

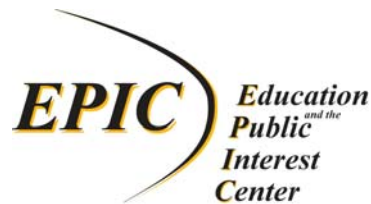
## Fellows' Education Letters to the President

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Edited by Peter Cookson and Kevin Welner

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Dear President-elect Obama,

It is my pleasure to present to you an impressive collection of letters from educational scholars. Each letter briefly sets forth an idea or proposal to help create a more productive and equitable educational system. These proposals should be thought of as the tips of empirical icebergs – beneath the letters lies a research base that we hope will guide policy-making throughout your time in office.

In addition to these letters, I want to call your attention to two sources of information that I hope will prove helpful. Our policy centers at the University of Colorado at Boulder and Arizona State University jointly produce policy briefs and “think tank reviews.” The latter provide timely, academically sound reviews of think-tank publications and can be found at [www.thinktankreview.org](http://www.thinktankreview.org). The former, available at [www.epicpolicy.org](http://www.epicpolicy.org), sometimes present original research but more often contain research summaries written to be understood by a general audience, in the vein of “What do we know about X?”

More generally, our policy centers have brought together as “fellows” a hundred of the nation’s top educational researchers, a dozen or so of whom offer their thoughts in the letters that follow. We hope you will not hesitate to call upon our expertise as an independent, outside-the-beltway, research-based policy organization.

Very truly yours,

*Kevin Welner*

Director, Education and the Public Interest Center  
University of Colorado at Boulder



Dear President-elect Obama,

Americans from all walks of life have a sense of hope because of your election. We stand on the threshold of a new era – one in which all children can have the chance to develop their talents and pursue their dreams. My colleagues and I are writing to you as scholars and activists who are deeply convinced that a reenergized commitment to excellent public schools for all students is America’s best hope for economic renewal and a society where trust and cooperation characterize public life.

While these letters represent diverse topics and perspectives, they are unified by a belief that a just educational system remains the foundation of democracy. For too long our public schools have failed our most vulnerable students, and the cost of this educational failure is very, very high for our students and our society.

As you know, the field of education is contested territory; we tend to grasp at quick fixes and imaginary solutions. The following letters, however, arise out of a belief that there is only one real constituency in education – the students. And we have only one real obligation – to ensure that all students receive a world-class education.

To achieve these ends we need to recognize that good intentions without resources, research and planning will result in more years of spinning our educational wheels. As our letters suggest, the place to start to build a new public school system is with a realistic assessment of the conditions of life for our students. Test scores tell us very little about how to improve education; rather they too often serve merely to sort and select students on the basis of race and family background.

From a policy platform informed by sound social analysis, we need to think boldly about what a 21<sup>st</sup> century means in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Additionally, we must, as you have said on numerous occasions, embrace the future by developing the world’s most engaging and educationally sound technologically advanced learning environments.

Because of your election, we have a chance to create the best educational system in the world; please consider us your allies in this effort. We stand ready to work tirelessly on behalf of public education and America’s children and young people.

Thank you for considering our ideas and suggestions,

Sincerely,

*Peter Cookson*  
Yale University



Dear President-elect Obama,

One of the strongest correlations, documented over and over by sociological research, is the connection between socio-economic status (SES) and school achievement. The higher the SES of a family, the higher the achievement of the children is likely to be. Better resourced schools with more proficient teachers, as well as solid family resources to enhance school learning with cultural and other educationally supportive experiences, contribute to the higher academic achievement seen among middle class and affluent students.

Poverty, on the other hand, often derails the educational enterprise. Parents may be overwhelmed with multiple low-wage jobs, resources may not be available in the family for academic enrichment or support, and poor children (especially when they are Black or Latino) most often attend poorly resourced schools with less proficient teachers. These factors, when combined with a lack of systematic health care for poor children, often create conditions that severely hinder high achievement.

Fortunately, a body of research has developed in the last 15 years that provides direct evidence that even minimal economic and social supports to poor families raise the academic achievement of poor children. Studies have demonstrated, for example, that social supports (such as family counseling, subsidized health care, employment services, and supervised child care), when combined with jobs that pay above the current minimum wage (as reported by Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation in 2001) result in significantly higher school achievement of elementary students. Long range studies have shown that familial supports of very young children can have lasting effects. And a federally funded project of adolescents (entitled New Hope), found that family social and economic supports resulted in many of the low-income teens experiencing fewer arrests, better school grades and teacher evaluations, and higher college going rates than similar adolescents not provided the counseling and economic support.

The fact that school achievement improves as family resources increase makes sense: parents with sufficient time and money are more likely to nurture their children's development with private tutoring, sports and arts programs, and educationally useful visits to museums and concerts. These parents will typically transmit positive expectations of college going and labor market involvement. And they will have the resources to fund the further education required to achieve these. In time, a community of residents with economic access and resources will itself be capable of attracting a tax base sufficient to fund its schools at higher levels, so the majority of children will have what they need to excel.

What the research suggests, then, is that school reform by itself is not enough to provide positive long range economic consequences for low-income students. In addition to better pedagogy, small classes, and de-tracking of schools (for example), we need to strengthen policies that provide economic and social support to poor families and poor communities. A



significantly increased minimum wage, for example, and the creation of decently paying jobs with career ladders and health insurance for community youths and adults, would provide a foundation for high individual and group achievement in schools.

In sum, Mr. President, without economic and social reform for residents of poor neighborhoods, students (and probably their teachers) are not likely to be willing or able to muster the materials, the hope, or the effort to achieve at high educational levels. If you could do one thing to make educational reform truly productive for poor students and schools, I would ask that you add economic and social supports to whatever educational reforms you schedule for urban America.

Sincerely,

*Jean Anyon*

Graduate Center of the City University of New York



Dear President-elect Obama,

You are certainly aware that there are sharp differences on both sides of the aisle over what ought to be done with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). There are those who are convinced that NCLB may need some tweaking but is fundamentally on the right track, while others buy into its goals but see serious flaws that can be repaired. There are still others including myself who believe that the national testing requirements and federal sanctions added to this 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) were a mistake and should be repealed.

These debates over the specifics of federal policies will no doubt continue, and a set of compromises will be forged for reauthorizing NCLB and getting it through Congress. I have had many years of experience as a teacher, teacher of teachers, and educational researcher and hold strong opinions on what's wrong and right with U.S. public education and how ESEA should be shaped. However, the purpose of this letter is not to expound these views. Rather it is to bring to your attention a concern that I believe is central to the future of American public education yet is likely to be largely ignored as the process of building a working political consensus on the immediate future of ESEA proceeds.

My concern here is not over whether there should be testing, assessment, and accountability. I take this as a given. My concern is over process—the means used by government authorities to assess educational growth and progress. There is a growing consensus that the technology we currently use is wholly inadequate, unjust, and hopelessly dated. This is not hyperbole. The technology of standardized testing is a product of another era. Its roots are in early 20th century field of psychometrics, at a time when the mechanical hole punch and manual sorting with pins was state of the art information processing technology. The multiple-choice format is a product of that technology. Since the advent of the mainframe computer, the statistical manipulations and reporting of results have become increasingly elaborate, but the basic data-gathering technology (multiple choice test items and protocols for standardized scoring and reporting data) has not changed.

The limitations of standardized testing technology are well known and I will not catalogue them here. As you know, with all their problems standardized academic achievement testing scores remain at the center of our current system of educational assessment. They drive the educational system and are seen by the public and the press as the single most important index of school success and educational growth. This heavy reliance on ranking by test scores is built into NCLB and state assessment regulations and this is unlikely to change in the near term. There are many reasons for this including that many individuals and organizations are heavily invested financially, politically, and psychologically in the technology of standardized testing; it's the system we all grew up with and know, or think we know. There are also many in the publishing industry, in government, universities and independent research agencies whose livelihood rests on the continued use of standardized assessment technology.





While immediate change is unlikely, we as a nation must look ahead to a future where we abandon and replace our current reliance on 19th century information technologies and fully embrace the exciting possibilities afforded by 21st century information and communication technologies. These new technologies could be used in the service of centralizing more power in the hands of federal and state authorities and/or panels of experts selected by government authorities, or they can be used in the service of furthering democratic assessment and equality in education.

The idea of democratic assessment is of course a complicated subject. However, at its core is a single idea—that parents, educators, communities and elected representatives have a major if not the sole voice in determining what and how our children are taught in the nation's public schools. Curriculum and pedagogical decisions are considered largely local matters, not the domain of state or federal governments. The possibilities are almost limitless for exploring the ways the emerging 21st century information and communication technologies can help build a system of democratic assessment, one that promotes equality of opportunity; enhances and enriches student learning; supports teachers and students; encourages dissent and dialogue among parents, teachers and students; and also provides the public and elected officials with dependable information needed to make informed decisions that serve our children, our communities, and the wider public interest.

I urge Secretary of Education Duncan to initiate an exploration of the uses of the newly emerging digital information and communication technologies for building responsive systems of democratic assessment. The effort requires moral leadership and government funding. Though investment of resources is required, the costs relative to other areas of need are modest. Careful consideration must be given to how this inquiry should be conducted and organized. It is critical that this inquiry not be dominated by those who have vested interests in preserving and updating the current standardized testing technology or by experts schooled in psychometrics and educational testing science.

