

Quality Education

The Problem

America's public education system has long been the cornerstone of its vibrant economy and thriving democracy, investing in the next generation and providing opportunity to all. Now, instead of lifting our kids up, our education system is holding too many of them back.

We're not making the investments needed to provide every child with the basics of modern education: early education, so every child starts school prepared to achieve; small classes; skilled teachers; after-school programs; modern facilities and affordable college. Instead, we're putting inordinate emphasis on standardized tests and stifling creative teaching, while failing to provide the resources needed for reform of schools that need help.

Public education still suffers from a savage inequality. Remarkable schools exist in affluent suburbs, but we fail to make even basic investments in poorer communities. Many schools are crumbling, overcrowded and forced to rely on trailers for classrooms. Some 25,000 schools require substantial repairs and renovation, according to a government study.¹ Too many children are forced to learn under deplorable physical conditions that literally make them sick. The demand for teachers is rising, as half leave the woefully underpaid profession within five years.

In the global economy, a college education or advanced technical training is vital to sustaining the world's best-educated workforce, opening the doors of imagination and helping form active citizens. But college is being priced out of reach for an increasing number of families, and students are forced to take on ever greater debt burdens.

The Reason

President Bush turned "No Child Left Behind" from an inspiring slogan to a broken promise. Schools were left behind as Bush broke his promises to provide the resources needed for reform. Subjects were left behind as principals set aside social studies, science, art, music and phys ed to chase the law's math and reading requirements. Good teaching was left behind as teachers were forced to narrowly teach "to the test" instead of teaching the critical thinking needed to succeed in today's economy.

When grading No Child Left Behind, many teachers would give it a D or an F.² The law has been implemented in a rigid manner with far too much emphasis on standardized testing. This has narrowed down the curriculum and diminished educational opportunities for poor students and those with learning differences. As a teacher in Florida put it: "I have seen students drop out of school, cry, cut themselves, become physically ill and more, just

because of the pressure we are putting on them to excel on the tests that accompany NCLB.... [W]e are pushing the creativity out of the classroom and creating little robots.”

Bush left college students behind as well, but not the college loan companies profiting from student debt. He killed a proposal to crack down on student loan companies, despite allegations of financial favors to colleges for steering clients their way.³ He joined with Republicans in Congress to cut \$12 billion in federal student loans, helping push even more business to private firms. And he broke his campaign promise to raise the level of Pell Grants *and* keep pace with runaway tuition costs.

The Solution

In 2007, the new Democratic majority in Congress began to reverse the damage by passing the largest increase in college student aid since the GI Bill. But that was just a first step. Much more is still needed to make college accessible to all, and to cut loose the anvil of debt weighing down new graduates. We need tuition tax credits to help parents bear the cost of college. We need to offer students grants and scholarships in exchange for national service. We need to use federal challenges to require states to sustain their own contribution to high quality affordable public schools.

For primary education, we must go another way. The failed No Child Left Behind approach should be scrapped, and replaced with an approach that actually lifts our schools up and provides support for strapped states, including:

- ◆ Modernizing schools and insuring state of the art technology
- ◆ Helping, not abandoning, struggling schools
- ◆ Ending inequalities holding back urban and rural schools
- ◆ Expanding early childhood education so kids don't fall behind before they get started
- ◆ Recruiting, training and retaining first-rate teachers with higher pay and incentives to work in schools with at-risk children
- ◆ Providing the resources necessary for teachers to excel in their professions, and for paraprofessionals to obtain greater opportunities for career mobility

We must commit ourselves to providing America's children with the best education the world offers to enable them to reach to their full potential, and to enable our economy to thrive in an increasingly competitive world.

Telling the Story

◆ Stories to Look for

- ◆ Debt-ridden college graduates unable to pursue careers of choice and achieve financial security, or forced to live at home in their first jobs
- ◆ Decrepit schools with dated books and science equipment
- ◆ Teachers buying supplies out of their own pockets

Spotlight Story

Kristin Cole, 30, who graduated from Michigan State University's law school and lives in Grand Rapids, Mich., owes \$150,000 in private and government-backed student loans. Her monthly payment of \$660, which consumes a quarter of her take-home pay, is scheduled to jump to \$800 in a year or so, confronting her with stark financial choices.

"I could never buy a house. I can't travel; I can't do anything," she said. "I feel like a prisoner."

A legal aid worker, Cole said she may need to get a job at a law firm, "doing something that I'm not real dedicated to, just for the sake of being able to live."

Parents are still the primary source of funds for many students, but the dynamics were radically altered in recent years as tuition costs soared...

..."This is literally a new form of indenture ... something that every American parent should be scared of," said Barmak Nassirian, associate executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.

