



## BARACK OBAMA: 21<sup>st</sup>-CENTURY SCHOOLS FOR A 21<sup>st</sup>-CENTURY DEMOCRACY

*"Today 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. 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."*

[Speech in Chicago, IL, 3/13/06]

Today, more than ever, our schools must prepare students not only to meet the demands of the global economy, but also to take their place as committed and engaged citizens. Public schools must also be the great equalizer, allowing every American, regardless of race or class or background, to achieve his or her potential.

Barack Obama is committed to strengthening our public schools to maximize our country's greatest natural resource – the American people. However, right now, six million middle and high school students read at levels significantly below their grade level. A full third of high school graduates do not immediately go on to a community college or university. America now has one of the highest high school dropout rates in the industrialized world. Obama believes that we must equip poor and struggling districts, both rural and urban, with the support and resources they need to provide disadvantaged students with an opportunity to reach their full potential.

Too often, our leaders present this issue as an either-or debate, divided between giving our schools more funding, or demanding more accountability. Obama believes that we have to do both, and has offered innovative ideas to break through the political stalemate in Washington.

### BARACK OBAMA'S EDUCATION PRIORITIES

#### PRESCHOOL

**Expand Early Childhood Education:** Research shows that many low-income children do not enter kindergarten ready to learn. In fact, half of low-income children start school up to two years behind their peers in preschool skills, and these early achievement gaps continue throughout elementary school. Barack Obama supports increasing funding for the Head Start program to provide preschool children with critically important learning skills, and supports the necessary role of parental involvement in the success of Head Start.

#### ELEMENTARY, MIDDLE, AND HIGH SCHOOLS

**Innovation to Improve Teacher Quality:** Barack Obama introduced a plan to support school districts that implement innovative methods to improve student learning, working with local teacher representatives to support successful teachers, instructional teams, and school leaders. Under his initiative, 20 districts across the country will get grants to develop innovative plans in consultation with their teacher unions. Successful teachers, and those who take on new responsibilities, such as mentoring new teachers, will be eligible for pay increases beyond their base salary. Dynamic school leadership and quality teaching can improve both the work environment for teachers and the learning opportunities for students. These innovation districts will implement

systemic reforms, and show convincing results that can be replicated in other school districts.

**Pay Teachers More:** Barack Obama wants to make a pledge to educators: since they are educating our children, we will increase their salary to the level they deserve. If teachers are willing to take on more responsibilities, like mentoring, they should earn more. And if they excel at helping students achieve their learning objectives, their success will be valued and rewarded as well. Obama believes the key is finding new ways to increase and differentiate compensation that are *developed with teachers, not imposed on them, and not based on some arbitrary test score*. That is one way Obama is going to close the achievement gap that exists in this country and start treating teachers like the professionals they are.

**Support Teachers:** Barack Obama wants to support teachers at all stages of their careers. This means modifying the certification and teacher preparation process so that, for example, a chemistry major can avoid unnecessary and expensive coursework to become a teacher, and instead learn to teach through proven programs such as teaching residencies that pair up new recruits with master teachers. Such a program was introduced by Obama and passed by the Senate. It means giving successful teachers more control over what goes on in their classrooms, and more opportunities to advance through career ladders, where teachers may choose to take on additional instructional leadership roles.

**Reform and Fund No Child Left Behind:** The goal of the No Child Left Behind Act is the right one – ensuring that all children can meet high standards – but the law has significant flaws that need to be addressed. Unfulfilled funding promises, inadequate implementation by the Department of Education, and shortcomings in the design of the law itself have limited its effectiveness and undercut its support among many people who care deeply about our schools and our students. Barack Obama would reform and fund No Child Left Behind.

**Promote Shared Responsibility:** Obama believes that accountability is essential for sustained educational improvements – not just accountability in the teaching profession, but also accountability in government, administration, parents, students, and others who must support our teachers in educating our children.

**Give More High School Students Access to Rigorous College-Level Courses:** Students who participate in Advanced Placement (AP) programs, which give students the opportunity to take college-level courses in high school, are much more likely to enroll and succeed in college. While enrollment in AP courses has nearly tripled over the past decade, many students attend schools that do not offer AP classes. Barack Obama, with Senator Jim DeMint (R-SC), introduced a bipartisan plan to allow students who do not have access to college-level courses at their high schools to apply for need-based grants and seek credit at local colleges or community colleges.

**Expand High-Quality Afterschool Opportunities:** Expanding access to high-quality afterschool programs will help children learn and strengthen a broad range of skills and provide relief to working parents who have to juggle child care and work responsibilities. Barack Obama will double funding for the main federal support for afterschool programs, the 21st Century Learning Centers program, to serve one million more children. Obama will include measures to maximize performance and effectiveness across grantees nationwide.