While new approaches to assessment are under development, standardized testing technology will continue to be widely used at federal, state, and local levels. Many students will continue to be denied promotion, access to programs and schools, and barred from receiving high school diplomas or graduation certificates based solely or primarily on their standardized test scores. These students are disproportionately poor, of color and from immigrant families whose home language is not English. There are also large numbers of competent students, including some who are exceptionally talented or creative, some with learning disabilities, who cannot be fairly or reliably assessed with standardized tests. If the federal government, state, or local jurisdiction mandates tests and ties high stakes decisions to test performance, individuals, groups of individuals, and families must be afforded legal protection and redress. I propose that there be added to the upcoming ESEA reauthorization provisions protecting children and their families from unfair and unreasonable use of government mandated tests.



There is precedent for legislative protection of students and families from abuse and misuse of standardized testing. Senator Paul Wellstone in April, 2000, introduced *The Fairness and Accuracy in Student Testing Act* (<http://www.senate.gov/~wellstone/highstakes2.htm>), that if adopted would have prohibited the use of standardized tests as the single determinant in making decisions about graduation, promotion, tracking or ability grouping of students. Test producers would have had the burden of proof to show that a test is valid and reliable for the purposes for which it was being used and that tests fairly assessed what students were taught in school. Students would have been guaranteed multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency and appropriate accommodations were required for students with limited English proficiency or disabilities. Senator Wellstone's unfortunate and untimely death put an end to consideration of this bill.

Democracy is unrealized without public schools that serve all the nation's children. The suggestions I have made—(1) significant investment in new digital information and communication technologies to advance democratic accountability and assessment, and (2) a bill of rights for test-takers—are places to begin.

Sincerely yours,

*Harold Berlak*





Dear President-elect Obama,

This letter concerns education policy and focuses on what I believe to be the most serious problem facing American education today—the massive scope of youth poverty in our country and its iron-fisted ties with educational failure. Unless that problem is addressed, much of federal education policy will continue to falter. This letter concerns both the problem and strategies for relieving it.

I write as someone who has spent several decades reviewing and writing about educational research, its findings, and its implications. For many of those years I had been aware that, in America, youth poverty was tied to educational failure, but it was not until I looked at the evidence that I learned about the massive scope of that poverty and the brutal strength of ties between it and failure.

What I have learned is that poverty now afflicts more than one-fifth of all young Americans—currently at least twenty million persons. Moreover, poverty is now increasing rapidly among American youth, and although some of that poverty is transitory, at least half of it is deep and tenacious. For at least two decades, rates for poverty among youth have been roughly twice those for adults and the elderly in the U.S. And—in contradiction to common stereotypes—although black and Hispanic families are more likely to be poor, the bulk of America's impoverished youths come from white families.

Youth poverty rates in the United States are also greater than those found in all other advanced nations—indeed, some nations in Northern Europe have youth poverty rates that are one-fifth the size of those found here! What this means is that, while the United States imposes the burdens of poverty on huge numbers of its youngest, most vulnerable citizens, this self-handicapping occurs far less often in other advanced nations with which we compete.

Many of these burdens are associated with the home, of course, where impoverished families must contend with inadequate dwellings plagued by vermin, lead-based paint, mid-winter utility interruptions, food shortages and poor nutrition, serious over-crowding and lack of books or other instructional materials in the home, minimal health and dental care, as well as parental stress and marital disruptions often tied to money worries. Burdens such as these pose great challenges for youngsters, and some can create permanent physical or cognitive damage. Indeed, poverty typically generates a nine point deficit on IQ tests for students in the first grade.

But poverty burdens are not confined to the home. In America, many poor families live in poverty ghettos where work opportunities, health clinics, tax-supported pre-schools, and adult role models are few, and where violence, crime, and gang warfare may prevail. And when, at last, youths from poor families enter the schoolhouse door, they often encounter high concentrations of impoverished students, sub-standard funding for education, and



tracking, enrichment, or remedial programs that typically provide extra resources for high-income students who are thought to be more "deserving."

Small wonder then that, in America, impoverished students often fail in public education. Burdened by problems from their homes, neighborhoods, and schools, they typically do poorly in classrooms, are required to repeat grades, earn low scores on achievement tests, and drop out of school as soon as they can. And if they do not drop out, they either learn to blame themselves for their "failures," or they become alienated and angry. Neither stance promotes interest in further education, of course, and vanishingly few of them ever earn a GED, let alone a bachelor's degree.

Such effects mean that huge numbers of young Americans are now denied access to the American dream of bettering themselves through education. Rather, impoverished youths are more likely to become dispirited or angry and to contribute to America's dismal rates of early pregnancy, violence, drug addiction, imprisonment, and early death. And the schools into which they are crowded find it nearly impossible to generate even average school-wide scores on high-stakes achievement tests.

Such findings suggest that the effects of youth poverty tend to be very strong, and indeed this is the case. Poverty generates more school failures than other known "at risk" social factors. And poverty tends to explain why failure rates are also high when youths come from families with single parents, families that are black or Hispanic, or families where parents lack educational qualifications.

In a nutshell then, American rates for youth poverty are much higher than in other advanced nations, impoverished youths generally do very poorly in American schools, and because of these failings, many of their potential contributions to our society are lost, and some of our country's worst social problems are escalated.

What can be done? Research and scholarship suggest many strategies that might be useful, but I confine my discussion here to four approaches for which evidence is particularly strong. I begin with two strategies for relieving youth poverty—strategies first pioneered in other advanced nations, but from which we can also learn.

First, surely the simplest, most direct way to reduce youth poverty is to provide extra income for struggling families in which those youths live, and other nations have adopted several techniques for doing this. A good way to accomplish this goal in the U.S. would be to modify the federal tax code so that negative income taxes are provided to needy families. Serious discussions of this strategy surfaced shortly after President Lyndon Johnson proposed his War on Poverty, and four "negative income-tax experiments" were set in motion during the Johnson years to examine outcomes generated by such a policy. Among their conclusions, all of these experiments found that typical youths from families receiving extra income generated better records in education. These experiments were squelched



during the Nixon years, and interest in this strategy seems not to have arisen since. Public discussions of this strategy should be resurrected.

Second, most advanced countries also use a second strategy for relieving poverty burdens for families with young children; they provide tax-assisted daycare and pre-school programs that serve the bulk of the population. Most of these programs charge fees for participating families, but fees are set on a sliding scale, and impoverished families pay very little. Such programs provide professional care for children when parents must work, and in most countries, they also provide valuable pre-school experiences that help low-income kids prepare for school. America already has a basic and small-scale program that falls within this bailiwick—our Head Start initiative for older pre-schoolers—and extensive research confirms that this program generates some positive effects. The Head Start program should be upgraded and expanded so that it serves both younger children and a wider range of middle-income and needy families in the country.

In addition, public education in America can be adjusted so that it provides more aid for youths from impoverished families, and research already suggests strategies for doing this. Thus, third, massive evidence confirms that when students are taught in small classes in the early grades, they tend to do better — not only in those classes, but throughout their subsequent years of schooling. Moreover, these effects are stronger for youths who are impoverished or come from families of color. (This makes sense; youngsters in the early grades need personal attention if they are to learn how to cope with schooling, and kids "at risk" for failure need more help.) Targeted programs for school districts should be initiated that provide funding, when needed, to help set up extra classrooms and hire additional teachers for the early grades.

Fourth, extensive research also reveals huge differences in levels of funding for American public schools. In brief, some American states spend twice as much or more, on average, for public education than do other states, and within many states funding for suburban schools may be three-or-four times as great, on average, as funding for schools in city centers and rural hamlets. Such differences create huge disparities in buildings and grounds, facilities, curricula, salaries for educators, and rates of student success. They also reflect America's time-honored custom of funding the bulk of education through taxes levied by local school districts, and mean that impoverished students are very likely to attend under-funded schools. Other advanced nations do not fund education this way; rather, they typically fund public schools equally, across the nation, on a per-student basis, and sometimes they provide extra "loadings" for schools that serve large numbers of needy students. This issue attracts controversies within various American states, but we should begin to tackle it at the federal level by passing legislation requiring that all states provide equal, base-level, per-student funding appropriate for primary, middle-level, and secondary public schools within their borders.



To repeat, research evidence suggests not only these but also additional strategies for coping with the huge problem about which I write, and another good idea would be to assemble a Task Force of scholars, researchers, educators, civil servants, and savvy elected officials who are charged with preparing viable suggestions for legislation that can reduce the massive scope of youth poverty and its horrific effects within American education.

And with that thought, I wish you all the best as you move to tackle the many problems now besetting our country. Please let me know if I can be of help.

Sincerest best wishes,

*Bruce J. Biddle*  
University of Missouri



Dear President-elect Obama,

Our children are living through one of the greatest transitions in human history. Never before have people been able to communicate so easily, quickly and continuously. Never before has the human learning curve been higher—there have been more discoveries in the last decade than in the previous six hundred years. Never before has the United States stood at the threshold of greater opportunities—and dangers.

The world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is fundamentally different than the world of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the United States no longer leads the world in capital accumulation, the economies of China and India are likely to become larger than ours, and four billion people on this planet live on less than \$2 a day.

