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Newsroom

Remarks of Senator Barack Obama to the National Education Association Annual Meeting

Philadelphia, PA | July 05, 2007

Over the last few years, I've been traveling to different schools and meeting with all kinds of educators to hear about what's working, what's not, what makes the difference when it comes to educating children today.

I've gained a lot of valuable insight from these visits, but one I'll always remember is my trip to Dodge Elementary School in my hometown of Chicago. I was talking to one of the young teachers there about the challenges they faced, and she mentioned what she called the "These Kids Syndrome" - the willingness of society to find a million excuses for why "these kids" can't learn. It's the idea that "these kids come from tough backgrounds" or that "these kids are too far behind." And after awhile, "these kids" become somebody else's problem.

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Then she said to me, "When I hear that term, it drives me nuts. They're not 'these kids.' They're our kids."

Our kids are why all of you are in this room today. Our kids are why you wake up wondering how you'll make a difference and go to bed thinking about tomorrow's lesson plan. Our kids are why you walk into that classroom every day even when you're not getting the support, or the pay, or the respect that you deserve - because you believe that every child should have a chance to succeed; that every child can be taught.

You've made our kids your life's work. And I believe it's time we put that work at the center of our politics once more.

We have never been a "these kids" country. From the earliest days of our founding, we have believed in Thomas Jefferson's declaration that "...talent and virtue, needed in a free society, should be educated regardless of wealth, birth or other accidental condition."

It is this belief that led our country to set up the first free public schools in small New England towns. It's a promise we kept as we moved from a nation of farms to factories and created a system of public high schools so that everyone had the chance to succeed in the new economy; one we expanded after World War II, when we sent over two million returning heroes to college on the GI Bill.

And even when America fell short of this ideal and forced Linda Brown to walk miles to a dilapidated Topeka school because of the color of her skin; even then, ordinary people marched and bled, they took to the streets and fought in the courts until the arrival of nine little children at a Little Rock school made real the decision that in America, separate could never be equal. And no matter what the Supreme Court said last week, that's still true today.

The ideal of a public education has always been at the heart of the American promise. It's why we are committed to fixing and improving our public schools instead of abandoning them and passing out vouchers. Because in America, it's the promise of a good education for all that makes it possible for any child to transcend the barriers of race or class or background and achieve their God-given potential.

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That's how America works. That's how we've met each challenge that has come our way. We rise together, as one people. And together is how teachers, education support professionals, students, and the American people will meet the challenges we face today.

We now live in a world where the most valuable skill you can sell is knowledge. Revolutions in technology and communication have created an entire economy of high-tech, high-wage jobs that can be located anywhere there's an internet connection. And today, a child in Philadelphia is not only competing for jobs with one in Boston, but thousands more in Bangalore and Beijing who are being educated longer and better than ever before.

In the 21st century, countries who out-educate us today will out-compete us tomorrow, and America is already in danger of falling behind. We now have one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized nation. By 12th grade, our children score lower on their math and science tests than most other kids in the developed world. Sixty percent of African-American fourth graders are unable to read at a basic level, and today only 9% of low-income students will graduate from college.

Forty or fifty years ago, students who had trouble in school might have gone on to find a factory job that could pay the bills and support a family. But we no longer live in that world. Today, the average salary of a high school graduate is only \$33,000 a year. For high school dropouts, it's even closer to the poverty line - just \$25,000 a year. And sadly, some folks here aren't paid that much and that's wrong.

This is not only morally unacceptable for our children; it is economically untenable for our nation. And it means that today, the work you do and the difference you make has never been more important to the future of this country.

In fact, new evidence shows that from the moment our children step into a classroom, the single most important factor in determining their 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 you. It's you who can reach the most challenging students. It's you who will stay past the last bell and spend your own money on books and supplies. It's you who will go beyond the call because you believe that's what makes the extra difference. And it does.

But you can't do it alone, and it's about time that Washington realized that. For too long, our politics has been stuck in a cycle where we praise our educators in speeches and photo-ops, but then abandon them when it comes time to offer the resources and the support you need to do your jobs.

There's no better example of this neglect than the law that has become one of the emptiest slogans in the history of politics - No Child Left Behind.

Now, we all know that the goals of this law were the right ones. We know that making a promise to educate every child with an excellent teacher is right. We know that accountability and standards are right. We know that it's right to close the achievement gap that exists in too many cities and towns, and that it's right to focus on the inequitable distribution of resources and qualified teachers in our schools. We didn't need some words in a law to tell us this, we already knew it, and every one of us is still willing to do whatever it takes to make these goals a reality.

But don't come up with this law called No Child Left Behind and then leave the money behind. Don't tell us that you'll put high-quality teachers in every classroom and then leave the support and the pay for those teachers behind. Don't label a school as failing one day and then throw your hands up and walk away from it the next. And don't tell us that the only way to teach a child is to spend too much of the year preparing him to fill in a few bubbles on a standardized test. We know that's not true. You didn't devote your lives to testing, you devoted them to teaching, and teaching is what you should be allowed to do.