From the Associated Press, September 30, 2007⁴

Hot Facts

- ◆ **Young people either can't afford to go to college, or must take on debilitating debt.**
 - ◆ Under Bush, the cost of public college tuition has risen nearly 40% from 2000-01 through 2006-07.⁵
 - ◆ 20 years ago, Pell Grants covered half the cost of attending public college. Today, it's only one-third.⁶
 - ◆ Debt levels for graduating seniors with student loans more than doubled over the past decade – from \$9,250 to \$19,200.⁷

- ◆ **No Child Left Behind has failed in its mission to lift up schools.**
 - ◆ After 7 years of No Child Left Behind, only 1 in 3 fourth graders are reading at or above proficiency levels.⁸ The policy has left African Americans even further behind: only 1 in 10 black fourth graders are reaching these levels.⁹
 - ◆ Over the past 10 years, the average salary for public schoolteachers increased only 1.3 percent after adjusting for inflation, not enough to keep pace with the soaring costs of housing, health care and gasoline.¹⁰
 - ◆ Nearly half of all teachers leave the profession during their first five years.¹¹
 - ◆ Only 70% of entering freshmen and barely half of students of color finish high school with a regular diploma four years later. Every school day, nearly 7,000 American high school students become dropouts.¹²

- ◆ **Public investment in our children strengthens our economy and nourishes our democracy.**
 - ◆ Every dollar invested in early childhood education yields seven times that in savings, with less need for special ed, welfare and criminal justice services.¹³

- ◆ **Many schools are hazardous to our children's health. We need a massive effort to convert our crumbling classrooms into high-performing schools.**
 - ◆ The American Society of Civil Engineers gave America's school infrastructure a "D".
 - ◆ The American Lung Association reported that "American children missed more than 12 million school days in 2000 because of asthma exacerbated by poor indoor air quality".¹⁴
 - ◆ In a 1999 federal study, three-quarters of all schools said they needed funds for repairs and modernization in order to upgrade their condition to "good".¹⁵

Public Pulse

◆ **Americans believe in public schools and support their government being involved.**

- ◆ 79% say: “The government – local, state or federal – should be responsible for funding preschool education for all children in the U.S.”¹⁶ (*Harris Interactive, May 2007*)
- ◆ 72% support reform of the public school system, versus only 26% who want an alternative to public schools.¹⁷ (*Gallup, September 2007*)
- ◆ Only 31% support “contract[ing] with private profit-making corporations” to run their public schools.¹⁸ (*Gallup, September 2007*)
- ◆ Only 39% support letting families “choose a private school to attend at public expense,” down from a high of 46% in 2002.¹⁹ (*Gallup, September 2007*)
- ◆ The public is split on allowing families to choose a public, private or religious school with “the government [paying] part of the tuition.” 51% support, including 61% of public school parents.²⁰ (*Gallup, September 2007*)

◆ **Negative views of No Child Left Behind are growing rapidly.**

- ◆ A plurality (40%) had an unfavorable view of No Child Left Behind in 2007, up from 13% in 2003.²¹ (*Gallup, September 2007*)
- ◆ 52% of public school parents said in 2007 there is too much emphasis on testing, up from 32% in 2002. (Only 43% of all adults agree there is too much emphasis, up from 31%.)²² (*Gallup, September 2007*)
- ◆ Only one-third of public school parents say NCLB is helping their schools, with the rest saying it is hurting or making no difference.²³ (*Gallup, September 2007*)
- ◆ Only one-third of public school parents say the “increase in testing” is helping their schools, with the rest saying it is hurting or making no difference.²⁴ (*Gallup, September 2007*)

◆ **Investing in smaller classes and better teachers attracts wide support.**

- ◆ 95% believe smaller class sizes would be effective in attracting and retaining teachers, and 87% believe higher salaries for beginning teachers would accomplish the same.²⁵ (*Gallup, September 2007*)

Message Box

Us on Us	Them on Us
<p>We must invest in our public schools and teachers to provide our children with the best education in the world.</p> <p>We need good teachers, empowered to teach the critical thinking kids need to succeed in today's economy, with rigorous monitoring of children's progress.</p> <p>We need to insure college or advanced training is within reach of everyone who earns it, without forcing students into a debilitating debt that holds them back.</p>	<p>They want to waste more money on a failed system.</p> <p>This is an agenda for the teachers' unions, not for America's children. Teachers don't like to be graded, so they want to gut No Child Left Behind just when it is working.</p>
Us on Them	Them on Them
<p>They would put billions of scarce public dollars into private school vouchers – while opposing the investments we need for our public schools.</p> <p>Bush broke his promise to fund his reforms, Republicans voted to cut money from the student loan program, while protecting subsidies to private loan companies that contribute to their campaigns.</p> <p>No Child Left Behind is leaving kids and schools behind, stifling imagination while forcing teachers to teach to the test.</p>	<p>We need to give parents vouchers, let them decide where to education their children, and let schools compete for their students.</p> <p>We need competition in student loans, not a wasteful government bureaucracy running the show.</p> <p>No Child Left Behind is working, holding underperforming schools accountable. And performance is up.</p>