This is the era of Globalization 3.0; today we face the challenge of not only losing the American Dream, but falling farther and farther behind as nations compete for economic and social security. If we are not to be swept up in this great *tsunami* of change, we must seize the creative moment and provide the kind of leadership you have already demonstrated.

The only way to truly seize these opportunities and avoid the dangers of this era is to rethink American public education; a world class education for all American children is our only real possibility for lasting homeland security.

At the heart of the American educational dilemma is our unwillingness to embrace diversity and complexity. Our children live at the center of a complex set of social concentric circles: home, neighborhood, school, city or town, state, country, and world. These different environments are not separate but interlinked, permeable, and continuously shifting. Every American family is affected by global change, yet, most of our schools continue to operate in not so splendid isolation. To break out of this educational and social isolation, I hope you and your team will consider the following policies and priorities:

- Reorganize the federal Department of Education to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The current concentration on standards and testing is misdirected and essentially retrogressive. We need a Department that is outward looking, sharply focused on supporting public education, supportive of educational innovation, and determined to develop a system of public schools that are genuinely preparing students for the challenges of Globalization 3.0.
- Recognize fully the significance of increasing diversity and complexity by funding new approaches to teaching, curriculum and school leadership. Too many of our public schools feel like relics, not from the 20<sup>th</sup> century but from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We need to invest in what might be thought of as our intellectual infrastructure; we need not only to support teachers, but give them the tools to be effective. We need curriculum that



connects students together to solve real world problems, and we need visionary school leaders who can see the future and motivate others, including parents, to embrace the future.

- Realign our standards so that they cease to be intellectual straightjackets and become guidelines for inquiry, discovery and creativity. Too many of our children are learning yesterday's knowledge; the new learning technologies provide new portals to new knowledge through the internet, social networking and access to information outside the formal school setting. A new set of 21<sup>st</sup> century standards ought to be developed—standards that release students' creative energies, not stifle them.
- Reinvest in public education through the federal budget. Currently, the federal financial contribution to public education borders on fiscal tokenism. Many of our schools were built over 100 years ago and are now horribly outdated and unsafe. Because of budget limitations, some schools are cutting down on extra-curricular activities, reducing the school week to four days, and faced with fewer teachers, counselors, and coaches. Only the federal government has the resources to ensure that every child goes to school in a safe, supportive and intellectually challenging atmosphere.
- Redirect our focus away from privatization and questionable policies which support the use of public funds for non-public schools. If we are to fully embrace the challenges of this new world we need a system of public schools that are fully supported, economically and politically. Public education is the foundation of democracy; we need a loud and clear message from the federal government that public education is not part of the problem, but part of the solution.
- Redouble federal support for learning technologies. Globalization 3.0 is nothing if not an expression of the extraordinary new capacities unleashed by science and technology. Our students must be technologically literate and they must be able to imaginatively use what can be thought of as the world's first universal virtual library. The knowledge explosion we are experiencing is not the preserve of a lucky few; it should be made available to all.
- Reward genuine excellence. Today, there are some who would have us believe that high test scores equate to intellectual accomplishment and that schools that manage to leverage test scores to meet some artificial benchmark are somehow better than other schools. In today's world we cannot afford to play such a cynical game; we need standards of excellence that reflect complex, imaginative thinking and high-level problem-solving skills. Our reward structure should reflect those accomplishments. Good schools can serve as models for other schools—we ought to establish a sense of community among schools, not waste our time in idle and essentially meaningless negative comparisons.





If we invest in public education in the coming years, the United States can regain not only the respect of other nations, but can show the way toward a world where cooperation and shared knowledge can bridge differences and potential conflicts by ensuring that every individual has a right to develop her or his talents. This could be the greatest legacy of all.

Thank you for considering these suggestions and I look forward to the coming years with positive anticipation and hope. Thank you for providing that sense of hope.

Respectfully submitted,

*Peter W. Cookson, Jr.*  
Yale University





Dear President-elect Obama,

We are writing today on behalf of an overlooked and underserved group of children in our elementary and secondary schools. The nation's 5.4 million English language learners (ELLs) "represent the fastest-growing student population, expected to make up one of every four students by 2025," according to the U.S. Department of Education. Yet, notwithstanding the prevailing rhetoric about holding schools accountable for the achievement of "all children," the unique needs of *these* children have all too often been ignored or treated as an afterthought by policymakers.

Neglect is evident at all levels: federal, state, and local. Far too little is being done to ensure that ELLs are provided an adequate share of school funding, appropriately trained teachers, valid assessments, and research-based programs to promote English acquisition and academic achievement.

Failure to address these needs has perpetuated a shameful, inequitable, *two-tier* system of public education. The Urban Institute reports that 70 percent of ELLs are now concentrated in majority-minority, under-resourced schools and in classrooms where teachers have considerably less experience and fewer credentials than those serving English-proficient students. A comprehensive "costing-out" study, released last month by the New York Immigration Coalition, found that an adequate education for these students "requires an extra funding weight of approximately twice that of regular education students." The most generous state formulas for supporting ELL programs currently provide only half that amount; a majority provide far less.

As a result, ELLs have among the highest failure and dropout rates of American students. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress show they have made little or no appreciable gains under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. In fact, there are indications that the law's test-and-punish approach to accountability has done them more harm than good. NCLB has impoverished the educational experience of ELLs – as it has for other underachieving "subgroups" – by creating incentives to narrow the curriculum to the two primary tested subjects and to stress rote instruction in basic skills rather than foster critical or creative thinking.

The impact has been doubly damaging for ELLs, whose academic achievement is usually assessed in English, a language the children have yet to master. In most cases, native-language assessments are either unavailable, inappropriate (where children are taught only in English), or disapproved by federal officials as instruments to gauge "adequate yearly progress." Thus, where ELLs are concerned, NCLB's approach to accountability is especially problematic. Although no one seriously argues that standardized tests designed and normed for fluent English speakers are valid or reliable for students who are still struggling with English, such assessments are nevertheless used for high-stakes purposes: to identify and sanction schools for "failure." Moreover, ELLs – defined by NCLB as students



likely to score below the “proficient level of achievement” because of language barriers – are still expected to attain the same proficiency levels as English-proficient children. These policies defy basic standards of fairness and, indeed, of rationality if our goal is to improve student achievement. Yet they have the force of law and thereby exert enormous pressure on schools. The perverse effects are well documented, from the demoralization of dedicated educators unable to achieve the impossible to the dismantling of native-language programs out of an urgency to prep for English-language tests.

Fortunately, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is scheduled to be reauthorized by the 111th Congress. This legislation should offer both an opportunity to correct the abuses inflicted by NCLB and a vehicle for long-overdue changes that would promote greater equity and excellence in our education system. Here are a few proposals that we believe would benefit American students in general and ELLs in particular:

- **Stress school improvement and support, not blaming and shaming.** Some supporters of NCLB have argued that its test-based accountability system, combined with the threat of severe sanctions for failure by ELLs and other subgroups, has brought increased “attention” to such students. No doubt that is true. Unfortunately, this punishment-based approach has done little to enhance student learning, because it offers educators little or no guidance on how to improve instruction. The enormous resources currently devoted to test development, test preparation, test administration, test scoring, test procedures, etc., could be better spent on *building schools’ capacity* to educate ELL students. State education agencies – especially if freed from administering a highly prescriptive accountability system – would be well situated to coordinate training and technical assistance for school districts, with additional funding provided under ESEA, Title III, state grants.
- **Invest in professional development.** Nearly 1.3 million – 43 percent – of U.S. teachers had ELLs in their classrooms in 2002; yet only 11 percent of those teachers with ELLs were certified in bilingual education and 18 percent in English as a second language. Over the previous five years, teachers who worked with three or more ELLs had averaged just four hours of in-service training in how to serve them. In other words, expertise in second-language acquisition, multicultural awareness, and effective classroom practices are largely lacking among staff responsible for educating these students. Rectifying this situation would be perhaps the single most important step that policymakers could take to remedy ELLs’ educational neglect. Accordingly, we propose to eliminate the arbitrary cap on funding for the National Professional Development Project under NCLB, Title III (which was cut by more than half from the FY 2001 level). To meet the needs of a rapidly growing population, at least 15 percent of Title III appropriations should be set aside for this purpose. In addition to funding preservice programs and scholarships for ELL teachers in training, the Project should restore fellowships for graduate study (as awarded under previous versions of ESEA) in the fields of bilingual education and English as a second language.



