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Education Reform in the Obama Administration  
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(final)  

Good evening and thank you.  
I have a friend back in Chicago. He lives in my neighborhood. His children attend the same school I attended. We play basketball together. 
And whenever we have a few minutes alone – we often end up talking about education. He is a passionate believer in public education – he attributes his personal success to education – and throughout his life he has used his position to advance the cause of public education. 
As it turns out, my friend was just elected President of the United States – so I’m feeling pretty hopeful about the prospects of a more progressive national education policy. I understand that we’re facing two wars, a struggling economy, an unsustainable energy policy, a health care system that consumes 16% of the GNP, and a national debt of about $10 trillion dollars. I also understand that we have had eight years in which there has been no real call for national sacrifice that is required to meet these kinds of challenges. Americans have been told that low taxes, easy credit, open markets and military might are all we need to preserve our way of life. 
No one told us that we can’t borrow our way to prosperity. No one told us that we also have to invest in ourselves, our children and our future – and sometime that requires delaying gratification today for a better tomorrow. And now America is paying a big price for being shortsighted with homes and jobs disappearing, retirement portfolios tanking, companies going under and education slipping compared to other countries around the world. So this may not be the ideal climate for a discussion on the future of public education. In fact, several recent newspaper articles have suggested that education will not be one of Barack Obama’s top priorities. I think they are wrong.
Americans are eager for an open, honest and provocative discussion on public education and Barack Obama is ready, willing and able to lead it.

Barack Obama has a profound understanding of the importance of education. His story would not be possible without an education.

He gave 12 major education speeches during the campaign. He was a strong advocate for education in the Illinois State Senate where he helped create the State’s early learning council.

In his short time in Washington, he has been a leader on the issue pushing for an increase in Pell Grants, teacher residency programs, and expanded summer programs.

His education platform – which you are all familiar with – is comprehensive, thoughtful, and forward-thinking.

It starts at birth by supporting struggling parents. He knows that children who fall behind by kindergarten may never catch up so he wants more Head Start seats and he wants higher quality pre-school.

He supports a major investment in K-12 education, with an emphasis on boosting teacher quality and more afterschool programs.

He does not want to abandon No Child Left Behind. He wants to fix it. He rightly credits the law with exposing underperformance among sub-groups, but rightly critiques the law for failing to live up to its promise.

NCLB set lofty goals but did not provide the resources to meet those goals – and now that so many states are in financial trouble – our hard-earned gains are even more at risk.

Barack Obama is a supporter of charter schools and performance pay and other strategies to raise achievement and promote competition. His views, however, are not driven by an ideology that holds unions in contempt and worships free markets.

He is interested in results. He understands that America has many good schools with union teachers and many without. Rather than debate governance models – he urges an open mind to new strategies and approaches. He will support whatever works best.

President-elect Obama also wants to expand access to college with a $4000 tax credit. He understands that America will fall further behind in the global economy unless more low-income kids go to college.

He will invest in subjects like science, technology, engineering and math – the so-called STEM subjects that are so important to our economic future.
Finally, he wants to challenge parents to take more responsibility for their child’s education – by turning off the video games, helping with homework and directing their children into constructive activities.

That’s a critical message because parents spend much more time with their children than teachers. If they don’t have books in their homes and if they don’t talk to their kids about school everyday, the kids will get the message that it’s not important.

There is a lot more detail behind these ideas but these are the basic components. Many of these initiatives were developed in big cities like this one – with the size and scale to experiment and try out new educational approaches like the KIPP schools.

We have a great new generation of educational thinkers and entrepreneurs – people like Jon Schnur of New Leaders for New Schools, Wendy Kopp of Teach for America and Michelle Rhee – who is now running the D.C. public schools.

Some people might disagree with me, but I believe that the combative history between unions and management has taken a back seat in recent years as we have all worked together to bring new approaches and ideas into our classrooms.

In Chicago, for example, we had nine teacher strikes between 1970 and 1987. Since then we have had 21 years of labor peace during which we opened:

- 75 charter schools
- Started performance pay
- Closed down 19 failing schools and dismissed the entire staff
- And gave our principals more authority than ever before to choose their teaching staff.

All across the country, similar experiments are playing out. It’s not always smooth – but there is at least a willingness and commitment on the part of all of the stakeholders to try and find common ground and put the interests of children and their education first.

Barack Obama has watched and learned from all of this. He has gotten personally involved. He has been candid with everyone about the need to invest and experiment if we want to take public education in America to a new level.

Now in order for President Obama to make good on what candidate Obama has proposed, he really needs our help. There are many factors he can’t control – from Congress, to the economy, to the external pressures of the stakeholders involved.

But I am very hopeful.

I know that – even in the kind of crisis environment we have today – Barack Obama is capable of staying focused on the broader challenges we face as a nation – and he believes – as I do – that education is the key to long-term economic strength.
As he said during the campaign – a President must be able to do more than one thing at a time – and the immediate crisis in the financial world cannot divert us from the larger crisis in the education world.

