



July 2, 2009

*Address by the Secretary of Education
To the National Education Association*

Partners in Reform

Good morning. Thank you for having me and thank you for hosting one of our Listening and Learning events. We embarked on this tour to hear from people in classrooms and schools—people who are facing educational challenges and finding solutions.

I've now been to 22 states and dozens of communities. I've met with hundreds of teachers and principals, education support staff, students, parents, superintendents, college professors, higher education administrators, and community leaders.

Everyone I spoke with understands that the status quo is not good enough. They want to get better—they need to get better—and they're willing to work even harder. They just want to be part of the process and they want their voices to be heard.

So I look forward today to hearing your voices—hearing what you have to say—hearing your ideas for improving American education. I encourage you to think boldly and courageously—to challenge me, challenge yourselves, and challenge each other.

But we must be willing to do more than talk. We all must be willing to change. As I said recently, education

reform isn't a table around which we all talk. It's a moving train and we all need to get on board.

I have had some compelling conversations with the NEA (National Education Association) leadership and many of your members. I'm convinced that if everyone is on board this train, it will gain enough speed, momentum, and direction to take public education to a new and better place.

In recent weeks, I have given a series of speeches about the four core reforms embodied in the *Recovery Act* leading up to the release of \$5 billion in competitive grants.

The first speech was about creating data systems that follow the progress of students from pre-K through college so teachers can better meet the needs of students and we can help identify teachers who are doing well or who are struggling.

The second speech was about adopting higher standards and creating high-quality assessments. I want to thank you for your support of higher standards. That's the kind of leadership we need on a whole range of issues.

The third speech was about turning around our most troubled schools. We proposed several models and

invited everyone to be part of the solution: unions, charters, nonprofits, for-profits, universities, states, and districts.

I also challenged the audience of charter school operators and authorizers to get much more serious about accountability. They must not protect third-rate charters. Those schools need to close. Charter schools are public schools and they should be held to the same standards as everyone else.

Today is the last of my four speeches, and the focus today is on the quality of the education workforce—teachers, principals, and education support professionals. I want to acknowledge some of the good things that we have done and talk about some of the things we haven't done.

I came here today to challenge you to think differently about the role of unions in public education because, when thousands of schools are chronically failing and millions of children are dropping out each year, we all must think differently.

It's not enough to focus only on issues like job security, tenure, compensation, and evaluation. You must become full partners and leaders in education reform. You and I must be willing to change.

I know we won't all agree on everything—but I'm confident there will be more we agree with than not. It starts with our shared values.

We believe it is our moral obligation to give children the very best education possible. We believe every child can learn and every school can succeed. We believe teaching is a profession and good teachers and principals are essential to success.

Unlike many of you, my values and views on education were not shaped in the front of a classroom. In 1961, my mother began an after-school, inner-city tutoring program on the South Side of Chicago and raised my brother, sister, and me as a part of her program.

That daily experience was an absolutely formative one for all three of us and we all tried to follow in her footsteps in various ways. It was work filled both with great heartbreak and also amazing triumph.

We experienced our share of early, violent deaths because of the community's chaos, and those

experiences shape you and frankly scar you in ways that to this day are difficult to talk about.

But from the group of friends I grew up studying with and playing ball with, from one street corner at 46th and Greenwood, emerged literally a brain surgeon, a Hollywood movie star, one of my top administrators at the Chicago Public Schools, and one of IBM's international corporate leaders.

How did this happen? Because these children, despite tremendous poverty, despite staggering neighborhood violence, despite challenges at home, had my mother and others in their lives who gave them real opportunities, real support and guidance over the years, and had the highest expectations for them. And because of that opportunity, their gifts and their talents, and their fierce desire to succeed, blossomed.

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What I learned as a little boy, what continues to motivate my mother today 48 years after she began her work, are the same two values that motivate all of you.

It is a fundamental, unalterable belief that every child can learn, and a fundamental understanding of the tremendous urgency of our work. Simply put, we cannot wait because our children cannot wait.

I've met a thousand educators like my mother in schools all across America. I've seen them on an Indian reservation in Montana, in a West Virginia middle school, at a high school in Detroit, and a charter school in Newark.

All of us remember an educator or coach who changed our life. It stays with us forever. It sustains us, guides us, and inspires us. They're the ones who commit those everyday acts of kindness and love and never ask for anything in return. They counsel troubled teens, take

phone calls at night, and reach into their pockets for lunch money for children who are too ashamed to ask.

I've seen how much these educators want to be valued for their work and honored for what they are: dedicated, professional, compassionate, serious, and responsible. These are the qualities of a great educator and we have millions of them all across America.

My next experience was with the I Have a Dream foundation, where we adopted a class of students and agreed to send them to college if they stayed in school. The previous class had a 67 percent dropout rate while we had an 87 percent graduation rate.

After that, I helped start a small new traditional neighborhood public school, the Ariel Academy. It wasn't a charter. It had union teachers and today it is one of the highest-performing public schools in Chicago—even though all of the kids come from poverty.