This is what I'll be trying to leave behind when No Child Left Behind comes before the Senate for renewal, and if we don't fix the law then, I can assure you this - I will when I'm President. Let's leave behind that empty slogan.

But I'll also say this - fixing the worst aspects of No Child Left Behind is just a starting point. The status quo is still unacceptable for teachers and students. In the face of a global economy where too many children start behind and stay behind, this country doesn't need more blame or inaction or half-measures on education. What we need is a historic commitment to America's teachers, and that's the kind of commitment I intend to make as

President.

We know that we have more than one million teachers who are set to retire and more kids entering school than ever before, and so we know that it's time to recruit a new generation of teachers and principals. Let's do this by finally raising salaries across the board, and making it possible for professionals in other fields to become teachers, not through easy shortcuts, but through programs that allow new teachers to learn from veteran professionals. And if you're willing to put yourself through college to make the sacrifice and commitment that teaching requires, we should be willing to help you pay off some of those college loans.

In the coming weeks, I'll be laying out the specific details of my plan to invest billions of new dollars into the teaching profession and recruit an army of well-trained, well-qualified teachers who are willing to stand at the front of any classroom and give every student the chance to succeed.

My view is this - if we truly believe that educators are the essential professionals that we know you are, then it's time we rewarded, and supported, and honored the professional excellence you show every day.

We know what we need to do here.

We also know that right now, we need the best teachers in the most challenging classrooms - those underserved, underachieving schools in parts of rural and urban America where we need to make "these kids" "our kids" again.

I believe in collective bargaining, and I believe that any time you're talking about wages, workers have to be at the table.

So let's make a promise right now that if you're a teacher or a principal doing the hard work of educating our children, we will reward that work with the salary increase that you deserve. If you're willing to teach in a high-need subject like math or science or special education, we'll pay you even more.

If you're willing to take on more responsibilities like mentoring, we'll pay you more.

And if you excel at helping your students achieve success, your success will be valued and rewarded as well. Here's the key: we can find new ways to increase pay that are developed with teachers, not imposed on them and not based on some arbitrary test score. That's how we're going to close the achievement gap that exists in this country and that's how we're going to start treating teachers like the professionals you are.

I commend the work you've done in Minnesota with the Governor there to craft an innovative pay system that not only values your performance in the classroom, but the performance of your students as well. You helped craft it and you and your students benefit from it.

We also know that when it comes to struggling schools, it's not just how much you're getting paid that matters, but how much support you're getting to do your job. We know that when you pair experienced, mentor teachers with new teachers, those new teachers are much more likely to stay in the profession. So let's make sure we start developing more mentor teachers so we can start recruiting and keeping the new generation of teachers we need.

And while we're at it, let's work with teachers and principals to finally develop assessments that teach our kids to become more than just good test-takers. The goal of educational testing should be the same as medical testing - to diagnose a student's needs so you can help address them. Tests should not be designed as punishment for teachers and students, they should be used as tools to help prepare our children to grow and compete in a knowledge economy. Tests should support learning, not just accounting.

One last point. There's a lot of talk out there about accountability in education. I share that concern, and I've called for more accountability in our schools myself. But I also believe that before we can hold our teachers accountable for the results our schools need, we have to hold ourselves accountable for giving teachers the support that they need. That's where accountability starts with a government that puts its money where its mouth is, and parents and community members who instill the value of education in their students. I am tired of hearing teachers blamed for our collective failures.

A few months ago, I had the opportunity to take a bus ride with a group of Iowa teachers and discuss their thoughts on education. Afterwards, one teacher said, "I don't think any teacher minds being accountable when the measuring tool is fair to educators and not about satisfying unrealistic goals."

She's right. If we do all this - if we go into struggling schools and provide more pay and better support for our teachers; if we allow them to teach our children to their strengths instead of just a test - then the teachers I've met wouldn't mind some accountability.

But we need to start doing our part first. When it comes to education in America, we need to start holding ourselves accountable. This goes for our government and our leaders. It also goes for parents. There is no policy or program that can substitute for a parent who is deeply involved in their child's education from day one - who is willing to turn off the TV, put away the video games, and read to their child, or help with homework, or attend those parent/teacher conferences. As parents too, many of you know what I'm talking about here.

A few years ago, a little girl at Earhart Elementary in Chicago was asked the secret to her academic success.

She said, "I just study hard every night because I like learning. My teacher wants me to be a good student, and so does my mother. I don't want to let them down."

We have quite a challenge ahead of us, but we've overcome great challenges before. Over the course of two centuries, we have continually upheld the promise of education for all as that which allows any child to transcend the barriers of race or class or background and achieve their God-given potential. And we have risen together as a result.

It is teachers and education support professionals who have always made this possible - who have always reminded us that that little girl in Chicago is not 'these kids', she is our child. She doesn't want to let us down, and now it is our generation's turn to ensure that we won't let her down either. I know you'll be leading the way, and I look forward to standing with you in the fight. Thank you.

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