- **Encourage innovation and experimentation.** As formulated by Congress in 1968, the original purpose of the Bilingual Education Act was to help “develop and carry out new and imaginative elementary and secondary school programs” designed to meet the unique needs of ELLs. For more than 30 years, the law authorized a competitive grant program that enabled school districts to experiment with pedagogical approaches. The most successful of these models were popularized and adopted elsewhere, vastly increasing the knowledge base on effective practices. Unfortunately, when NCLB replaced the Bilingual Education Act with a system of formula grants – funds that are distributed more widely but much more thinly – the goals of innovation and dissemination were abandoned. School districts are now largely on their own in developing new programs or adapting existing models to their own students and communities; often they lack sufficient resources to do so. While it would be politically difficult to eliminate formula grants under ESEA, Title III, we propose to supplement them with an Academic Excellence Demonstration Project. It would set aside at least 15 percent of Title III appropriations to design, implement, and disseminate ELL program models, emphasizing such areas as math and science, bilingualism and biliteracy, dual language, newcomer schools, and secondary education. Grants would be awarded to local educational agencies, state education agencies, and institutions of higher education on a competitive basis, using a peer-review process to ensure quality control. We think this would be a highly cost-effective approach to building schools’ capacity to provide programs for ELLs that reflect the state of the art in scientific research and practitioner experience.
- **Ensure a range of program options.** Parents should continue to have a strong say in the assignment of their children to a variety of ELL program alternatives. Correctly, in our view, NCLB forbids the federal government from mandating any particular pedagogical approach. But parental choice is an empty slogan if only one option is offered – as often happens in states where politically motivated restrictions have been imposed on native-language instruction. Such “English only” mandates are misguided and inconsistent with what is known about best practices for teaching ELLs. Reviews of the research literature have consistently shown bilingual program models to be superior in promoting academic achievement *in English*. Conversely, research has shown no improvement in ELL achievement in states such as California and Arizona that have enacted English-only instruction laws. In our view, the best way to promote educational excellence for ELLs is to ensure that parents have meaningful choices and that educators are free to apply their professional judgment. We propose that, as a condition of receiving funding under ESEA, Title III, all school districts be required to offer a range of research-based options for educating ELLs, including bilingual program models where practicable, without arbitrary time limits for student enrollment. They should also be encouraged to offer dual-language programs, which enable both English-proficient and limited-English-proficient students to become bilingual and biliterate.



- **Revitalize and broaden the federal research agenda.** While the understanding of second-language acquisition has advanced substantially over the past generation, much remains to be learned. Under NCLB, the federal research agenda in education has emphasized assessment and initial literacy, virtually to the exclusion of other pedagogical issues affecting ELLs. We propose to revive the research grant program previously authorized under the Bilingual Education Act, with a special emphasis in such areas as second-language acquisition, program design, effective practices, heritage-language development, diverse student needs, dual-language pedagogy, and field-initiated studies.
- **Require adequate, equitable funding for ELLs.** It's a sad commentary on the American education system that the students most in need of special help are usually those provided the least qualified teachers, the most segregated schools by race and class, the shoddiest facilities, and the smallest share of resources. And these shocking inequities occur in our *public* schools, to which all taxpayers contribute! While some states have tried to mitigate disparities between rich and poor districts, these "equalization" formulas generally only narrow – but do not close – the existing gap. Perhaps the most contentious issue here for ELLs involves incremental costs: what is the extra expense of educating these students? Rather than wait for such questions to be fought out in 50 state court systems, Congress should step in, commission the needed research, and set criteria for equitable funding by states and localities. The threat of withholding Title I funds would be powerful leverage to force states to honor their civil-rights obligations.
- **Guarantee equity and accuracy in testing.** Assessment serves a number of important functions in educating ELLs. These include: identifying students with limited English proficiency, placing them in appropriate programs, and determining when they are ready to be reassigned to mainstream classrooms; diagnosing student strengths and weaknesses in order to assist educators in improving instruction; evaluating alternative program models to compare their effectiveness; tracking long-term trends of student achievement in various contexts; and holding schools accountable for student performance. Unfortunately, NCLB has stressed only the last of these functions while ignoring the rest. This, in turn, has led to an undue emphasis on standardized achievement tests to enforce "reform" and a tendency for policy-makers to overlook their serious limitations. As noted above, because most of these tests are designed for proficient English speakers, they are neither valid nor reliable for ELLs – who, not surprisingly, tend to score poorly on tests they cannot understand. Such assessments simply cannot measure what ELLs have learned and are unable to generate meaningful results by which to gauge "adequate yearly progress" under NCLB. Nevertheless they are being used – indeed, mandated by the U.S. Department of Education – to make judgments and decisions about ELLs and their schools. If the aim is truly to reform (rather than, say, discredit) public education, how could anyone justify a reliance on inaccurate and inequitable assessments? We offer two proposals to address the situation: (1) prohibit the use for "high-stakes" purposes of



any assessment not proven valid and reliable for the students involved, and (2) require that students who receive academic instruction in their native language be academically assessed in their native language, if at all possible.

- **Require appropriate language proficiency assessments.** NCLB’s requirement that states must assess ELLs’ English proficiency on an annual basis has brought some benefits. But it has also led to tests that are tied to school-based academic standards, blurring the important distinction between language proficiency and academic skills such as literacy. While both types of assessment are informative when considering reassignment of ELLs to the regular academic program, initial identification of students as limited-English-proficient requires an assessment of language as a separate construct, based on tests or other criteria that reflect a linguistically sound theory of language proficiency. Otherwise, over-identification of students as ELLs is likely to occur. In addition, many states and districts have long required or recommended assessments of ELLs’ oral proficiency in their native language. This practice is now known to generate inaccurate information (such as classifying ELLs as “non-non,” or not proficient in any language) and is potentially harmful to children. To ensure appropriate testing in this area, we offer two proposals: (1) prohibit states and districts from routinely using oral native-language assessments for ELLs, and (2) require that initial identification of ELLs be done using assessments developed according to a research-based theory of language proficiency.
- **Restore sanity to accountability.** There is no evidence that scores from a single battery of standardized tests can provide an accurate measure of school quality, or that 100 percent of American students can reach arbitrary “proficiency” targets in language arts and math by the year 2014. Yet these are the premises of NCLB’s accountability system. They become especially detached from reality when applied to ELLs, who are *by definition* unlikely to perform at proficient levels because of language barriers. (When ELLs become proficient in English language arts, they are no longer classed as ELLs. Removing high scorers from the subgroup naturally lowers average scores; so does the arrival of newcomers with limited English. This creates a “treadmill” effect in which the subgroup can never make much progress even if individuals do.) We propose to substitute a broader approach to accountability that would encompass multiple measures of student progress, including alternative, native-language, performance-based, and locally developed assessments. We would also expand the system to consider *inputs* as well as outputs – that is, the adequacy of resources, program designs, curriculum quality, teacher qualifications, appropriate materials, and so forth. We note that such an approach already exists: the *Castañeda v. Pickard* standard used as an enforcement tool by the U.S. Office for Civil Rights for more than 20 years. It would require a corps of state-level inspectors to visit districts, observe classrooms, and identify problem areas – again, with an emphasis on school improvement and the use of sanctions as a last resort. We believe that such an approach would benefit not only ELLs but all students who are currently underachieving and underserved.





Education and the Public Interest Center  
University of Colorado at Boulder

**EPRU** EDUCATION POLICY  
RESEARCH UNIT  
ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

Thank you for considering our ideas. We look forward to working with your transition team on these issues and would be happy to provide further assistance. So please do not hesitate to contact us. And congratulations, Mr. Obama, on your historic victory.

Sincerely,

*James Crawford*  
President, Institute for Language and  
Education Policy

*Jeff MacSwan*  
Arizona State University College of Education



Dear President-elect Obama,

Thank you for providing the United States with a new vision, one that promises to reverse policies that have made a mockery of principles we long have said we stood for. Among those are educational policies which, for the past thirty years, have seen one reform after another pass by and do little more than destroy the morale of teachers and the hopes of our most needy children. I want to ask you to undertake two actions that will help to restore those destroyed hopes: Remove the most punitive aspects of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) when it is re-authorized, and pass the DREAM (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) Act to allow undocumented immigrant children to attend college and become U.S. citizens. Let me explain why I think these are crucial actions.

I have spent the past 35 years as a researcher working with, learning about and studying students who drop out or are pushed out of school and the teachers and administrators who try to help them succeed. The majority of these students are from low income families, members of racial and ethnic minority groups, or non-native English speakers. They attend schools with the fewest resources, oldest buildings, and least experienced teachers—schools that have very high dropout rates and are most likely to be designated as failing schools under the punitive sanctions of NCLB. But it is not the schools that are failing. The United States and its educational policies have failed schools, students and teachers.

In truth, the United States currently has no viable educational policy. Instead, we have policies that damage our public educational system and permit the public to think of education for all children as a public nuisance, not a civil right. NCLB substitutes punishment for providing support. Intentionally or not, we reward the successes of those least in need and punish those who are most at risk. We provide insufficient resources for key goals – to help students who struggle to learn English, to close gaps between school expectations and the experiences poor children have had at home or in previous schooling, or to create bridges that help children with learning disabilities overcome them. How can teachers continue to manage to teach with hope and enthusiasm and energy in such circumstances?

We have consistently underfunded education at every level, while blaming educational systems for waste and inefficiency. At this point, there's little money left to waste! Relative to need, funds for every educational category have decreased, from money for replacing decrepit buildings and obsolete textbooks to resources for special populations and the teachers to serve them. Nonetheless, policy-makers continue to support “no cost” reforms and expect public education to do more with less. We have raised standards, increased requirements, and established more tests—and not funded improved instruction that would bring students up to those higher benchmarks. Vouchers, charter schools and tax credits are thinly disguised strategies to eliminate traditional public schools and benefit primarily students who are less needy. Evidence shows that children in charter schools perform similarly to children in regular public schools. Closing underperforming schools and moving





their students elsewhere does not solve pedagogical problems. Even if nearby schools do have room for such students, there is absolutely no evidence that moving improves performance. These efforts have done very little to improve achievement, instruction, or the quality of education overall, but they *have* increased dropout rates among students who give up and who attend schools who push out low achievers so as to improve their overall “report card.” Most seriously, our current policies, and especially those specified in NCLB, argue that the real problem in schools is that students and teachers are lazy, which justifies incentives that are punitive, unreasonable, and statistically irresponsible.

