



BARACK OBAMA: 21st-CENTURY SCHOOLS FOR A 21st-CENTURY DEMOCRACY

"Today we are failing too many of our children. We're sending them out into a 21st-century economy by sending them through the doors of 20th-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 half of low-income children start school up to two years behind their peers in preschool skills and that these early achievement gaps continue throughout elementary school. Obama has been a champion of early childhood education since his years in the Illinois legislature, where he led the effort to create the Illinois Early Learning Council. Obama has introduced a comprehensive "Zero to Five" plan to provide critical supports to young children and their parents by investing \$10 billion per year to create: Early Learning Challenge Grants to stimulate and help fund state "zero to five" efforts; quadruple the number of eligible children for Early Head Start and increase Head Start funding and improve quality for both; work to ensure all children have access to pre-school; provide affordable and high-quality child care that will promote child development and ease the burden on working families; and create a Presidential Early Learning Council to increase collaboration and program coordination across federal, state, and local levels.

ELEMENTARY, MIDDLE, AND HIGH SCHOOLS

Innovation to Improve Teacher Quality: From the moment children step into a classroom, the single most important factor in determining their achievement is their teacher. Barack Obama values teachers and the central role that they play in education. To ensure competent, effective teachers in schools that are organized for success, Obama's K-12 plan will expand service scholarships to underwrite high-quality preparation for teachers who commit to working in underserved districts, support ongoing improvements in teacher education, provide mentoring for beginning teachers, create incentives for shared planning and learning time for teachers, and support career pathways in participating districts that provide ongoing professional development and reward accomplished teachers for their expertise. The Obama Career Ladder initiative will help eliminate teacher shortages in hard-to-staff areas and subjects, improve teacher retention rates, strengthen teacher preparation programs, improve professional development, and better utilize and reward accomplished teachers.

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. Barack Obama believes it was wrong to force teachers, principals and schools to accomplish the goals of No Child Left Behind without the necessary resources. We have failed to provide high-quality teachers in every classroom and failed to support and pay for those teachers. Obama understands that NCLB has demoralized our educators, broken its promise to our children and must be changed in a fundamental way. Obama will work with mayors and state leaders to ensure that NCLB reform addresses the need for a broader range of assessments and an accountability system that focuses on improving schools, rather than punishing them.

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.

Reduce the High School Dropout Rate: Only 70 percent of U.S. high school students graduate with a diploma. African American and Latino students are significantly less likely to graduate than white students.

Obama will address this problem by helping at-risk students before they get to high school, because the warning signs often occur well before high school. Obama will sign into law his “Success in the Middle Act,” which will provide federal support to improve the education of middle school students in low-performing schools by requiring states to develop a detailed plan to improve student achievement, develop and utilize early identification data systems to identify those students most at-risk of dropping out and invest in proven strategies that reduce the number of drop outs. Obama will also establish a competitive grant process open to existing or proposed public/private partnerships or entities that are pursuing evidence-based models that have been proven to reduce dropouts – such as Diploma Plus or Teacher Advisor programs.

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 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.

Create a 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 strong supports expanding research initiatives at American colleges and universities. University-based research is a critical component of creating new jobs in the 21st century. To support these initiatives, Obama will double federal funding for basic research and provide new research grants to the most outstanding early-career researchers in the country.