Finally, I spent seven years running the Chicago Public Schools, where I learned other important lessons. We set up 150 community schools open 12 hours a day and offering classes to adults and students.

We paid teachers to work extra hours and many of them took on that responsibility because they were committed to the school's success. Schools must support the social and emotional needs of students and engage the whole family.

We also increased the number of National Board Certified teachers in Chicago to about 1,200—from about a dozen when I started. We partnered with the union and with the Chicago Public Education Fund, which is a group of business leaders. Together we grew NBC teachers faster than anywhere else in the nation.

I am a big believer in this program, but let's also be honest: school systems pay teachers billions of dollars more each year for earning PD (professional development) credentials that do very little to improve the quality of teaching.

At the same time, many schools give nothing at all to the teachers who go the extra mile and make all the difference in students' lives. Excellence matters and we should honor it—fairly, transparently, and on terms teachers can embrace.

The president and I have both said repeatedly that we are not going to impose reform but rather work with

teachers, principals, and unions to find what works. And that is what we did in Chicago. We enlisted the help of 24 of the best teachers in the system to design a pilot performance compensation system. We also sat down with the union and bargained it out.

It was based on classroom observation, whole school performance, and individual classroom performance, measured in part by growth in student learning. The rewards and incentives for good performance went to every adult in the school, including custodians and cafeteria workers, and not to just the individual teachers.

Where you see high-performing schools, it's the culture—every adult taking responsibility and creating a culture of high expectations.

We're asking Congress for more money to develop compensation programs “with” you and “for” you—not “to” you—programs that will put money in the pockets of your teachers and support personnel by recognizing and rewarding excellence.

So I begin our conversation today around some important areas of agreement: Excellence in teaching, good professional development, schools open longer hours, and a shared responsibility for student success among all the adults in the school building.

But the president and I want to go further. I want to describe some tough challenges and ask you how we can work together to meet them. Let's start by talking about underperforming schools.

We don't need a study to tell us that chronically underperforming schools do not have the best principals and teachers. Experience tells us that failing schools usually have poor leadership, and poor leadership usually drives away good teachers.

Now often we try replacing the leadership, and sometimes that works. We need to invest much more in principal leadership. We need to recruit and train the very best people possible because the job is hard and the cost of failure is too high.

Principals run multimillion dollar budgets, they hire, train, and manage scores of people, and the best of them are also instructional leaders who are trained in classroom observation. It's a lot to ask of anyone, and we need 95,000 of them in America.

Great principals lead talented instructional teams that drive student performance and close achievement gaps. They deserve to be recognized and rewarded. But if they're not up to the job, they need to go.

Similarly, in struggling schools we have tried boosting support for teaching staff and making other changes around curriculum, school day, etc., and sometimes it has worked. I always favor more support, collaboration, mentoring, and time on task.

But sometimes, despite our best efforts, these methods don't work. Today, America has about 5,000 schools that continue to underperform year after year, despite our best efforts.

Two thousand high schools produce half of the dropouts in the country. Their kids are years behind grade. They are perpetuating poverty and social failure. When it comes to these schools, we need to think differently. We need the courage to change.

We need to go into a room—states, districts, unions, administrators, foundations, think tanks, charters, nonprofits, parents, and elected officials—lock the door, throw out the rule books, and start with a clean slate.

We need to be open and honest about the challenges and the barriers. If we agree that children need more time, then we must give it to them. If we agree that teachers need more support, then we must give it to them.

But if we agree that the adults in these schools are failing these children, then we have to find the right people and we can't let our rules and regulations get in the way. Children have only one chance to get an education.

It's also not about charters or unions. Chicago has turnaround schools led by a businessman who uses union teachers and he's getting great results. So does Green Dot in Los Angeles.

But Mastery Charters in Philadelphia is a different turnaround model and we need that as well. There is so much urgency and so much need in underperforming schools that we can't impede successful models like these, regardless of governance structure.

The NEA has an honest and passionate leader in Dennis Van Roekel. He shares our sense of urgency. He

has told me personally that he'll walk into any room with anyone to talk about how to turn schools around.

And that gives me hope. We're losing too many children today and incremental change won't save them. We need dramatic change.

And we can't continue to blame each other or blame the system. We are the system and it is up to us—you and me—to change it. So let's talk about that.

We created seniority rules that protect teachers from arbitrary and capricious management, and that's a good goal. But sometimes those rules place teachers in schools and communities where they won't succeed, and that's wrong.

We created tenure rules to make sure that a struggling teacher gets a fair opportunity to improve, and that's a good goal. But when an ineffective teacher gets a chance to improve and doesn't—and when the tenure system keeps that teacher in the classroom anyway—then the system is protecting jobs rather than children. That's not a good thing. We need to work together to change that.

I told the charter schools they need to police themselves or their progress will be stalled. I told the school boards that if they can't improve student achievement, they have a moral obligation to consider mayoral control.

