

## Tractenberg, Sadovnik: Education

Sunday, January 18, 2009

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NorthJersey.com

*Without a world-class public education for all our nation's children, we face decline and disaster.*

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BARACK OBAMA assumes the presidency facing extraordinary challenges. We understand that some may be more dramatic and appear more pressing than the status of American education. But for a half century we have understood that education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. In today's global world, the federal government, too, has awesome educational responsibilities.

Without a world-class public education for all our nation's children, we face decline and disaster, not by terrorist act or stock market collapse, but by steady, incremental, inexorable erosion of our national capacity to produce and to compete.

We could write a book on how our education system falls short, and what the president could do about it. Instead, we focus briefly on what President Obama can do immediately to begin addressing three linked national problems with important symbolic as well as tangible aspects:

\* Inequality of educational opportunity.

Despite decades of efforts, mainly through state courts, to equalize educational funding within individual states, most states still have serious inequality, harming mainly poor and disadvantaged children. There is an equally severe problem of educational inequality that has received less attention — resource and educational differences among states. Just as we have first-class and second-class educational citizens within states, we have first-class and second-class states.

\* Persistent educational achievement gaps across racial, ethnic and socioeconomic lines.

These gaps are especially pernicious because they exist across racial and ethnic lines even when socioeconomic status is controlled. Middle-class, or even upper-income, students of color achieve, on average, at a lower level than white and Asian students of the same socioeconomic class. To some degree, this is linked to resource inequalities among schools, but it goes far beyond.

\* Urban and rural education. Especially at the high school level, education in our urban areas is in desperate need of focused attention and improvement. These schools and their students are victimized by unequal resources and persistent achievement gaps in student performance, but they suffer from the broader pathology of entrenched poverty.

Educational achievement is diminished by poor health, poor nutrition, a pervasive sense of hopelessness and the resultant deterioration of family and community.

What can the Obama administration do about these problems?

\* He can use the bully pulpit of the presidency to bring sustained public attention to the urgency of dealing with them comprehensively.

\* He can develop a legislative agenda systematically addressing these problems. He must explore sources of congressional authority to legislate on a national basis beyond the federal spending power, including the intriguing historical argument that the citizenship clause of the 14th amendment was designed to give Congress authority to ensure all citizens receive an adequate level of education.

\* He can substantially increase federal educational spending from its habitual 6 percent to 7 percent of total spending so that every new national education initiative is not met with the charge of "unfunded mandate."

\* He can make reauthorization of No Child Left Behind a vehicle for a new federal approach to education, one in which the lofty goals of NCLB are implemented by more realistic and workable national standards and procedures.

Few would disagree with the law's goal of improving student proficiency and reducing achievement gaps, but NCLB needs a dramatic overhaul.

Its over-reliance on high-stakes testing has made schools test-prep factories. Its failure to incorporate valid and reliable growth models into its assessment system punishes many urban and rural schools making acceptable progress, but not meeting absolute student proficiency standards.

Without a national examination system, state-to-state comparisons are impossible, and states with lower proficiency benchmarks can appear more successful than those with higher ones.

NCLB's exclusive focus on student achievement is fundamentally flawed because it ignores inequality in school resources and powerful non-school factors such as poverty.

## Growth models

Fixing all these flaws in NCLB is daunting, but essential. Its assessment system must incorporate growth models, multiple measures of student performance and a national examination permitting comparisons across states.

These must be augmented by national standards focusing on student opportunities to learn and on equalized educational funding for all children.

NCLB or related legislation must address non-school factors that profoundly affect student achievement. Just as educational inequalities are caused by factors inside and outside of schools, their solutions must be aimed both inside and outside the schoolhouse door.

\* Obama can use New Jersey's experience with Abbott v. Burke as a model for how states — and the nation as a whole — can begin to tackle the profound, linked problems identified above.

As long, messy and still incomplete as the reform process triggered by the Abbott funding formula for distressed regions in the state has been, it has accomplished more than any other state for students in poor urban schools.

It has largely equalized funding of those students to the level of the best suburban districts. It has imposed research-based school reforms. It has provided for supplemental programs and services needed to overcome educational and societal disadvantages.

It has required high-quality full-day early childhood programs for all 3- and 4-year-olds. It has demanded that every deficient school building in the poor urban districts be renovated or replaced with state funding.

## Closing achievement gaps

For the past several years, these reforms have shown real progress in closing achievement gaps in the lower grades where the emphasis has been.

Recently, a middle-school/high-school reform program was adopted to extend the gains. Yet, Abbott has been constantly under siege, as it is now.

We are told it costs too much and that, especially now, we just can't afford it.

But, Mr. President, if we can afford to bail out Wall Street, mega-banks and auto companies, are we really prepared to tell our children that we can't afford to do what's needed for them?

\* The president can reject educational quick fixes, using sound educational research rather than ideological rhetoric to guide educational reform.

Like Bernie Madoff's investments, educational solutions that promise too much, too quickly are too good to be true.

The core educational problems have been years in the making and will require years of systematic, sustained effort.

Now is the time to begin.