

QUALITY EDUCATION

America's public education system has long been the cornerstone of our vibrant economy and thriving democracy, investing in the next generation and providing opportunity to all. Now, instead of lifting our kids up, our education system is holding too many of them back.

We're not making the investments needed to provide every child with the basics of modern education: early education, so every child starts school prepared to achieve; small classes; skilled teachers; after-school programs; modern facilities and affordable college tuition. Instead, we're putting inordinate emphasis on standardized tests and stifling creative teaching, while failing to provide the resources needed to reform the schools that need help.

Public education still suffers from a savage inequality. Remarkable schools exist in affluent suburbs, but we fail to make even basic investments in poorer communities. Many schools are crumbling, overcrowded and forced to rely on trailers for classrooms. Some 25,000 schools require substantial repairs and renovation, according to a government study. Too many children are forced to learn under deplorable physical conditions that literally make them sick. The demand for teachers is rising, as half of new teachers leave the woefully underpaid profession within five years.

A college education or advanced technical training is vital to opening the doors of imagination and thriving in the global economy. But college is being priced out of reach for an increasing number of families, and students are forced to take on ever-greater debt burdens.

THE CHALLENGE

Public schools educate 90% of the nation's children¹, and record numbers of students will enter school over this decade. Most of the funding for public schools comes from state and local sources, but rampant tax-cutting at the federal level has led to squeezed state budgets. Without a national commitment to our schools, communities are hard-pressed to keep up with growing education needs.

Approximately 6 in 10 high school graduates go on to college.² But neither family incomes nor tuition grants have kept pace with soaring costs. Each year, 400,000 academically qualified students forego college because they cannot afford it. Other students take on higher levels of debt and scramble for part-time jobs. Some take time off from school to earn money and many drop out along the way. Those who graduate are burdened with increasing amounts of debt that take years, if not decades to pay off. Grappling with high-interest loan rates prevents many

HOT QUOTE

"For individuals, education is the prerequisite for opportunity and success. For communities and nations, educated citizens provide the foundation for sustainable social and economic progress."

BILL GATES

CEO of Microsoft, January 23, 2008

graduates from entering public service careers, such as teaching, further exacerbating the problems of the public school system.

At a time when a good education has never been more important, we're increasingly failing to provide even the basics. More-affluent families send their kids to better schools and can pay to supplement their educations. But working and poor families don't have that capacity—and increasingly their children are denied equal opportunity from the start.

THE CONSERVATIVE FAILURE

President Bush turned “No Child Left Behind” from an inspiring slogan to a broken promise. Schools were left behind as Bush broke his promises to provide the resources needed for reform. Subjects were left behind as principals set aside social studies, science, art, music and phys ed to chase the law's math and reading requirements. Good teaching was left behind as teachers were forced to narrowly teach “to the test” instead of teaching the critical thinking needed to succeed in today's economy.

When grading No Child Left Behind, many teachers would give it a D or an F. The law has been implemented in a rigid manner with far too much emphasis on standardized testing. This has narrowed down the curriculum and diminished educational opportunities for poor students and those with learning differences. As a teacher in Florida put it: “I have seen students drop out of school, cry, cut themselves, become physically ill and more, just because of the pressure we are putting on them to excel on the tests that accompany NCLB.... [W]e are pushing the creativity out of the classroom and creating little robots.”³

Bush left college students behind as well, but not the college loan companies that profit from student debt. He killed a proposal to crack down on student loan companies, despite allegations of financial favors to colleges for steering clients their way.⁴ He joined with Republicans in Congress to cut \$12 billion in federal student loans, helping push even more business to private firms. And he broke his campaign promise to raise the level of Pell Grants *and* keep pace with runaway tuition costs.

The failure to invest in our public schools stems from the ideological desire to privatize education. Conservatives continue to push vouchers for private schools that would divert resources away from public institutions. They do nothing to repair crumbling schools, pay teachers competitive salaries or make college affordable. Instead of ensuring that parents and students have good education choices in every neighborhood, their vision would perpetuate existing inequalities and stifle the aspirations of millions in the next generation.

