
Executive Summary

Getting Smarter, Becoming Fairer

A Progressive Education Agenda for a Stronger Nation

America's public education system came of age at the beginning of the last century, amid an enormous growth in population and a fundamentally changing economy. Early 20th century America saw the fading of an agrarian society, the advent of the industrialized economy and a massive influx of immigrants. We created our current public school system to meet the needs of this changed society and to prepare students to succeed in the 20th century economy. Our investments and leadership in education, such as making high school widely available and building strong public universities, helped foster economic prosperity and a strong democracy.

One hundred years later, America faces a newly globalized economy, rapidly changing demographics, and a lingering and dangerous achievement gap for minority and poor students that continues to sap America's strength by failing to give all children the tools they require to become the highly skilled workforce and engaged citizenry our country needs.

Now, we are charged with simultaneously closing two sets of student achievement gaps: one at home, the other on the international stage. We must ensure that all American children – regardless of race, ethnicity, income, native language, or geographic location – are afforded access to the high-quality schools that will enable them to participate in the promised opportunity of the American dream. Failure to do so will only lead to greater divisions in the country between the “haves” and “have-nots,” which history tells us can have disastrous consequences. We must also produce more high-caliber students to compete successfully with the young people overseas who can today rightfully take pride in their own world-class educations.

In this new era, America must commit itself to a fundamental examination of its public education system and fully restructure it to meet the challenges of this century. American perseverance, ingenuity and brainpower can make America stronger than ever. But 21st century success will require the creativity and talent of every American. *Getting Smarter, Becoming Fairer* lays out a road map for creating a public education system capable of meeting the challenges our country faces. We call on our nation's leaders to show the courage to guide America along this path.

Defining the Challenge

Globalization and Competitiveness

The United Kingdom was the economic world power and the United States' greatest economic competitor at the beginning of the 20th century. The United States now finds itself in an increasingly competitive global economy. The European Union and Japan today are formidable advanced industrial competitors. Developing countries like China and India offer the world economy workers of increasing education and sophistication at far lower costs than the United States can match. Global competition is growing ever more intense; by 2050, the three largest economies are likely to be China, the United States and India – in that order.

The rapidly globalizing economy means Americans no longer have to vie with just one another for good jobs. Other nations are increasingly realizing the relationship between knowledge and economic progress. They are encouraging learning and supporting its application to develop ideas and spur innovation. While many of America's public schools produce high-quality graduates, many others fail to do so. Too many of our students are not prepared to thrive in this increasingly competitive world.

Achievement Gap

More than 40 years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and President Lyndon B. Johnson's declaration of a war on poverty, the gaps between "haves" and "have-nots" continue to be huge on almost every measure of health, income and achievement. Minority and poor students – in rural areas and cities alike – continue to fall behind in basic math and reading skills. These gaps can no longer be ignored; students of color are growing as a proportion of our population and in this century will become our new majority. Currently, one in every five children in America is the son or daughter of an immigrant. By 2015, that number is expected to grow to one in every three children. Just as the creativity and hard work of 20th century immigrants helped create unparalleled prosperity for our country, each of these children has the talent and potential to contribute to our society in ways we can only imagine.

On an individual level, academic gaps represent a fundamental failure in the promise of our education system to ensure that every child has the opportunity to reach his or her fullest potential. Reverberating through the lives of millions of children, these gaps stifle economic growth and endanger our democracy.

Indeed, the achievement gap threatens more than our society's competitiveness. The signal role of public education is to prepare a citizenry capable of participating fully in the life and work of our democracy. In our increasingly complex, knowledge-driven and information-rich society, the skills and critical-thinking abilities necessary to serve on juries, choose our leaders and participate in civic life are as important as ever. America's diversity has always been our greatest resource; we must have an education system that capitalizes on this strength.

Our Response to the Challenge

To meet the challenges we have outlined, America must renew its commitment to education.

More Time on Task

We begin with a simple but essential idea: students need more learning time. Whenever our economy has asked more from Americans, America has offered its people greater education. Universal elementary public education and the 9 a.m. – 3 p.m. school day were developed in the agrarian era, when young people needed basic knowledge but were still expected to help out on the farm. Later, in the industrial era, we offered high school to all students, and thanks to the GI Bill, college became possible for millions of Americans. The extension of college opportunity to more students laid the foundation for the great post-war economic boom.