Currently, schools cannot be considered “successful” unless every single subgroup in every tested grade achieves AYP—or “adequate yearly progress”—an arbitrary standard that varies by state and is set in accordance with political, not educational, criteria. Unfortunately, the more subgroups a school has—that is, the more diverse a school is—the harder it is for that school to get every single subgroup up to AYP. And unless it does, the school is considered failing. This “diversity penalty” actually is not an educational problem; it’s an artifact of how the statistics are computed. But it has educational ramifications: schools that reflect the increasingly diverse reality of our society—multiracial, multilingual, stratified by social class, serving immigrants, English language learners and students with disabilities—find it nearly impossible to achieve AYP for all groups. Thus, failing schools include even those where, for example, teachers have been able to stem the flow of dropouts to nearly zero and bring up to near-grade level the performance of English Language Learners. Such schools “fail” if they have even one subgroup in one grade level not up to AYP.

In contrast, the successful schools under this system are the homogenous ones, those most likely to be in affluent, racially isolated areas, serving students with fewer obstacles not of their own making. What happens to “failing” schools? Ultimately, they are restructured or closed down, and the children sometimes scattered to any other schools with room to hold them. We must end the disastrous policy of using subgroup scores to punish diverse schools.

We also must begin to focus on the heart of education: improving instructional quality and teacher morale, something none of the current reforms address. What our high-stakes testing programs have done is to narrow what is taught, discourage creativity and critical thinking, impose a straitjacket of instructional programs on teachers, and lead many of the best of them to leave the profession. Further, raising standards in the absence of supports to meet them increases dropout rates. NCLB’s negative sanctions encourage schools to push struggling students out of school so that they don’t drag down test scores, making the schools subject to restructuring and closure.

Moreover, immigrant students who are not legal residents or whose parents are undocumented have little incentive to achieve. Consider Melissa, a single mother, who graduated from high school at the top of her class. Melissa wants to be a pharmacist, but she has no access to college. Melissa and her parents are undocumented. Her three siblings were



born in the U.S., but she was born in Mexico. She does not have the money to pay international student tuition, and current policies in her state prevent even valedictorians who are undocumented from receiving in-state tuition or scholarships to college. (And national immigration policies only add to her burden.) Further, her siblings, who *are* citizens, are reluctant to apply for college because asking for financial aid would reveal the domicile and legal status of her parents and Melissa, increasing their likelihood of deportation. Upon graduation, Melissa faces a life of low-wage illegal employment.

Why did Melissa bother to graduate? Because she believes in the hope of America. But many students aren't as strong as she is. They drop out as soon as they realize that even with a high school diploma their future educational and occupational life is a dead end.

Given the world fiscal crisis we face, it's unlikely that a financial "Marshall Plan" for education in the United States will be feasible very soon. However, two important policy changes would cost little. First, when NCLB is reauthorized, we should temper the "diversity penalty" that so adversely affects multicultural schools. We can recognize that disadvantaged students need more than a single year, or even several years, to catch up with their more privileged peers. That said, we should retain the NCLB requirement that schools report test scores for all subgroups of children by income, ethnic minority, language minority, and disability status, because it is important to know which groups are doing least well in the schools. Second, pass the DREAM Act so that children of undocumented immigrants who graduate from accredited high schools in the United States, regardless of their own immigration status, can enroll in college and be eligible to receive public scholarship aid. Our current policy punishes children for the acts of their parents; like Melissa, many of these children really know no other home than the U.S., condemning them to a life without an educational or occupational future is morally wrong and economically stupid. We can do better.

Respectfully yours,

*Margaret D. LeCompte*  
University of Colorado at Boulder



Dear President-elect Obama,

We are pleased that you have an interest in using research to improve schooling for our children, and we want to highlight the research on one reform in particular. Charter schools are extremely popular with both parents and policymakers, as you know, since you have committed to increased federal spending for these schools. In fact, charter schools are being used as primary vehicles for education reform in cities like Washington, DC and New Orleans. But the political popularity of charters is largely divorced from the current body of evidence concerning their effects, so we believe that your efforts will be aided by clear information on what the research community has learned.

While charter schools have proliferated rapidly in recent years, the empirical record on these schools is rather mixed on key aspects — much more so than some advocates indicate. In particular, there are four dimensions that deserve special consideration when weighing charter school policy: (1) Equity and access, (2) Innovation, (3) Achievement and (4) Accountability. Please allow us to briefly summarize what is known about charter schools in each of these areas. In part, this mixed record reflects the variation among charter schools — highlighting the importance of considering what specific aspects of charter schools “work” if we are to cultivate and replicate the success of these schools.

#### Equity/Access

One of the great promises of charter schools is that they offer new options to disadvantaged students trapped in failing district schools. While many charter schools have opened in or near low-performing districts, thus increasing options for students, the research on equity is cause for concern. Of particular note are issues of segregation; too many charter schools contribute to greater segregation in our public school system. For instance, researchers at Duke University found that charter schools in North Carolina were contributing to ethnic and racial sorting, and similar patterns are evident in Arizona, Michigan, Colorado, and post-Katrina New Orleans.

While charter schools did not create segregation, they appear to be exacerbating it in many jurisdictions. In any case, they are not living up to their potential to reduce racial, economic, and ability sorting by opening up admissions across segregated boundaries. This is due, at least in part, to the competitive incentives that shape charter schools. While these schools have greater autonomy, too often they use that freedom to avoid higher-risk students by adopting covert admissions criteria such as parent contracts, or by marketing to more affluent populations, including those already in private schools. Even mission-driven charter schools, which serve at-risk students and deserve great praise, exist within this context of niche marketing and contribute to stratification.

#### Innovation

Charter schools are certainly a dramatic policy innovation in school governance. They are also uniquely positioned to serve as R&D centers for the public sector. Since they are free of



many burdensome bureaucratic regulations and must compete to attract students, they can develop educational innovations critical for serving marginalized students, narrowing the achievement gap, and discovering more effective approaches to raising student achievement. In fact, this was one of the central expectations for charter schools as they were being embraced in various states.

But there is now a general consensus in the research community (if not with some charter advocates) that innovations in charter classrooms are too few and far between. Reports from Columbia University, the University of Illinois, and Arizona State University demonstrate that teaching practices are often quite familiar, and even rather traditional. While many parents might prefer this, these tendencies undercut the potential for charters to find new ways of reaching different learners. Quite often, charter schools have abandoned efforts to develop innovative approaches due to the immediate competitive pressures to attract good students and to show achievement gains. If charters are to serve a useful R&D function, they should be given the support and freedom to try something new, rather than being asked to simply “sink or swim.” If charters are not to serve an R&D function, then policy makers need to articulate a clear, alternative purpose for them.

Along with the issue of innovation is the question of “scale up” – how do we replicate successful practices in other charter and district schools? Private and non-profit management organizations offer one possible step in this direction, but much more needs to be learned about their practices and effectiveness with different populations.

### Achievement

Of course, the main concern for many people is the question of achievement: Are charter school students performing at a higher level than their counterparts in other public schools, and are any differences caused by greater charter school effectiveness, as many anticipated? While this is probably the most hotly debated aspect of charter schools, there is some increasing clarity on this issue. Despite claims by charter school advocates that “rigorous” studies show greater achievement gains for charter students, many of these have been funded and conducted by advocacy organizations and are not very rigorous. In fact, the only peer-reviewed studies indicate that, overall, charter schools are not out-performing other public schools (and may, in fact, be slightly behind, even when we account for differences in populations served). Yet some reputable local studies highlight areas where charter schools *are* boosting academic achievement — suggesting that some charter schools in some states possess characteristic that are useful and may be replicated in scaling up these successes.

### Accountability

One of the promises of charter schools was that they would be offered additional autonomy in exchange for additional accountability for meeting the terms outlined in their contracts. In practice, closing schools has been much more challenging than originally anticipated by advocates, and schools often remain open despite unclear success with raising student



achievement. For charter schools to meet accountability expectations, more attention needs to be given to providing authorizers and policy makers with the support and models to implement strong accountability provisions.

#### Lessons from Charter Schools

While charter schools have generated considerable excitement, it is important to recognize that they are not a “panacea” for the problems of public education. Rather, the research suggests a mixed picture, in which some schools thrive while others struggle, and far fewer than anticipated truly offer the “innovative” programs promised by advocates. As well, issues around segregation are troubling.

If charter schools are to fulfill their potential in ongoing efforts for school improvement, we must focus on determining *why* some schools are successful. We need to know what practices can be replicated, and what policies, supports and accountability mechanisms foster successful schools that serve the students with the greatest needs without adding to the existing segregation in American schools.

Sincerely,

*Christopher Lubienski*  
University of Illinois

*Katrina Bulkley*  
Montclair State University



Dear President-elect Obama,

We are lifted by the power of your vision of hope not only for the nation, but for those whose dreams have been denied. Over-shadowed by the compelling issues of economic collapse, wars and debt, the ultimate key to equality, opportunity and economic vitality is the education of all the people. As Thomas Jefferson said, we cannot sustain democracy unless education is universally shared. Shamefully, our educational, income and poverty disparities are among the greatest of developed nations.