THE PROGRESSIVE SOLUTION

In 2007, the new majority in Congress began to reverse the damage, passing the largest increase in college student aid since the GI Bill. But that was just a first step. Much more is still needed to make college accessible to all and to cut loose the anvil of debt weighing down new graduates.

Make college affordable. We need more substantial tuition tax credits. We need to offer students grants and scholarships in exchange for national service. We need to use federal challenges to require states to sustain contributions to high-quality affordable public schools. We need increased funding to prepare underserved populations for higher education.

For primary education, we must replace the failed No Child Left Behind approach with a strategy that actually lifts schools up, promotes critical learning skills and provides support for cash strapped states.

Maximize learning. Expand early childhood education so kids don't fall behind before they get started. Provide meaningful after-school opportunities for students from 1st through 12th grades. Lengthen the school year and move off of the 19th-century agricultural calendar.

Recruit, train and retain first-rate teachers for all students. Pay teachers more and provide them with career opportunities. Offer high-quality training to beginning teachers, and have continuing on-the-job training opportunities. Reward teachers for excellence, and offer financial incentives to teach in schools with at-risk children.

End the savage inequality. Fund all schools properly, and provide adequate health care and nutrition, so every student has an opportunity to learn and thrive.

Reform No Child Left Behind. Junk requirements that narrow the curriculum and force schools to “teach to the test.” Promote demanding curriculums that emphasize the critical thinking needed to thrive in the global economy. Broaden criteria for assessing school performance beyond snapshot standardized tests to include factors such as teacher retention, class sizes and graduation rates.

Invest in our children's success. Double federal expenditures on education—from 3 to 6%—as a near-term goal. Modernize and repair school infrastructure. Require schools to invest in best practices so money is spent wisely.

Support lifetime learning. With the increasing technological complexity of today's workplaces, and the need to adopt new skills over a lifetime, higher education beyond high school is critically important. Grants and additional tax credits are needed to promote continuing education.

Only with a national commitment to public education, backed with public investment, can we achieve the reforms necessary to prepare the next generation to flourish in the 21st-century global economy and make our education system world-class once again.

HOT QUOTE

“If we are serious about ensuring that every child in America meets high standards, then we must develop a federal school finance policy equal to the task.”

GOODWIN LIU

Assistant Professor of Law at Boalt Hall
School of Law, 2006

MAKING THE CASE

You know the challenge we face. You know how conservatism failed. You know how a progressive vision can move us forward. How do you crystallize the argument, deliver the key facts and take down conservative spin? Below are the tools you need to make the case in your community.

Core Arguments

Instead of lifting our kids up, our education system is holding too many of them back.

Proof Points

- The demand for teachers is rising, as half leave the woefully underpaid profession within five years.⁵
- Some 25,000 schools require substantial repairs and renovation.⁶
- Each year, 400,000 academically qualified students forego college because they cannot afford it.⁷

Conservatives turned No Child Left Behind from an inspiring slogan to a broken promise.

- President Bush and congressional conservatives never fully funded the program and provided the resources needed for reform.
- Teachers were forced to narrowly “teach to the test” instead of teaching the critical thinking skills needed to succeed in today’s economy.
- After 7 years of No Child Left Behind, only 1 in 3 fourth graders are reading at or above proficiency levels.⁸
- When grading No Child Left Behind, many teachers would give it a D or an F.⁹

College is being priced out of reach for an increasing number of families.

- During the Bush administration, the cost of public college tuition has risen nearly 40%¹⁰ while wages have been stagnant.¹¹
- President Bush joined with congressional conservatives to cut \$12 billion in federal student loans¹², helping push even more business to private firms.
- Debt levels for graduating seniors with student loans more than doubled over the past decade—from \$9,250 to \$19,200.¹³

Public investment is critical if we are to provide world-class education to our kids and ensure college is accessible and affordable to all who earn it.

