



UNITED STATES SENATOR • ILLINOIS

**BARACK OBAMA**



**Teaching Our Kids in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Economy**  
**Remarks as Prepared for Delivery**  
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**1333 H Street NW, 10th Floor**  
**Washington, DC**  
**Tuesday, October 25, 2005**

The other day, I was reading through Jonathan Kozol's new book, *Shame of a Nation*. In it, he talks about his recent travels to schools across America, and how fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, we have an education system in this country that is still visibly separate and painfully unequal.

At one point, Kozol tells about his trip to Fremont High School in Los Angeles, where he meets some children who explain with heart-wrenching honesty what living in this system is like. One girl told him that she'd taken hairdressing twice, because there were actually two different levels offered by the high school. The first was in hairstyling; the other in braiding.

Another girl, Mireya, listened as her friend told this story. And she began to cry. When asked what was wrong, she said, "I don't want to take hairdressing. I did not need sewing either. I knew how to sew. My mother is a seamstress in a factory. I'm trying to go to college. I don't need to sew to go to college. My mother sews. I hoped for something else."

I hoped for something else.

It's a simple dream, but it speaks to us so powerfully because it is *our* dream – one that exists at the very center of the American experience. One that says if you're willing to work hard and take responsibility, then you'll have the chance to reach for something else; for something better.

The ideal of public education has always been at the heart of this bargain. From the moment the earliest Americans stepped out from the shadows of tyranny and built the first free schools in the towns of New England and across the Southern plains, it was the driving force behind 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's a bargain our government kept as we moved from a nation of farms to a nation of factories, setting up a system of free public high schools to give every American the chance to participate in the new economy. It's a bargain we expanded after World

War II, when we sent over two million returning heroes to college on the GI Bill, creating the largest middle class in history.

And even when our government refused to hold up its end of this bargain; when America fell short of its promise and forced Linda Brown to walk miles to a dilapidated Topeka school because she wasn't allowed in the well-off, white-only school near her house; even then, ordinary people marched and bled, they took to the streets and fought in the courts, they stood up and spoke out until the day when the arrival of nine little children at a school in Little Rock made real the decision that in America, separate could never be equal. 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.

In this country, it is education that allows our children to hope for something else.

And as the twenty-first century unfolds, we are called once again to make real this hope – to meet the new challenges of a global economy by carrying forth the ideals of progress and opportunity through public education in America.

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 Chicago 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.

America is in danger of losing this competition. We now have one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized country. By 12<sup>th</sup> grade, our children score lower on their math and science tests than most other kids in the world. And today, countries like China are graduating eight times as many engineers as we do.

And yet, as these fundamental changes are occurring all around this, we still hear about schools that are giving students the choice between hairstyling and braiding.

Let's be clear – we are failing too many of our children. We're sending them out into a 21<sup>st</sup> century economy by sending them through the doors of 20<sup>th</sup> century schools.

Right now, six million middle and high school students are reading at levels significantly below their grade level. Half of all teenagers can't understand basic fractions; half of all nine year olds can't perform basic multiplication or division. For some students, the data is even worse: almost 60% of African-American fourth-graders can't read at even the basic level, and by 8<sup>th</sup> grade, nearly nine in ten African-American and Latino students are not proficient in math. More students than ever are taking college entrance exams, but these tests are showing that only twenty percent are prepared to take college-level classes in English, math, and science. For African-American students, the figure dips to just ten percent.

What happens to these kids? What happens to the one in four eighth graders who never go on to finish high school in five years? What happens to the one in two high school graduates who never go on to college?

Thirty or forty years ago, they may 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.

If we do nothing about this, if we accept this kind of economy; this kind of society, we face a future where the ideal of American meritocracy could turn into an American myth. A future that's not only morally unacceptable for our children; but economically untenable for a nation that finds itself in a globalized world, as countries who are out-educating us today out-compete our workers tomorrow.

Now, the American people understand that government alone can't meet this challenge. They understand that we need to transform our educational culture, from one of complacency to one that constantly strives for excellence. And they understand that government cannot replace parents as the primary motivator for the hard work and commitment that excellence requires.

But they also know that government, through the public schools, plays a critical role. And what they've seen from government for close to two decades is not innovation or bold calls to action. Instead, what they've seen is inaction and tinkering around the edges of our education system – a paralysis that is fueled by ideological battles that are as outdated as they are predictable.

You know the arguments. On one side, you'll here conservatives who will look at children without textbooks and classrooms without computers and say money doesn't matter. On the other side, you'll find liberals who will look at failing test scores and failing schools and not realize how much reform matters. One side will blame teachers, and the other side will never ask them to change. Some will say that no matter what you do, some children just can't learn. Others will make excuses for them when they won't learn.

Some will say that the same public school system that succeeded for generations must now be dismantled and privatized, no matter who it leaves behind. And others will defend the status quo in these schools even when they fail to teach our kids.