So the education community has the opportunity of a lifetime to remake public education in America.

We must move beyond the old battles and come together behind the fundamental concepts at the heart of the Obama vision. We must help him make the case for these investments.

We need to put the flesh on the bones, challenge the status quo, and hold ourselves and each other accountable.

If we allow early childhood programs to devolve into babysitting enterprises, that’s our fault. We all know young children can learn -- so if we’re not teaching them, then we have failed.

Every middle class family invests in tutoring and piano lessons and other enrichment activities. They know that a six-hour school day is not enough to prepare kids for the information society -- so why should we send poor children home at 2:30?

We must get our priorities in order so that every child in large urban districts like mine – where 85% of the kids are low-income -- has safe, constructive activities each afternoon.

Chicago’s community schools program is one model. The school is open 12 hours a day. There’s a community partner involved and there are programs for parents and children.

If school systems across America can’t adopt proven strategies – from departmentalizing middle grades to boosting AP participation in high schools – then we have failed.

If we resist charter schools or performance pay – then we have failed. The rest of the world has used financial incentives since the dawn of time. The education world is way behind on this issue. I just started paying kids for grades. If it works, I’ll expand it.

If eight years from today, we’re still arguing about whether unions are the problem and charters are the answer then we will have missed an opportunity. They’re both here to stay and let’s use them both to make good things happen in the classroom.

If we are unwilling to shut down failing schools and replace the staff with dedicated, energetic new teachers, then we have failed.

Five years ago, we closed down Dodge Academy on the West Side of Chicago. At the time about 15 percent of the kids were meeting standards. We reopened a year later with a new team – union teachers I might add – and today we have tripled test scores.
In 2005, I took Senator Obama to Dodge Academy. He spent the day talking to teachers, kids and administrators. I know the experience stayed with him because he wrote about it in his book.

It also says something about his character and his leadership that he would dwell on this particular story – which is really about the ultimate form of accountability.

Barack Obama’s uplifting rhetoric about hope and change and a unified America is equally matched by his toughness and his determination to make difficult but necessary choices. That’s why parental responsibility is one of his core principles.

He is absolutely willing to challenge conventional thinking even if draws a few boos. He understands – as all of us do – that the educator’s job is to fight for children – not adults.

Best of all, he is not someone who has been removed from this his whole life. This is his life. There are struggling schools and communities within blocks of his Chicago home. He spent years organizing poor families on the South Side.

He has seen first-hand how broken families and dysfunctional communities can impede learning. He has seen how gang life lures children away from school, triggering drug abuse, violence, and failure.

He won’t need to be briefed on this issue. It’s too close to him to fall off the list of priorities. You can sit down with him today and discuss education policy. He gets it – he asks thoughtful questions – and he gives informed responses.

So this is the time to think big – to move beyond the 20th century debates – and the 20th century formulas – and ask ourselves – what can education in America become?

How can we get the very best people in every classroom – and especially in the schools that need them the most? What do we need to pay them? How do we need to pay them?

We need the next generation of superstars to choose teaching instead of choosing Wall Street or silicon valley. How do we make that happen?

How can we give every child who needs it much more time and support?

How can we crack the code on high schools so they stop losing a third of more of their kids – and start producing students who are ready for work or college?

How do we bring real accountability into a system that resists reform, avoids blame, and tolerates failure?

If they had not named the financial bailout bill the Troubled Assets Relief Program, they could have used it to apply to American education. In all of America, no asset is more troubled, and no asset is more critical.
The economic crisis won’t displace education reform because there won’t be an economic future without a major investment in education.

You have heard all of the arguments before. The cost of education is less than the cost of crime, prisons and welfare. An investment in education strengthens the workforce.

Education is the path out of poverty, the response to inequality, the solution to economic competitiveness.

The difference today is that we have a president-elect who doesn’t just mouth these arguments. He believes them. He embodies them. They are central to who he is and to what he believes.

He understands that education is the civil rights issue of our generation. This is the next step in the journey that ended slavery and Jim Crow. It’s the next step in the journey after Selma and Dr. King and the reforms of the 1960’s.

It’s the next step in the journey after affirmative action and diversity programs in government and the private sector.

Education is the only path to equality and hope for the child of a crumbling home in a broken community – who looks out the door and sees young men without hope or opportunity. We have to get that child to go back inside and sit down and read.

Investing in education is not a policy option for America. This is an economic and social imperative. We don’t have a choice in this matter. Perpetuating inequality and failure in education will bring us all down.

The alternative, however, will lift us all up and give us the platform to advance in the new century with confidence, ingenuity and determination.

It will make it possible for more kids from single parent homes like Barack Obama’s to fulfill their dreams and find meaning and purpose in their lives.

The Americans that elected Barack Obama were hard-working people who gave up their nights and weekends to work for change. They dug into their limited savings to support his campaign for change.

They know that service is central to American life. They are ready to make the sacrifice required to give our kids a better and stronger future.

They came out in record numbers to vote for change and they are willing to do their part to bring about change. And now we need to do ours.

Thank you.