- Reform No Child Left Behind. End “teaching to the test.” Promote demanding curricula that emphasize the critical thinking needed to thrive in the global economy.
- In 2007, the new Democratic majority in Congress passed the largest increase in college student aid since the GI Bill. Build on success until college is truly affordable.¹⁴
- Every dollar invested in early childhood education yields seven times that in savings, with less need for special ed, welfare and criminal justice services.¹⁵
- In a 1999 federal study, three-quarters of all schools said they needed funds for repairs and modernization in order to upgrade their condition to “good”.¹⁶

Spotlight Story

Kristin Cole, 30, who graduated from Michigan State University's law school and lives in Grand Rapids, Mich., owes \$150,000 in private and government-backed student loans. Her monthly payment of \$660, which consumes a quarter of her take-home pay, is scheduled to jump to \$800 in a year or so, confronting her with stark financial choices.

"I could never buy a house. I can't travel; I can't do anything," she said. "I feel like a prisoner."

A legal aid worker, Cole said she may need to get a job at a law firm, "doing something that I'm not real dedicated to, just for the sake of being able to live." Parents are still the primary source of funds for many students, but the dynamics were radically altered in recent years as tuition costs soared....

"...[T]his is literally a new form of indenture... something that every American parent should be scared of," said Barmak Nassirian, associate executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.

From *The Associated Press*, September 30, 2007.¹⁷

Conservative Spin

Sending your tax dollars to the government won't make college affordable. Lower taxes and more money in your pocket will.

Progressive Response

- We tried that. Higher tuitions, along with higher gas prices and medical costs, effectively slapped a bigger tax on working families than Bush's tax cuts.
- Instead of tax cuts for the wealthiest, tax breaks to hedge fund managers and oil companies and billions for a disastrous occupation of Iraq, let's invest in America's foundation, including affordable education.

Parents should not be forced to keep their kids in failing public schools. We should provide vouchers so parents have a choice of public and private schools.

- Private school choice doesn't work because there will never be enough private options in the places that most need better schools—such as inner cities and poor rural areas.

Throwing good money after bad in failing public schools is a waste of money.

- Thoughtless spending won't lift up schools and end savage inequalities, but smart investment in critical areas will.
- Every dollar invested in early childhood education yields seven times that in savings, with less need for special ed, welfare and criminal justice services.
- Half of teachers leave the profession in five years; we need to invest in better salaries so we can recruit and retain the best for our kids.
- Kids can't learn in crumbling schools with unhealthy air quality or makeshift trailers. We need to invest in upgraded infrastructure.

No Child Left Behind is working, raising scores in critical areas of reading and math.

- Narrowly teaching to the test can goose test scores a bit, but after 7 years of No Child Left Behind, only 1 in 3 fourth graders are reading at or above proficiency levels. And it can't teach the critical thinking skills our children need to succeed in the 21st-century economy.
- Furthermore, No Child Left Behind has never been properly funded, leaving schools without the resources needed to improve children's education and end the savage inequalities in educational opportunities that hold kids back.

Liberal proposals waste money on college aid to families that don't need it, instead of spending money wisely by targeting the neediest.

- Conservatives continue to ignore how their failed economic policies have squeezed the middle-class, putting college out of reach or saddling college graduates with debilitating levels of debt. We need to invest in education so college will be affordable and accessible to every student who earns it.

Public Pulse

Americans believe in public schools and government involvement in education.

- 79% say: “The government—local, state or federal—should be responsible for funding preschool education for all children in the U.S.” (*Harris Interactive, May 2007*)
- 72% support reform of the public school system versus only 26% who want an alternative to public schools. (*Gallup, September 2007*)
- Only 31% support “contract[ing] with private profit-making corporations” to run their public schools. (*Gallup, September 2007*)
- Only 39% support letting families “choose a private school to attend at public expense,” down from a high of 46% in 2002. (*Gallup, September 2007*)

79%

72%

31%

39%

Negative views of No Child Left Behind are growing rapidly.