The common criticisms of education do not tell the real story. In saying our international test scores are merely average, they hide the fact that this average is composed of very high scoring suburbs where scores equal or surpass the world, and of very low performing urban areas – where scores are in last place among developed nations. This inequality of test scores reflects another fact – we spend \$1,500 less per pupil in our urban areas, where need is the greatest. Likewise, we under-invest in our children of color. Neither partisan press release lamentations nor calls for educational “accountability” overcome the truth that we systematically disenfranchise poor children.

With bipartisan support and fanfare, the *No Child Left Behind* act became law in early 2002. The proclaimed purpose was to provide all children good educational opportunities. No purpose could be grander. But the law is unworkable for several reasons. Perhaps the greatest of these is the failure to fund the promise.

In the beltway world, federal policymakers did not adequately consider what it would actually cost to achieve the goals of the law. Instead, the conversation focused on what percentage the current funding should be increased. With policymakers otherwise focused on military spending, free market solutions and tax cuts, investments in education and our society were shrugged aside.

Considering the record national debt, economic collapse, bail-outs of a trillion dollars or more, and accelerating military budgets, many say we cannot afford to spend on people. On the contrary, this is the very time we must. This is the time when training for new skills and new work opportunities is required. This is the time to empower the strength of all our nation’s peoples.

Reflecting a meager vision, Education Secretary Paige claimed in 2003 that the federal law was “fully funded” because federal Title I appropriations increased 52% in four years. What he didn’t say was that a large increase in a small number is still a small number. This four billion dollar increase amounted to less than a one percent increase in the nation’s total education spending of \$525 billion. Moreover, since 2003 federal funding for poor children has shown only small incremental increases. Considering that 18% of our children were in poverty in 2006, that child hunger increased 50% in one year, and that these numbers





skyrocket as more jobs are lost, we face a domestic problem of almost catastrophic proportions.

For No Child Left Behind, the 2008 appropriation for all NCLB titles was just short of \$25 billion. But this number pales when compared with the needs. Seventy state studies have been conducted by a variety of scholars and commissions to determine what it costs to bring every child up to the legally required standard. This evidence suggests we need \$160 billion.

While the needed increase in overall education spending averages 30%, some studies have reported staggering findings. A set of 20 inter-related California studies, conducted by some of the nation's finest experts, shows that California alone needs a 53% to 71% increase. The number for Massachusetts is 85%.

Today's accountability rhetoric claims schools can have all children reach standards if the schools just "work harder." This is an over-simplification but it has some truth. Certainly, teacher skills must be improved, learning materials must be rich and current, poor teachers must be weeded out, and school leadership must be capable. Regrettably these essentials are least satisfied in our neediest schools.

While schools make a difference, there are limits to what can be done by simply drilling children to pass a test. When a child lives in a single-parent abusive home with only a space heater and a blue tarp for a roof, academic learning takes second place to basic survival. It is fundamental truth that unless safety, health, love and belonging needs are met, children cannot concentrate on academics.

To be sure, the school costing studies focus on traditional school costs. Yet, almost universally, the studies show the core necessity of dealing with environmental factors. There are new essentials:

- Early education – Particularly for poor and handicapped children, quality services for these children are vital.
- Small class sizes – Particularly in the early grades.
- After-school programs – Children have about 6,000 waking hours a year. Schools have children for 1,000 hours. If we are to overcome impacted poverty, we have to provide healthy and supportive environments.
- Year-round programs – Some research suggests that the achievement gap can be attributed to summer losses of economically deprived children.
- Nutrition – School food programs are basic nutrition for many. They need expansion. It is no surprise that emergency food shelf (pantry) demands increase in the summer.
- Family Support Systems – Demands on human service systems, whether in or out of the school, are stronger.
- Health programs – A national dilemma. Sick children do not learn.

Mr. President, you recognized these needs in calling for "promise neighborhoods" such as





the Harlem Children's Zone. But we must go further than isolated programs. It is our moral obligation to educate all our children, to give them equal opportunities, and to give those with substantial obstacles a fair shot at overcoming these obstacles. The No Child Left Behind act made that promise; we did not keep it.

In our nation's history, we have shown a great ability to overcome hard times. The New Deal brought us out of the depression, John Kenneth Galbraith demonstrated that the GI bill was arguably the most important nation builder in our history, and the war on poverty did shrink the gaps. We can do it again.

You spoke of hope in your campaign. As someone who served as a school superintendent for more than twenty years, I am deeply troubled by the lack of hope among our neediest. But hope is based on our youth seeing a path that is open to them – seeing that they can follow this path to escape poverty and that they can live the American dream. And we can provide this hope.

It simply requires that we have the vision, the courage, the will and the commitment to make it so.

Sincerely,

*William J. Mathis*

Superintendent, Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union, Vermont



Dear President-elect Obama,

*"Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society. Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities."*

This powerful statement serves as a preamble for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and sets forth two important elements of our national policy regarding the education of children with disabilities. First, the statement makes clear that the “public” served by our nation’s public schools naturally includes diversity with regard to abilities and disabilities. Second, the statement establishes the IDEA’s key role in extending equal educational opportunity to children with disabilities.

As you begin your administration and consider the ways in which your leadership can edge us closer to that “more perfect union” enshrined in our Constitution, I urge you to consider the educational opportunities afforded children with disabilities and how the federal government can better assist schools and teachers in meeting children’s needs. To that end I recommend you carefully examine five issues in relation to special education and the IDEA: (1) reconfirming the IDEA’s commitment to equity; (2) increasing the federal funds available for special education; (3) reconciling the IDEA with No Child Left Behind (NCLB); (4) attending to the disproportional number of children of color now being served in special education; and (5) addressing the particular problems parental choice presents for children with disabilities.

#### Commitment to Equity

Whatever changes may be proposed, it is essential that the primary strengths of the IDEA be preserved. As I see them, the most important strength of the IDEA is that it includes a focus on the individual child and recognizes that an equitable education requires an examination of the particular needs that arise due to the nature and severity of that one child’s disability. Decisions about special education must be child-centered; programmatic availability and administrative convenience cannot and should not dictate service delivery.

A second strength of the IDEA is the so-called “zero reject” principle. It is important to remember that when the law was first enacted as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975, more than a million school-aged children were entirely excluded from public education. We have come a long way since then, but access to education requires more than physical access, it requires meaningful responses to the educational dilemmas a disability causes.



A third strength of the IDEA is that it vests parents with significant procedural rights to enable them to serve as advocates for their children. Those rights provide a powerful means of educational accountability. While some argue for diminishing those rights as a way to control the litigation associated with the IDEA, many of the gains made in special education delivery can be traced to families' ability to challenge the system and hold schools accountable. There is an old saying that a right without a remedy is no right at all. The right to an appropriate education secured by the IDEA is accomplished precisely because remedies are available to parents and children if school authorities fall short on their obligations under the law.

### Funding

As you noted in one of the presidential debates, the federal government has never funded the IDEA to the promised level of forty-percent of excess costs. That lack of federal financial commitment has severely compromised state and local efforts to realize the IDEA's intent. The shortfall has also placed different programs and services in competition for the educational dollar. Prior to 1975, many school districts that denied education to children with disabilities did so precisely because of the costs associated with meeting child's special needs. The education of children with disabilities was never a budgetary priority for those policy-makers. It is sadly ironic, therefore, that Congress has continually fallen prey to the same budgetary pressures that the IDEA was enacted in part to prevent.

Since funding for the IDEA is part of the discretionary budget, Congress has consistently yielded to the temptation to fund other priorities and leave states and local educational agencies to their own devices. Congress has essentially ignored the economic reality recognized by the EAHCA in 1975 – that if special education was going to be provided in a meaningful way, the federal government had to assist states and local school districts with a significant proportion of the costs. As many have argued each time Congress has reauthorized the IDEA, making the funding of the excess costs associated with the IDEA a part of the mandatory budget and committing to providing a federal share equal to 40% of those costs would dramatically assist states and school districts to realize the IDEA's goal of equal educational opportunity. While I understand Congress' desire to preserve as much budgetary discretion as possible, the thirty-three year history of the IDEA makes clear that, like the local authorities prior to 1975, Congress will not live up to its promises under a discretionary system of funding.

### IDEA's Relationship to NCLB

The most recent reauthorization of the IDEA in 2004 explicitly named the coordination of the IDEA with NCLB as one way special education could be improved. However, those efforts seemed to have failed to realize an important distinction between the two acts – that the IDEA exists to ensure an individual right, while NCLB provides a mechanism for collective system accountability. The failure to recognize that difference has led to the untenable reality that a school district can be in complete compliance with the IDEA, by ensuring that each child with a disability has a meaningful education available by means of



an appropriate Individualized Education Program (IEP), and still be “in need of improvement” and subject to punitive sanctions under NCLB because students with disabilities have not been able to score at “proficient” levels on the required standardized testing. While it is certainly true that the presumption should be that all children can reach proficiency on the same set of standards and skills, to ignore what the IDEA recognizes – that individual needs may require different approaches – places schools in a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” position. It is simply not realistic that 100% of children with disabilities will meet the same proficiency standards as children without disabilities by 2014. This problem should be reconciled while still holding schools and teachers accountable for the progress of children with disabilities in a meaningful way.