Today, extending learning time from early childhood through post-secondary education is once more an imperative for our nation. Education should begin long before children enter the classroom, yet far too few children begin school ready to learn. In 1999, only 39% of all pre-kindergarten 3- to 5-year-olds had gained at least three of the four literacy school readiness skills.¹ Once children enter school, they face a system that inhibits learning by structuring the school year and school day according to tradition and habit, rather than according to student needs. The summer vacation months of the typical school year allow many students to forget some of what they learned earlier and force teachers to spend precious time reviewing material.² The current length of the school day is just as harmful to student learning. Research has shown that quality after-school activities increase academic performance and reduce negative behaviors; yet 14 million children simply return to an empty home when the dismissal bell rings.³ Given this foundation, it comes as no surprise that many of America's high-school graduates find themselves under-prepared for a post-secondary education.

In an increasingly competitive world where economic prosperity, for both the nation and individuals, is so dependent on education, only about half of American students obtain a post-secondary education. And for all of our children, but particularly for low-income and minority students, the United States lags far behind many of its competitors in providing pre-school education and a school year that allocates enough time for learning. These realities are unacceptable – both as a matter of equity and as a matter of economic strength. We must extend educational time and use the time we have more effectively.

High Expectations, Standards, and Accountability

Of course, it is not enough to extend educational time; we must use the time better. We must ensure that all students are learning what they need to succeed in the 21st century. Currently, there is little consensus on what students should know and be able to do by the time they graduate from high school. While some states have implemented rigorous curriculum standards and sophisticated evaluation systems that push students to aim high, others have settled for the minimum. It is time to establish a consensus and codify what standards and accountability measures will best prepare students to succeed. But providing every student with a high-quality education goes beyond strong standards and quality measurements; it requires turning around low-performing schools. Federal and state laws promise assistance, but effective and sufficient help is all too rare. We must develop high standards and work to make sure that all students can meet these expectations.

¹ Child Trends, *Early School Readiness* (Washington, DC: Child Trends Databank, 2003). Available at: <http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/indicators/7EarlySchoolReadiness.cfm>

² H. Cooper, B. Nye, K. Charlton, J. Lindsay and S. Greathouse, "The Effects of Summer Vacation on Achievement Test Scores: A Narrative and Meta-analytic Review," *Review of Educational Research*, 66(3): 227-268, Fall 1996.

³ After-school Alliance, *America After 3 PM: A Household Survey on After-school in America* (Washington, DC: After-school Alliance, 2004). Available at: http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/press_archives/Working_Families_Rpt.pdf

Highly Qualified Teachers and Effective School Leaders

Schools need well-trained and dedicated teachers and principals to succeed. Despite this reality, for too long, we have not ensured that the training for teachers and principals meets the most pressing needs of students, and we have failed to address the many reasons teachers leave the profession, including a lack of professional development and advancement opportunities, low pay, lack of support from school administrators, poor working conditions, and limited decision-making power. As a result of the nation's failure to attend to these issues, one-third of new teachers leave within the first three years of teaching,⁴ and students in hard-to-serve schools are more likely to be taught by instructors with temporary or emergency certifications and just a year or two of teaching experience.⁵

Only high-quality educators will produce the skilled workforce and involved citizenry this country needs. The prestige of the profession must be raised in order to continue to attract and retain the professional force needed to educate the nation's children.

Connecting Schools with Families and Communities

All too often, low-income children and children of color start pre-school and kindergarten behind their more advantaged peers. Disadvantaged children, from toddlers to teenagers, may also face challenges in their homes and communities. These out-of-school difficulties can leave children further behind; children without adequate health care, housing, parental support and nutrition are simply not as well prepared to focus on learning when they are in the classroom. Providing families with supports to ensure the health, safety and steady development of their children is essential for a positive beginning and continued academic success.

Investing in America's Future

Transforming our schools to meet 21st century challenges will demand real resources. The National Institute for Early Education Research, for example, reports that it would cost \$11.6 billion to provide quality pre-school to 3- and 4-year-olds from low-income families.⁶ The Teaching Commission, chaired by former IBM chairman Louis V. Gerstner, Jr., calls for an annual investment of \$30 billion to improve teacher quality.⁷ These figures may appear daunting, but addressing the challenges of the 21st century is essential to our prosperity and to the survival of our democracy.