Like most ideological debates, this one assumes that there's an "either-or" answer to our education problems. Either we need to pour more money into the system, or we need to reform it with more tests and standards.

But we don't make much progress for our kids when we constrain ourselves like this. It appeared for a brief moment that the President, working with leaders like Senator

Kennedy understood this, and many of us were initially encouraged by the passage of No Child Left Behind. It may not be popular to say in Democratic circles, but there were good elements to this bill – its emphasis on the achievement gap, raising standards, and accountability. Unfortunately, because of failures in implementation, particularly its failure to provide adequate funding and a failure to design better assessment tests that provide a clearer path for schools to raise achievement, the bill’s promise is not yet fulfilled.

The shortcomings of NCLB shouldn’t end the conversation, however. They should be the start of a conversation about how we can do better. Yes, it’s a moral outrage that this Administration hasn’t come through with the funding for what it claims has been its number one domestic priority. But to wage war against the entire law for that reason is not an education policy, and Democrats need to realize that.

If we truly believe in our public schools, then we have a moral responsibility to do better – to break the either-or mentality around school reform, and embrace a both-and mentality. Good schools will require *both* the structural reform *and* the resources necessary to prepare our kids for the future.

It’s not as if innovation isn’t taking place around the country. It’s taking place in wealthier schools, like Illinois’ Adlai Stephenson High School, which has one of the highest percentages of students taking AP exams in the country, and California’s New Tech High, which puts a computer in front of every child. But it’s also taking place in schools where large majorities of children find themselves below the poverty line yet above the national average in achievement -- places like Newark’s Branch Brook Elementary and Chicago’s Carson Elementary School.

The problem is that we are not applying what we’ve learned from these successes to inform national policy. We need new vision for education in America – one where we move past ideology to experiment with the latest reforms, measure the results, and make policy decisions based on what works and what doesn’t.

Now, if we are going to learn from schools that work, we must begin by admitting the obvious: money matters. In too many places, kids are going to school in trailers where rats are more numerous than computers. Smaller classes, books and lab supplies, better paid teachers, modernized buildings with the latest technology – all of this is critical if we are serious about educating our next generation.

But money alone won’t make a difference without reform. And by the way, we won’t be able to muster the political will to get more money into the system unless taxpayers are convinced that the money will produce measurable results. Fortunately, those who work in the field know what reforms really work: a more challenging and rigorous curriculum with emphasis on math, science, and literacy skills. Longer hours and more days to give kids the time and attention they need to learn. Early childhood education for every child so they’re not left behind before they even start school. Meaningful, performance-based assessments that can give us a fuller picture of how a

student is doing. And putting effective teachers and transformative principals in front of our kids.

All of these reforms need to be scaled-up and replicated across the country. But in the time I have remaining, let me use just talk about a few to point to what's possible, starting with one place where I think we can start making a big difference in education right now.

From the moment our children step into a classroom, new evidence shows that the single most important factor in determining their achievement today 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 person who will brave some of the most difficult schools, the most challenging children, and accept the most meager compensation simply to give someone else the chance to succeed.

One study shows that two groups of students who started third grade at about the same level of math achievement finished fifth grade at vastly different levels. The group with the effective teacher saw their scores rise by nearly 25%. The group with the ineffective teacher actually saw their scores drop by 25%.

But even though we know how much teaching matters, in too many places we've abandoned our teachers, sending them into some of the most impoverished, underperforming schools with little experience or pay; little preparation or support. After a few years of experience, most will leave to pick wealthier, less challenging schools.

The result is that some of our neediest children end up with less-experienced, poorly-paid teachers who are far more likely to be teaching subjects in which they have no training. Minority students are twice as likely to have these teachers. In Illinois, students in high-poverty schools are more than three times as likely to have them. The No Child Left Behind law, which states that all kids should have highly qualified teachers, is supposed to correct this, but so far it hasn't, because no one's followed through on the promise.

If we hope to give our children a chance, it's time we start giving our teachers a chance. We can't change the whole country overnight. But what we can do is give more school districts the chance to revolutionize the way they approach teaching. By helping spark complete reform across an entire school district, we can learn what actually works for our kids and then replicate those policies throughout the country.

So here's what I'm proposing: the creation of what I call Innovation Districts. School districts from around the country that want to become seedbeds of reform would apply and we'd select the twenty with the best plans to put effective, supported teachers in all classrooms and increase achievement for all students. We'd offer these districts substantial new resources to do this, but in return, we'd ask them to try systemic new reforms. Above all, we'd require results.

In Innovation Districts, we'd ask for reforms in four broad areas: teaching, most importantly, but also how teachers use their time, what they teach, and what we can do to hold our schools accountable for achievement.