### Special Education and Race

Special education shares constitutional ties to *Brown v. the Board of Education*. The IDEA essentially codifies *Brown*’s recognition that separate educational systems may compromise equality. The IDEA creates a legal presumption of placement in regular classes and requires that the separate schooling for children with disabilities for all or even part of the school day only occurs when an appropriate education cannot be delivered in a traditional classroom environment. Still, data continue to show that children of color are over-represented in special education programs. IDEA 2004 enacted new provisions directing states to collect and attend to data documenting disproportionality in more meaningful ways. The commitment inherent in those provisions must continue and should be strengthened in order to ensure that special education does not result in a *de facto* segregation on the basis of race.

### The Problems of Parental Choice

Finally, I must draw your attention to the particular problems of school choice has for children with disabilities. One problem is simply ensuring that systems of choice in public schools (statewide open enrollment, magnet schools, or charter schools) ensure accessibility to children with disabilities. In other words, when states and school districts make available to parents the option of school selection, policymakers must also ensure that children with disabilities can meaningfully participate in those programs. A second problem involves segregation on the basis of disability. The IDEA currently requires that children with disabilities be placed with their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. Parents’ “choices” under IDEA in typical school environments are limited if they involve separate classes when the nature and severity of the child’s disability does not warrant the separation from typical peers. However, an increasing number of charter schools have been created to serve children with disabilities exclusively. To the extent that those schools create opportunities for children, they should be lauded. But if they become vehicles for a return to segregating children with disabilities – even when parents like it – equal educational opportunity may be sacrificed. As an initial step, we need federally funded research to understand how these schools work and to ensure that a child’s right to an appropriate education with non-disabled peers is primary and protected.



These issues – (1) reconfirming the IDEA’s commitment to equity; (2) increasing the federal funds available for special education; (3) reconciling the IDEA with No Child Left Behind (NCLB); (4) attending to the disproportional number of children of color now being served in special education; and (5) addressing the particular problems parental choice presents for children with disabilities – are only some of the considerations that will require leadership if children with disabilities are truly to experience equal educational opportunity. They are, however, some of the most important and the most pressing special education issues. I urge you to marshal the talent and expertise necessary to address them as you establish your educational leadership team. Special education is and always has been complex. We have come a long way, but I am confident that we can do even better. Moreover, I am hopeful that your administration will truly bring about the changes all children, including those with disabilities, deserve.

Respectfully,

*Julie F. Mead*

University of Wisconsin-Madison



Dear President-elect Obama,

First and most importantly, congratulations on the election! I cannot adequately express the excitement that you have inspired in those of us working for socially just education policies. It is thus with much hope that I write this letter to you about access and equity in higher education. To tell you about myself, very briefly, I am a philosopher of education who has conducted research both inside and outside of academia concerned with how higher education policy affects the opportunities that disadvantaged young people have to attend college. I would like to take this opportunity to ask you and your administration to pay careful attention to two important issues related to equality of opportunity for higher education: 1) the salience of race and ethnicity in education, and 2) the politics of intimidation faced by institutions of higher education using affirmative action in their admissions and outreach programs.

Regarding issue #1, I know you are aware of those who have been proclaiming that the election of the first black president of the United States means that we no longer need race-conscious policies like affirmative action because it somehow proves that racism has now disappeared. As promising as your election indeed is, it is still important for Americans to understand that race and ethnicity remain relevant in education and society. Your office has the power to affirm this, both symbolically and actively. Until the color of people's skin is no longer a factor in the awarding of educational opportunities, positive race-conscious policies like affirmative action – though by no means perfect – are still needed. In fact, although there is more progress to be made, we can use this historic moment to highlight the successes of race-conscious policies to get many people of color into the leadership positions in which they are today. Of course, issues of socioeconomic status are salient as well; some commentators would urge that higher education policy focus on issues of class – and not race – in admissions and outreach policies. The research evidence shows that both should be taken into account, rather than only one or the other.

The research also shows that a racially and ethnically diverse student body not only increases the quality of educational experiences for all students, but also allows selective institutions of higher education to fulfill their missions of educating students who will be able to serve all communities through their professions and function well in a multicultural world. Indeed, eliminating affirmative action has serious, negative outcomes: the resegregation of higher education, resulting in a system where the people of color would be found primarily at lower-status institutions, with fewer underrepresented minority students at the most selective institutions, which has been the case in the four states (CA, MI, NE, WA) that have banned affirmative action via state ballot initiative; and the restriction of financial resources and outreach programs.

Regarding the second issue cited above -- the politics of intimidation -- the Bush administration has, unfortunately, not seriously pursued issues of access and equity in higher education. The Justice Department's Division of Civil Rights has been perpetuating a





politics of intimidation that is mean-spirited, and worse, unnecessary. For example, attorneys from the Civil Rights Division threatened Southern Illinois University with a lawsuit due to a small number of scholarships the University had for underrepresented minority students. These were scholarship programs, such as the Bridge to the Doctorate, aimed at helping students of color and women pursue graduate school in science and technology and other fields in which they are underrepresented. Division attorneys claimed that these scholarships violated the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which was originally passed to combat egregious racism against African Americans and other disenfranchised people of color. Although there are now four states with laws that have eliminated affirmative action and would preclude such targeted scholarships, Illinois is not one of them.

In 2003, the *Grutter* court clarified that the U.S. Constitution does not prohibit affirmative action. As such, federal education and civil rights policy and enforcement should be in line with the Supreme Court's opinion in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, allowing institutions to consider race and ethnicity as factors relevant in admission and outreach processes. Yet, under the current administration, the Civil Rights Division effectively has been dismantled. The enforcement of civil rights cases has declined conspicuously in the last eight years. It has become an ideological space and is no longer attending to its historic mission of enforcing the nation's civil rights and anti-discrimination laws. As Joe Rich, former chief of the Voting Rights Section, testified in a House Judiciary subcommittee hearing on the Civil Rights Division, "the essential work of the division to protect the civil rights of all Americans is not getting done." Your administration has a significant opportunity to change this blatant disregard for civil rights, first by appointing experts in civil rights law to lead the Division of Civil Rights and second, by revitalizing the Division of Civil Rights so that it can return to doing what it was meant to do, including supporting institutions of higher education in their quest to uphold the Supreme Court's vision in *Grutter* and create vital, diverse centers of higher learning that will educate all of our students to contribute to the socially responsible aims of our diverse democratic society.

Thank you. I pledge to support and inform your efforts in any way that I can. And I wish you every success in your office as you work to bring to life the change that we can believe in.

Sincerely,

*Michele S. Moses*  
University of Colorado at Boulder



Dear President-elect Obama,

During the past century two competing narratives have vied for dominance in American public education. One is the progressive impulse of John Dewey and those politicians and intellectuals associated with social liberalism. The other is that of *social efficiency* as inspired in human service institutions by the rise of mass production and the assembly line in manufacturing. Both value systems are as central today to the debate about our public schools as they were one hundred years ago. Embedded in them are fundamental assumptions about human nature that mirror an older controversy, between the Biblical notion of original sin and Rousseau's vision of the perfectibility and inherent promise of humanity in this world.

This is not a left-right bipolarity. As in U.S. politics, there is no strong voice on the left of American education. The radical critics of the Sixties, advocates of deschooling and similar reforms are little evident in a manner that parallels the American political left, which also is not a major presence in our social imaginary. The debate in education is between centrists and the right, as it is in American politics at large.

For some, such characterizations are too high-flown and grandiose. Some practical people of affairs question or ridicule discussions of first principles. Skeptics should be reminded, however, as you have done, of the language of our founding documents and the values through which America was conceived. We are an Enlightenment project, inspired by liberal and romantic thinkers who spoke of education in our primary documents in ways such as this: "*Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary for good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged,*" The Northwest Ordinance of 1787, Article III. At our founding, we were not afraid to speak of such non-material ideals and to speak of them alone in conceiving our institutions.

Among the other fellows of the Education Policy Research Unit, I am writing you with the hope that your Department of Education will redress the imbalance of the past eight years in education policy and implementation. During the No Child Left Behind period the federal government has favored one set of education goals at the expense of another. The Act treats schools as economic engines in a short-term sense at the expense of their larger, longer-term purposes—as cited above in The Northwest Ordinance. Too many policymakers and officials in the Department have not been from our profession and have lacked what I would call the *soul of educators*. By this I mean a holistic and humane commitment to the welfare and growth of our children and youth. Treating young people, in Dewey's spirit, always as ends in themselves and never as means to an end.

Fair competition and judicious standards have a place in our schools, but only in balance with compassion, nurturance, and an appreciation of the spectrum of human talent. Fear and shame are not fitting engines of education in our democracy. The punitive character of NCLB is aggravated by its narrow view of the purpose of schooling and the nature of human



potential. Even within the cognitive dimensions of schooling, NCLB looks narrowly and inaccurately for quality of performance. Under this regime, as Linda Darling-Hammond has pointed out, we are driving students out of our schools for the first time in our history. This is education designed with an assembly line mentality wherein broken or non-standard parts are thrown aside in the interest of mistaken notions of efficiency. We have *no* children we can afford to throw away. Educators know that a student who is struggling today can become successful in the future. We do not give up on young people. That is a primary role of educators in society.

