better, or consistently excel in the classroom, the salary increase they deserve. And whether it's the plans AFT helped create in Cincinnati or Chicago, you've shown that it is possible to find new ways to increase teacher pay that are developed with teachers, not imposed on them.

And together, we will begin changing the odds for our at-risk children by providing quality, affordable early childhood education for all our children. To address the achievement gap, we'll expand afterschool and summer learning opportunities. To address the dropout crisis that condemns so many futures, we'll intervene much earlier in a child's education – because the forces that lead a high school student to drop out start well before the ninth grade.

But there is no program and no policy that can substitute for a parent who is involved in their child's education from day one, who makes sure that child is in school on time, helps them with their homework, and attends those parent-teacher conferences; who is willing to turn off the TV once in awhile, put away the video games, and read to their child. Responsibility for our children's education starts at home. We have to set high standards for them, and spend time with them, and love them. We have to hold ourselves accountable.

This is the commitment we must make to our kids. This is the chance they must have. We all know there are too many young men and women in America right now who are slipping away from us as we speak – students who've lost all hope that they can make something of their lives. You know these kids. And I know these kids. I began my career over two decades ago in communities on Chicago's South Side. And I worked with parents and teachers and local leaders to fight for their future. We set up after school programs and protested outside government offices so that we could get those who had dropped out into alternative schools. And in time, we changed the odds for our children.

But while I know hopelessness, I also know hope. In May, I visited a high school in Colorado where just three years ago, only half of the seniors were accepted to college. But thanks to the hard work of caring parents, innovative educators, and some very committed students, all forty-four seniors of this year's class were accepted to more than seventy colleges and universities across the country. And the example they set trickles down. While there, I met an eighth grader named Theo Rodriguez, who now sets his sights a little higher – he wants to go to Oxford and study criminology.

That's what hope is. That's the promise of education in America – that no matter what we look like or where we come from or who our parents are, each of us should have the opportunity to fulfill our God-given potential. Each of us should have the chance to achieve the American Dream.

That's why I'm running for President, AFT. To make sure all our kids have that chance. But I need your help to get there. From your earliest days in Chicago, you've stood up for change – when minorities weren't allowed full union membership; when parents fought to integrate our schools; when it was time to take the march for civil rights to Washington, you stood up.

And if you stand up with me these next four months; if you march with me and knock on doors and make phone calls and register voters, and talk to your friends and co-workers and neighbors; then I promise

and much more!

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you this: we will win this election; we will change education in this country; and we will bring about a better future for our children and for this country we love. Thank you.

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