- A plurality of adults (40%) had an unfavorable view of No Child Left Behind in 2007, up from 13% in 2003. (*Gallup, September 2007*)
- 52% of public school parents said in 2007 there is too much emphasis on testing, up from 32% in 2002. (43% of all adults agree there is too much emphasis on testing, up from 31%.) (*Gallup, September 2007*)
- Only one-third of public school parents say No Child Left Behind is helping their schools, with the rest saying it is hurting or making no difference. (*Gallup, September 2007*)

40%

52%

33%

Investing in smaller classes and better teachers attracts wide support.

- 95% believe smaller class sizes would be effective in attracting and retaining teachers, and 87% believe higher salaries for beginning teachers would accomplish the same. (*Gallup, September 2007*)

95%

MORE RESOURCES

Afterschool Alliance, Get the most up-to-date polling and analysis on after-school issues, <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/>

Campaign for America's Future: Revitalizing Education, Analysis and development of progressive and education issues in primary and higher education, http://www.ourfuture.org/issues_and_campaigns/education/index.cfm

Campaign for College Affordability, A coalition of concerned organizations that promote grassroots organizing and provide legislative summaries on college affordability, <http://collegeaffordabilitynow.org>

Center for American Progress—Campus Progress, An organization that connects student leaders with progressive voices, <http://www.campusprogress.org>

Children's Defense Fund, State-by-state analysis of education, poverty, and other child issues, <http://www.childrensdefense.org>

National Education Association, Stay current with legislation and reports that inform parents and educators about public education, www.nea.org

Pre-K Now, Great state data and analysis on early education, <http://www.preknow.org/resource/index.cfm>

Public Education Network, Get up-to-date data research and polling on public education, <http://www.publiceducation.org/>

State PIRGs' Higher Education Project, Read the latest news in college affordability and accessibility, <http://www.uspirg.org/higher-education>

United States Student Association, Learn about the newest legislative bills and grassroots activism by the nation's oldest organization representing college students, <http://www.usstudents.org>

Reports

Campaign for America's Future, Higher Education: Chasing the Dream,
<http://ourfuture.org/reports/higher-education-chasing-dream>

Campaign for America's Future, Higher Education: Soaring Out of Reach
for America's Families, <http://ourfuture.org/node/13081>

Alliance for Excellent Education, The High Cost of High School
Dropouts: What the Nation Pays for Inadequate High Schools,
<http://www.all4ed.org/publications/HighCost.pdf>

Renewing Our Schools, Securing Our Future,
http://emailimages.ctsg.com/caf/edureport_gsbff_full_report.pdf

College Board Trends in Higher Education Series: Trends in Student
Aid 2006, http://www.collegeboard.com/prod_downloads/press/cost06/trends_aid_06.pdf

Trends in Higher Education Series: Trends in College Pricing 2006,
http://www.collegeboard.com/prod_downloads/press/cost06/trends_college_pricing_06.pdf

National Education Association, Rankings & Estimates:
Rankings of States 2005 and Estimates of School Statistics 2006,
<http://www.nea.org/edstats/images/06rankings.pdf>

Public Education Network, NCLB Research Reports,
http://www.publiceducation.org/nclb_main/Reports-NEA.asp

The Education Trust, Summary of Education Trust Recommendations
for No Child Left Behind Authorization,
<http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/BE18FFC3-20A7-4689-8C30-1ACC1E64EDF2/0/EdTrustNCLBRecommendationsSummary41607.pdf>

Funding Gaps 2006,
<http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/CDEF9403-5A75-437E-93FF-EBF1174181FB/0/FundingGap2006.pdf>

US PIRG—Higher Education Project, Cutting Interest Rates, Lowering
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Endnotes

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⁷“2006 ACE Annual Report,” American Council on Education. http://www.acenet.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/About/AnnualReport/06AR_Year.htm

⁸“The Nations’ Report Card: Reading 2007,” U.S. Department of Education. <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2007/2007496.pdf>

⁹American Federation of Teachers. “Now It’s Time to Fix NCLB.” http://www.aft.org/fixnclb/survey_responses.htm

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