Additional Resources

American Federation of Teachers (AFT) “Hot Topics”
<http://www.aft.org/topics/index.htm>

Campaign for America’s Future: Quality Education
<http://ourfuture.org/education>

National Education Association: No Child Left Behind/ESEA – Research and Reports
<http://www.nea.org/esea/research-esea.html>

Campaign for College Affordability
<http://collegeaffordabilitynow.org/>

The Project on Student Debt: Quick Facts
http://projectonstudentdebt.org/Debt_Facts_and_Sources.pdf

The College Board: Trends in Student Aid
http://www.collegeboard.com/prod_downloads/about/news_info/trends/trends_aid_07.pdf

USPIRG: Cutting Interest Rates, Lowering Student Debt
<http://www.uspirg.org/home/reports/report-archives/affordable-higher-education/affordable-higher-education-reports/cutting-interest-rates-lowering-student-debt>

Alliance for Excellent Education, “In Need of Improvement: NCLB and High Schools,”
http://www.all4ed.org/files/NCLB_HighSchools.pdf

Pre[k]now Fact Sheets
<http://www.preknow.org/advocate/factsheets/benefits.cfm>

Committee for Economic Development, “The Economic Promise of Investing in High-Quality Preschool,” 2006: http://www.ced.org/docs/report/report_prek_econpromise.pdf

Endnotes

-
- ¹ General Accounting Office. 1995. *School Facilities: Conditions of America’s Schools*.
http://www.epa.gov/iaq/schools/pdfs/publications/gao_he95061.pdf
 - ² American Federation of Teachers. “Now It’s Time to Fix NCLB.”
http://www.aft.org/fixnclb/survey_responses.htm
 - ³ “Warnings On Student Lenders Unheeded,” *Washington Post*, 1 May 2007.
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/30/AR2007043001930.html>
 - ⁴ “High-Priced Student Loans Spell Trouble,” *Associated Press*, 30 September 2007.
<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/huff-wires/20070930/student-loans-the-spiral/>
 - ⁵ United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Digest of Education Statistics, 2007. (Adjusted for 2007 dollars)
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d06/tables/dt06_319.asp
 - ⁶ “Trends in Student Aid 2007,” College Board.
http://www.collegeboard.com/prod_downloads/about/news_info/trends/trends_aid_07.pdf

-
- ⁷ “Quick Facts About Student Debt,” Project on Student Debt.
http://projectonstudentdebt.org/files/File/Debt_Facts_and_Sources.pdf
- ⁸ “The Nations' Report Card: Reading 2007,” U.S. Department of Education.
<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2007/2007496.pdf>
- ⁹ “Next Round Begins For No Child Left Behind,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 8 January 2007.
<http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0108/p01s01-uspo.html>
- ¹⁰ “Teacher Salary Lags Behind Inflation,” National Education Association, 10 December 2007.
<http://www.nea.org/newsreleases/2007/nr071210.html>
- ¹¹ “Half of Teachers Quit in 5 Years.” *Washington Post*. 9 May 2006.
http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/08/AR2006050801344_pf.html
- ¹² Alliance for Excellent Education, “In Need of Improvement: NCLB and High Schools,” November 2007. http://www.all4ed.org/files/NCLB_HighSchools.pdf
- ¹³ <http://www.preknow.org/advocate/factsheets/benefits.cfm>
- ¹⁴ American Federation of Teachers. 2006. *Building Minds, Minding Buildings: Turning Our Crumbling Schools into Environments for Learning*. <http://www.aft.org/topics/building-conditions/downloads/minding-bldgs.pdf>
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ “Public Policy: Economy, Workforce, Funding” Harris Interactive, May 2007.
https://www.pnc.com/webapp/unsec/Requester?resource=/wcm/resources/file/ebc8fe068732013/P_NC_Study_Findings_Public_Policy_0507.pdf
- ¹⁷ “The 39th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward The Public Schools,” Lowell C. Rose & Alec M. Gallup, September 2007.
http://www.pdkmembers.org/members_online/publications/e-GALLUP/kpoll_pdfs/pdkpoll39_2007.pdf
- ¹⁸ Ibid
- ¹⁹ Ibid
- ²⁰ Ibid
- ²¹ Ibid
- ²² Ibid
- ²³ Ibid
- ²⁴ Ibid
- ²⁵ Ibid