⁴ Richard M. Ingersoll, *Why Do High-Poverty Schools Have Difficulty Staffing Their Classrooms with Qualified Teachers?* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress and the Institute for America's Future, November 2004).

⁵ National Partnership for Teaching in At-Risk Schools, *Qualified Teacher for At-Risk Schools: A National Imperative* (Washington, DC: 2005).

⁶ National Institute for Early Education Research, *Fact Sheet: Cost of Providing Quality Preschool Education to America's 3- and 4-year-olds* (New Jersey: National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers, State University of New Jersey, 2005). Available at: <http://nieer.org/resources/facts/index.php?FastFactID=5>

⁷ The Teaching Commission, *Teaching at Risk: A Call to Action*, (New York: The Teaching Commission, 2004). Available at: http://www.theteachingcommission.org/press/FINAL_Report.pdf

In the past, when urgent national needs emerged – be they opening the doors of college opportunity to returning GIs or answering the challenge of Sputnik – the federal government led the way in responding. Today we find the opposite, with less than 3% of the total federal budget going to education. The federal government will need to lead again. To begin the implementation of the recommendations made in this report, we propose a \$325 billion federal investment over 10 years. Even this increase, however, would not be adequate to implement the recommendations made in this report to the extent our country needs. To achieve our full vision, we call for doubling the federal investment in education and increasing the investment from states and localities.

If we were only asking for more spending on the education system of our past – the one that hasn’t worked well for so many – then we would not deserve to have our call answered. But we are not. We are recommending a dramatic new approach to education and a new investment paradigm by seeking increased federal dollars to leverage much more learning time and realize much higher expectations, to take aggressive steps to improve the quality of teaching, and to connect with families and communities so that they can enhance their children’s learning opportunities. We are convinced our recommendations, if well implemented, will work to better prepare all students and close learning gaps. They promise significant returns and therefore are deserving of the significant investment increases for which we call. For every \$1 invested in pre-kindergarten, for example, experts predict a return of at least \$7 due to higher earnings and less crime and remedial education.⁸ Similarly, increased college participation improves tax receipts and lowers expenditures on social programs and incarceration.⁹

America today faces both a choice and an opportunity. We cannot pretend that we are ready to meet the challenges of the 21st century if we continue with business as usual. The agenda outlined here calls for a marked transformation of our schools. That requires greater commitment, greater accountability and greater investment. This transformation is essential if we are to provide our children with the education they need and deserve.

Our national history is rich with tales of American perseverance, ingenuity and brainpower rising to take on the challenges of each era. We must once again summon the resolve to transform our education system; our future depends on it.

⁸ National Institute for Early Education Research, “Federal Reserve Economist Urges Much Wider Public Investment in Preschool” *Preschool Matters*, vol. 1, no. 3, December 2003.

⁹ Sandy Baum and Kathleen Payea, *Education Pays 2004* (New Jersey: The College Board, 2004). Available at: http://www.collegeboard.com/prod_downloads/press/cost04/EducationPays2004.pdf

Outline of Recommendations

The *Renewing Our Schools, Securing Our Future* National Task Force on Public Education believes that, by implementing the following major recommendations, Americans will be better prepared to meet the needs of the 21st century.

1. More and Better Use of Learning Time

- Extending the School Day, Lengthening and/or Reorganizing the School Year, and Making Better Use of Existing Time in School
- Providing Pre-School and Full-Day Kindergarten
- Preparing All High-School Students for Higher Education and Connecting Them to Affordable Post-Secondary Opportunities

2. High Expectations, Voluntary National Standards, and Accountability for All Students Learning

Developing voluntary national standards, expanding national accountability measures, and pressing for adequate and equitable funding across states.

Increasing assistance to low-performing schools and districts and promoting school construction and modernization.

3. Highly Qualified Teachers for Every Classroom and Strong, Effective Leaders for Every School

Developing better teacher and principal preparation and training, enhanced compensation structures, and a more equitable distribution of highly skilled teachers.

4. Connecting Schools with Families and Communities

Establishing community schools to address out-of-school needs, offering early screening to identify developmental and physical challenges, promoting home visits and support for struggling families, and encouraging greater parental involvement in children's education.