

The Ed Challenge for Change

A Call From Democrats To Democrats To Unite Behind Barack Obama's 21st Century Education Agenda

Barack Obama's compelling call for political change has been a powerful inspiration for Americans of all ages, races, and persuasions. But implicit within Senator Obama's message is also a core challenge for the Democratic Party to change itself – to let go of outdated orthodoxies that stand in the way of progress, and to embrace new ideas and fresh solutions to meet the complicated tests of the 21st Century.

Nowhere is this more evident—or more overdue—than on the critical issue of education. Barack Obama clearly recognizes – as do a growing number of progressive educators and advocates who are working to close the devastating achievement gap that persists in this country – that we simply cannot afford to keep on following the same policies and expect to get different results for our children and our country. He believes that policymakers and practitioners must adapt our thinking and programs to meet the evolving realities in our communities and the increasingly challenging needs of our students today.

Even more encouraging, Barack Obama has clearly shown the vision and strength to lead the party and the country in a new direction on education and do what's necessary to fulfill the promise of equal opportunity for every American child. He has rejected the false fight between resources and reform that has divided our party for too long and embraced several effective change-drivers that our party has shied away from in recent years, such as increasing pay for our most effective educators and expanding the supply of high-performing public charter schools. The result is the beginnings of a truly progressive, 21st Century education agenda that puts children first and focuses on delivering results.

Perhaps best of all, Barack Obama's leadership is helping to hasten a substantial policy convergence that is already occurring in the education community. Indeed, instead of getting trapped in the stale, simplistic argument about whether our schools need more money or more accountability, more and more reformers are exploring new ways to target the additional investments we know we need to make prepare all our students to succeed in a knowledge-based economy – and pursuing new models to make No Child Left Behind fair to and work for schools, teachers, and students. As a result, today we are starting to see a wide range of promising examples of the kind of change Barack Obama is calling for in districts across the country – and telling evidence about the kind of reforms that will make a meaningful difference.

This convergence is reflected in the overlapping calls for change that have been recently released by the Education Equality Project, the New Schools Venture Fund, and Ed in 08. These are three different groups with different member-

ships and different missions that nonetheless are rallying around a largely similar approach to dramatically improve the performance of our urban schools and restore our K-12 educational competitiveness in the world. The common elements are a commitment to put the interests of students ahead of the adults in the system, a willingness to break from the rigid thinking and ineffective policies of the past, and a readiness to adopt orthodoxy-challenging ideas and initiatives that research shows will make a meaningful difference for children.

The upshot of these developments is that we have arrived at a positive perfect storm for our party and our country on what will be a defining test of our time. We have a rare opening to transform the education debate in America, win the public's confidence for a breakthrough policy agenda, and actually begin making good on the ambitious yet unrealized promises of NCLB. But to seize this unique opportunity, we as Democrats must rise to our nominee's challenge – he can't lead public education in a different direction if his own party won't follow. We must unite behind Barack Obama's innovative, results-oriented agenda during this campaign and show voters that we are the "Yes We Can" party on education. Moreover, once he is elected, we must work to help President Obama to craft and pass a bold bipartisan reform plan that will deliver on the vital yet unrealized promises of No Child Left Behind.

We are a diverse group of progressive education advocates who have come together on the eve of the Democratic convention to stand with our nominee – and to call on our party leadership to embrace Barack Obama's challenge for educational change. We believe the best and most immediate way to do that, and galvanize our party behind a new bargain on this critical issue, is to adopt a true 21st Century education platform that builds on the strong innovation foundation our nominee has already established. In this, we urge our fellow Democrats to start with the following core principles and priorities for reforming federal education policies, which we feel collectively captures the common ground found in the three recent declarations referenced above and outlines a realistic roadmap for raising academic achievement for all students.

Improving Accountability Measures

Change The Way We Assess Progress & Hold Schools & Educators Accountable

To do the hard work of closing the achievement gap, we must set high standards and demand accountability for meeting them from every stakeholder in the system – students and parents, teachers and principals, education schools and researchers, and not least of all, elected and appointed policymakers.

We must not, therefore, abandon the important core principles that No Child Left Behind was premised on. Instead, we should learn from NCLB, improve its accountability system, and ensure its legitimacy and viability.

That means developing and implementing high-quality assessments that

measure growth, critical thinking skills, college readiness, as well as give real time feedback to educators. Also, incentives and consequences for schools and districts should be built more around students than adults.

Expanding Parental Choice & Engagement

Change The Social Compact To Provide More Parental Choice & Insist On More Parental Responsibility In Return

We should respond to growing parental demand for more high quality educational options by providing meaningful public school choice for all students.

To help realize this goal, we should expand access to high-performing public charter schools, which are showing great possibilities for what educational entrepreneurs can do and great promise in closing the achievement gap.

At the same time, we should make clear that with choice comes responsibility: parents must be partners in helping our young people become disciplined students and committed citizens.

Promoting Excellence & Professionalism

Change The Way We Recruit, Retain And Reward Excellent Teachers

If we are serious about giving every child a world-class education, we must aggressively recruit America's best and brightest to become teachers and school leaders, including candidates from non-traditional backgrounds.

To do this, we must transform teaching into a profession that is:

- competitive in compensation with comparable fields
- continuously providing meaningful opportunities for learning and growth
- focused on and accountable for producing results

This means creating a new bargain with teachers that offers increasing pay and increasing autonomy in exchange for meeting collaboratively-developed performance standards and showing measurable gains in student achievement

Delivering Equity In Investments

Change The Way We Allocate School Funding To Target Aid To Those Most In Need

We cannot hope to overcome the substantial education deficits that many low-income children come to school with today and get them to proficiency without making significant new investments in our poorest school districts

In particular, experience tells us that we have to provide new pay incentives to attract our best teachers and principals to schools with large concentrations of students living in poverty and learning below grade level.

We must also provide additional resources to expand access to high-quality pre-school, after-school, and summer programming, as well as other interventions that have proven to be effective in raising academic achievement. And we must ensure that appropriate funding follows students to the school house.

Enhancing School Readiness

Change Inputs At The Pre-School Level To Yield Better Outputs On The Back-End

We now know without question that quality early childhood education can make a critical difference in getting students in high-poverty areas ready to learn when they come to school and leveling the educational playing field.

We must therefore be prepared to make bold new investments in this proven gap-closing strategy and work toward the goal of giving every child access to quality pre-K programs.

This means building effective systems of publicly-funded early education that utilize diverse providers (including community-based providers, school districts, and charter schools) to deliver high-quality programs taught by qualified teachers with a bachelor's degree and demonstrated knowledge of how young children learn; use research-based curricula to develop children's language, literacy, mathematics, and social-emotional skills; and are aligned with a broader PK-12 reform agenda, state academic standards, and the K-12 schools children enter following pre-K.

Increasing Time In The Classroom

Change One Of The Most Important Variables For Achievement

We know from research that more time in the classroom is essential to helping children who are starting off or falling behind to catch up and become proficient.

As a result, we must make a commitment to providing extended school days and extended school years for students who need it and parents who choose it.

In doing so, we must also provide more time for teachers to analyze student data and work collaboratively on effective practices for raising student achievement.