And I'm telling you as well that, when inflexible seniority and rigid tenure rules that we designed put adults ahead of children, then we are not only putting kids at risk, we're also putting the entire education system at risk. We're inviting the attack of parents and the public, and that is not good for any of us.

I believe that teacher unions are at a crossroads. These policies were created over the past century to protect the rights of teachers, but they have produced an industrial factory model of education that treats all teachers like interchangeable widgets.

A recent report from the New Teacher Project found that almost all teachers are rated the same. Who in their right mind really believes that? We need to work together to change this.

Now, let's talk about data. I understand that word can make people nervous, but I see data first and foremost as a barometer. It tells us what is happening. Used properly, it can help teachers better understand the needs of their

students. Too often, teachers don't have good data to inform instruction and help raise student achievement.

Data can also help identify and support teachers who are struggling. And it can help evaluate them. The problem is that some states prohibit linking student achievement and teacher effectiveness.

I understand that tests are far from perfect and that it is unfair to reduce the complex, nuanced work of teaching to a simple multiple choice exam. Test scores alone should never drive evaluation, compensation, or tenure decisions. That would never make sense. But to remove student achievement entirely from evaluation is illogical and indefensible.

Our challenge is to make sure every child in America is learning from an effective teacher—no matter what it takes. So today, I ask you to join President Obama and me in a new commitment to results that recognizes and rewards success in the classroom and is rooted in our common obligation to children.

It's time we all admit that just as our testing system is deeply flawed, so is our teacher evaluation system, and the losers are not just the children. When great teachers are unrecognized and unrewarded, when struggling teachers are unsupported, and when failing teachers are unaddressed the teaching profession is damaged.

We need to work together to fix this and I will meet you more than halfway. I will demand the same of every principal, administrator, school board member, elected official, and parent. I ask only the same of you that I ask of myself and others.

The NEA has long history of reform on issues of health care, child advocacy, civil rights, and disabilities rights. And I don't begin to suggest that all teachers and unions are standing in the way of reform. I know many of your members and affiliates have been working on these issues. In Illinois, for example, the IEA (Illinois Education Association) has led a 20-year effort to build labor-management partnerships around school improvement.

One of the leaders of that effort, Jo Anderson, has joined our team. He's here today and I thank him for his work.

I also want to acknowledge my general counsel Charlie Rose, who was our labor lawyer in Illinois. Charlie told me years ago that the key to making progress on education reform begins with respect for the labor-management relationship.

I believe that and I salute union-management partnerships all across America that are working together to develop better hiring, compensation, evaluation, and turnaround strategies. But we need to move faster and we need to go further.

America's teachers are yearning to be partners in reform and change. They want teaching to be a respected profession that has high standards for performance, rewards excellence, provides opportunities for advancement, and promotes real collaboration.

They are tired of being demonized, blamed, and disrespected. They want to get on the train. Let me share a powerful quote from your former president, Mary Hatwood Futrell:

The education reform movement demands not only that we seize the opportunity, but that we embrace the responsibility that is ours. You and I must provide the leadership ... and share this responsibility with every parent and citizen who is concerned about safeguarding the sanctity and purpose of public education for all.

Taking her words to heart, our challenge is to make sure every child in America is learning from an effective teacher—no matter what it takes. So today, I ask you to join President Obama and me in a new commitment to results that recognizes and rewards success in the classroom and is rooted in our common obligation to children.

You've heard my voice, and I appreciate that. Now I want to hear your voices. I began my remarks with a personal story. I just want to close with one more.

Dr. Martin Luther King came to the West Side of Chicago in 1966 to protest housing discrimination. His powerful and inspiring message brought billions of dollars into that community for housing, job-training, and community development.

But when I took over the public schools in Chicago 35 years later, the children of North Lawndale were still desperately poor. You have to ask yourself why, after so much money and time, nothing had changed.

It's because they forgot to invest in the one thing with the power to transform lives. They forgot education. They put all of that money into bricks and mortar and social programs, but they forgot to give the people the skills they need to help themselves.

President Obama learned that lesson and that's why the *Recovery Act* invests more than \$100 billion in education. I want to thank NEA for your support. That money is going into our classrooms to keep teachers teaching and kids learning so we can educate our way to a better economy.

The president understands that the nation that out-teaches us today will out-compete us tomorrow. He understands that education is the foundation of our economic strategy and the only sure path to long-term economic strength.

That's why he wants America to produce the highest percentage of college graduates by the end of the next decade. This is our moon shot. This is our call to action.

It is an economic imperative and a moral imperative. This is the civil rights issue of our generation. The fight for a quality education is about so much more than education. It's a fight for social justice. And he's counting on you to lead that fight.



Photo by Joshua Hoover

There is simply no more important work in our society than education. The president understands that, parents understand that, America understands that. Now we—all of us together—must act on that understanding and move forward.

Thank you.

U.S. Department of Education

Arne Duncan

Secretary

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