**Expand Summer Learning Opportunities:** Differences in learning opportunities during the summer contribute to the achievement gaps that separate struggling poor and minority students from their middle-class peers. Barack Obama's "STEP UP" plan addresses this achievement gap by supporting summer learning opportunities for disadvantaged children through partnerships between local schools and community organizations. One portion of this proposal was included in a comprehensive bill to improve U.S. competitiveness that passed the Senate in April 2007 with a provision for summer programs focused on increasing student math and problem-solving skills.

**Improve Opportunities for English-Language Learners:** One in every ten public school students is an

English language learner, a student whose first language is not English. This fast-growing student population faces significant hurdles to a quality education, and states are not adequately keeping track of their progress. Barack Obama will ensure schools monitor the progress of students learning English and hold schools accountable for making sure these students complete school.

**Help Students Become Aware of College Readiness:** A common reason that high school students decide not to attend college is that they discover they are unprepared for it in 12th grade. By that time, it is too late for many of them to do anything to address the problem before they graduate. Some states have developed an Early Assessment Program that enables 11th graders and their families to ascertain if they are on track to be college ready by the time they graduate. The voluntary test and the presentation of results are specifically designed to inform students what they need to do to prepare for college while they still have time to do it. This program will increase college readiness and is voluntary. Barack Obama will provide \$25 million annually in matching funds for states to develop Early Assessment Programs. These funds will also promote state efforts to raise awareness about the availability of federal and state financial aid programs.

## **HIGHER EDUCATION**

**Create the American Opportunity Tax Credit:** Barack Obama will make college affordable for all Americans by creating a new American Opportunity Tax Credit. This universal and fully refundable credit will ensure that the first \$4,000 of a college education is completely free for most Americans, and will cover two-thirds the cost of tuition at the average public college or university. And by making the tax credit fully refundable, Obama's credit will help low-income families that need it the most. Obama will also ensure that the tax credit is available to families at the time of enrollment by using prior year's tax data to deliver the credit at the time that tuition is due, rather than a year or more later when tax returns are filed.

**Simplify the Application Process for Financial Aid:** The application process for financial aid is cumbersome and evidence shows it may be a reason why students never apply for college. Research has shown that the low take-up rate of the Pell Grant and HOPE and Lifetime Learning tax credit programs is likely due to the complexity of the application process. The current Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is 5 pages and 127 questions – making it longer and more involved than many federal tax returns. Not surprisingly, over 1.5 million high school students failed to apply for aid in 2004, despite being eligible for a Pell Grant. A recent study by Susan Dynarski and Judith Scott-Clayton found that the costs of complexity in our financial aid processes fall most heavily on low-income, non-white, and non-English speaking youth. Barack Obama will simplify the financial aid process by eliminating the FAFSA and its complicated calculations altogether. Instead, aid would be based on a much simpler yet equally accurate formula, so that students can predict their eligibility well in advance. The aid process will be streamlined by enabling families to apply simply by checking a box on their tax form, authorizing their tax information to be used and eliminating the need for a separate application.

**Expanded Pell Grants for Low-Income Students:** Two decades ago, the maximum Pell Grant covered 55 percent of costs at a public four-year college, compared with only 32 percent today. The first bill Barack Obama introduced in the U.S. Senate would have helped make college more affordable for many Americans by increasing the maximum Pell Grant from the limit of \$4,050 to a new maximum of \$5,100. Obama has worked in a bipartisan way on the Senate Health Education Labor and Pensions Committee to achieve an increase in the Pell Grant to \$5,400 over the next few years. As president, Obama will continue to work to ensure that the maximum Pell Grant award is increased for low-income students. Specifically, he will ensure that the award keeps pace with the rising cost of college inflation.

**Community College Partnership Program:** Community colleges are a vital component of our higher education system, serving 12 million people each year, almost half the undergraduate students in the U.S. Without community colleges, millions of people would not be able to access the education and skills they need to further education or succeed in the workplace. Barack Obama will create a Community College Partnership

Program to strengthen community colleges by providing grants to (a) conduct more thorough analysis of the types of skills and technical education that are in high demand from students and local industry; (b) implement new associate of arts degree programs that cater to emerging industry and technical career demands; and (c) reward those institutions that graduate more students and also increase their numbers of transfer students to four-year institutions. These efforts will ensure that community college students are able to directly use their skills in the workforce following graduation, and be prepared to continue their higher education. And the grants will support programs that facilitate transfers from two-year institutions to four-year institutions.

**Eliminate Costly Bank Subsidies:** Currently, there are two basic college loan programs: the Direct Loan system, funded publicly, and the Federal Family Education Loan Program, funded privately by banks and lenders who receive subsidies and guarantees from the government. Privately funded loans cost more per loan than the Direct Loan program and provide no greater benefits. Obama will save taxpayer money billions by eliminating the more expensive private loan program, and directing that money into aid for students.

**Increase Investment in Research:** Barack Obama wants to invest in our future innovators by doubling federal funding of basic research over the next five years, and providing new research grants to the most outstanding early-career researchers in the country.