We'd begin by working with these districts to strengthen their teaching, and we'd start with recruitment. Right now we don't have nearly enough effective teachers in the places we need them most: urban and rural schools, and subject areas like math and science. One of the main reasons for this, cited by most teachers who leave the profession, is that no one gives them the necessary training and preparation.

Around the country, organizations like the Academy for Urban School Leadership in Chicago are changing this by recruiting and training new, highly-qualified teachers for some of the hardest-to-teach classrooms in the country. We need to expand this by giving districts help in creating new teacher academies that will partner with organizations like this to recruit effective teachers for low-performing, high-poverty schools. Each teacher would undergo an extensive training program before they begin, including classroom observation and participation.

After we recruit great teachers, we need to pay them better. Right now, teaching is one of the only professions where no matter how well you perform at your job, you're almost never rewarded for success. But with six-figure salaries luring away some of our most talented college graduates from some of our neediest schools, this needs to change. That's why teachers in these Innovation Districts who are successful in improving student achievement would receive substantial pay increases, as would those who choose to teach in the most troubled schools and the highest-need subject areas, like math and science. The city of Denver is trying pay increases in partnership with the local union, and when Chattanooga, Tennessee offered similar incentives for teachers who taught in high-need schools, student reading scores went up by over 10%.

Of course, teachers don't just need more pay, they need more support. One thing I kept hearing when I visited Dodge Elementary School in Chicago is how much an encouraging principal or the advice of an experienced teacher can make a difference. That's why teachers would be paired with mentor teachers who've been there before. After a few years of experience, they'd then have the chance to become mentor teachers themselves.

And to help them deal with those few disruptive students who tend to slow down the rest of the class – a problem I hear about from teachers all the time – we'd expand innovative programs being used in states like Illinois that teach students about positive behavior.

Finally, we would also require Innovation Districts to work with their unions to uncover bureaucratic obstacles that leave poor kids without good teachers, including hiring, funding and transfer policies. Districts would work with unions to tackle these problems so that we can provide every child with an effective teacher.

Beyond policies that help teachers specifically, we'd also ask Innovation Districts to try reforms that create a more effective teaching environment. To give teachers more time with their students and more time to learn from each other, these districts would be asked to restructure their schedules and implement either longer days or summer school. In addition to more learning, this would provide kids a safe, educational environment while their parents are at work.

And we'd make sure that in every school district across the country, educators are teaching a curriculum that will prepare our kids for the global economy. In many states, students are taught the anatomy of a flower as many as six times over the course of their education. Yet, they are never taught what they need to become a productive citizen in a global economy – like computer technology, how the economy works, why skyscrapers stand, or how to design a new product. Some states are successfully using this kind of project-based learning to give our kids real world, hands-on experience in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math. We will provide funding for more of this learning in more of our schools.

To hold schools and teachers accountable for the results of all these reforms, Innovation Districts would be asked to support schools that succeed and shut down those that don't. To find out what works and what doesn't, we'd provide them with powerful data and technology, and also give them the option of partnering with local universities to help them improve performance, like what happens at the University of Chicago's Urban Education Initiative. Schools that raise student achievement would be given bonuses. For schools that don't improve, the districts would close them and replace them with new, smaller schools that can replicate some of the successful reforms taking place elsewhere. Entire districts that do not improve would be removed from the program.

These reforms would take an important first step toward fixing our broken system by putting qualified, supported teachers in the schools that need them most. But beyond that, they would show us the progress we can make when money is well spent. And they would allow us to finally break free from the either-or mentality that's put bureaucracy and ideology ahead of what works; ahead of what's best for our kids.

When it comes to education, the time for excuses has passed – for all of us.

During my visit to Dodge Elementary, I was able to speak with a few of the teachers about some of the challenges they're facing in educating their students. And one teacher mentioned to me that in one of the biggest obstacles in her view is what she referred to as the "These Kids" syndrome.

She said that when it comes to educating students today, people always seem to find a million excuses for why "these kids" can't learn. That you'll hear how "these kids are nothing but trouble," or "these kids come from tough backgrounds," or "these kids don't want to learn." And the more people talk about them as "these kids," the easier it is for "these kids" to become somebody else's problem.

But of course, the children in this country – the children in Dodge Elementary, and South Central L.A., and rural Arkansas, and suburban Maryland – they are not “these kids.” They are our kids. They want a chance to achieve – and each of us has a responsibility to give them that chance.

In the end, children succeed because somewhere along the way, a parent or teacher instills in them the belief that they can. That they’re able to. That they’re worth it.

At Earhart Elementary in Chicago, one little girl, raised by a single mom from a poor background, 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.”

In the months and years to come, it’s time for this nation to rededicate itself to the ideal of a world class education for every American child. It’s time to let our kids hope for something else. It’s time to instill the belief in every child that they can succeed – and then make sure we make good on the promise to never let them down. Thank you.