One defense of NCLB is that through its Adequate Yearly Progress requirements for subgroups it has focused attention on neglected minority children. In my opinion teachers and other educators were well aware of these problems and have been calling for assistance for these young people since Great Society days. Perhaps other American constituencies needed more evidence of society's inadequate service to some "subgroups," but not teachers. Unfortunately, even a new awareness of such schooling inequities has not inspired Washington to fund appropriate, helpful reforms for those in need. Quite the opposite, remarkable innovations such as Reading Recovery, Success for All, and performance assessment have been deliberately undermined by the Bush Education Department in favor of profit-making ventures. This is not hyperbole; it is fact.

My letter is a plea to you in the spirit of your memoirs to honor the lonely aspirations of children whose talents may be diverse, who may not have had loving parents, a stable home, and a privileged cultural or ethnic history. My plea is to allow room for them to succeed in our schools, both by the definition of success and by the comprehensive services provided to them by society.

All this is less onerous if we remember the ultimate goal of education is *spiritual*, that is, the cultivation of meaning in the lives of children and youth. We have been reminded by your campaign that postulating visionary and integrative aspirations, such as hope, gives purpose and motivation to the daily duties of life and promotes success. And so it is with schools. If our aims go no further than the short-term economic ones, we create "a bitter bread that feeds but half man's hunger." This is what NCLB has done. It has created too narrow a competition, without kindness and compensation for the vicissitudes of life that, in the process, neglects our full humanity. NCLB has been a fitting microcosm of the value system of the Bush Administration: creating winners and losers and favoring those with privilege while presuming that market accomplishment is the only achievement that matters.

Education, like government in general, is best structured around holistic ideals. As an educator committed to the practical and spiritual dimensions of our schools, I urge you as your administration begins to advocate with passion and eloquence for hope in education: a hope that is based on promoting meaning in our children's lives. As one voice among many



Education and the Public Interest Center  
University of Colorado at Boulder

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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

others in my profession, I ask that you restore a vision of American education in which all young people will reach fulfillment as feeling, thinking, inspired human beings.

Very truly,

*Paul Shaker*  
Simon Fraser University



Dear President-elect Obama,

First, thank you for taking on the task of engaging American citizens in a transformation of this country, of reclaiming the most humane and democratic of our values while recognizing that present conditions necessitate deep changes in the way we live and interact with one another and the planet. It is the educational implications of these conditions and the transformation they necessitate that I wish to address.

People in coming decades will need to become actors in a great transition away from an industrial economy predicated on fossil fuels to a way of being that is only now beginning to take shape. The citizens of this emerging culture and society will need to recognize planetary limits and at the same time know how to create economies capable of providing sufficient resources to assure the welfare of all people. These crafters of a post-carbon society will need to be motivated by a recognition of their interdependence on other individuals, communities, and nations as well as the natural systems that support human life. Little in contemporary schools is directed toward these ends.

One of the primary reasons for this gap is that schools have become institutions focused on the development of individuals more concerned about social mobility than the welfare of human and natural communities. This must change. Making a transition to a world without cheap energy will require all of us to attend to the health of the places where we live. In the absence of inexpensive fuel, it will be primarily within the context of neighborhoods and towns that people will create systems capable of assuring their collective well-being.

Schools need to educate children for this new set of responsibilities and obligations. Rather than focusing primarily on the abstract and the faraway, teachers need to immerse their students in knowledge, issues, and skills that will draw the young into a sense of affiliation with their home communities and regions and develop in them a resilient self-confidence about their capacity to make valuable contributions to the lives of others. The proof of their educational success should be these contributions—recognized by their families and neighbors—rather than mastery of the disembodied knowledge encountered on standardized tests. We need citizens and activists and people like yourself. Our country cannot afford to prepare test takers unable to think for themselves, solve problems, or act with a mind toward the health of the human and more-than-human communities that surround them.

To give you an idea about what is possible, I'll share a story that took place in Boston at the Greater Egleston Community High School (GECHS) a few years ago. GECHS primarily serves low-income Black and Latino students who have not earned enough academic credits to graduate at the same time as the rest of their class. With the help of a U.S. Department of Labor grant, the school was created in the 1990s by a group of parents hoping to draw their children away from the attractions of gang membership to an educational program focused on preparing them to become community leaders. When Elaine, a science teacher, came to



the school in the mid-1990s, she established an environmental justice class as a means for linking science to the school's emphasis on leadership.

Working with a nearby environmental non-profit organization, Alternatives for Community and Environment (ACE), Elaine and her students took on the problem of air quality and rising asthma rates in the surrounding neighborhood. Community organizers from ACE came to the school on a regular basis and worked with her students to, among other things, start a campaign aimed at getting the city to enforce a law that restricted vehicles from idling at a single location for more than five minutes. The bus lot for the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority is within a half dozen blocks of the school, and buses would idle for sometimes 30-40 minutes each morning before heading out on their routes. Students worked on this issue for six years, organizing rallies, writing press releases, speaking with news reporters, and testifying before the Boston City Council. In 2004, a court ruled that the MBTA needed to obey the anti-idling law and continue converting its diesel burning buses to natural gas. Students from GECHS became so respected for the quality of their research and testimony that the Boston City Council requested them to report back about the needs of low-income residents and the impact of city policies on their lives. Students who had been school failures became the protectors of their community. What they had learned was in evidence every time they planned a rally, spoke to a reporter, or gave testimony to elected officials.

The challenges of this era demand tens of thousands of more people like them. An education that connects young people to their community and place could play a vital role in supporting the transition to a world where health and security are predicated on the maintenance of our connections to others and our willingness to protect the earth. In your position as President, I urge you to encourage a national conversation about the purposes of public schools and help us as a people understand the degree to which our collective welfare is better served through the cultivation of thriving communities than the narrow pursuit of individual self-interest.

Sincerely yours,

*Gregory Smith*  
Lewis & Clark College





Dear President-elect Obama,

This is a story about Reading First, one of the most sweeping, expensive and prescriptive education policies the federal government ever implemented.

When George W. Bush became President he brought with him to the Federal government a group of people who advised him in Texas. Their Texas Reading Initiative was committed to a single way of teaching children how to read. Phonics-based reading is founded on the notion that children have to be taught a series of skills, in specific order, with one skill mastered before the next can be taught. They first must be taught the alphabet and the relationship between sounds and letters. Only when children have mastered these skills are teachers allowed to focus on words and on the ability of children to read fluently and without error. Only then can they be taught vocabulary and spelling, followed by very simple comprehension tasks. Another way of thinking about this model is that it is based on the mastery of discrete skills first, before children can read real story books and write. According to Bush advisors, teachers must use specific materials and methods that conform to a small set of published texts and basal series. Over the years a tight connection had formed between certain publishers, test developers, and consultants associated with the Texas group.

When the Reading Excellence Act was being considered, this same coalition worked closely with key legislators and lobbied to make sure that phonics-based reading methods would become authorized as the only way the nation's children could be taught. The same group worked hard to diminish and demonize any competing (literacy-based) views about how children learn to read. The Reading Excellence Act brought about Reading First.

One of the main tactics the coalition used was to claim that phonics-based reading was the only method that was based on scientific evidence, thus the term that was thrown around was "science-based" or "evidence-based." The problem is that this is not the truth. Phonics-based methods are not based on science. How these phrases came to be accepted as true, though, is -- from my point of view as a research methodologist -- the most interesting part of the story.

Although the Texas coalition had done studies on the effects of phonics-based reading methods, members were disappointed when a panel of experts appointed by the National Academic of Sciences reviewed the research on reading methods and recommended that a "balanced approach" was shown to be best. In other words, existing research shows that using both phonics-skills and literacy-based activities is the most effective path for teachers to take. That conclusion didn't provide the authority to pursue an exclusive phonics-based policy, so another panel was appointed by officials in the National Institute of Children Health and Development (NICHD) to settle the question. The National Reading Panel was supposed to be balanced in composition, with scholars and teachers on all sides of the



reading controversy. They were supposed to come to an unbiased conclusion from the research literature and to offer a set of recommendations.

Now I need to digress a little. In medical research, the standard method of testing one drug against another is the Randomized Clinical Trial (RCT). Suppose a group of patients with psoriasis volunteer for a study. A researcher assigns them at random to two groups. One of these groups gets the new Drug X, while the other gets a placebo treatment (like a sugar pill). At the end of the treatment period, the two groups are compared on how much their symptoms have improved. If the people getting Drug X are better off than the other group, then we can be fairly sure that Drug X is effective. Drug X has stood the first standard of “science-based” or “evidence-based” medicine. But it gets more complicated, I am sorry to say.

Since separate studies often contradict each other, science-based medicine requires that researchers conduct a Meta-Analysis, which is the statistical integration of all the studies on Drug X. Collectively, if the weight of the studies shows that Drug X still comes out ahead, then a more rigorous standard of science-based medicine has been met. The third standard is peer review, which means that both the separate studies and the meta-analysis are thoroughly vetted by the most expert scholars in the field to make sure they were done rigorously, according to the standards of the field.

Although I have my doubts about whether the RCT is the correct way to do science in education, let’s assume for the sake of the story that the way to establish science-based reading methods is to adopt the methods of science-based medical research. This is what the Texas coalition, now established in the federal government, wanted to use. However, since they wanted the results to come out in a certain way, they stacked it with phonics-first advocates and controlled how the meta-analysis would be conducted. Substantial and important parts of the research literature were culled out even before the Panel had a chance to look at them. Studies that have shown the positive benefits of parents and teachers reading books to children, studies that have shown the benefits of integrating reading with writing, speaking, and hearing, studies that have shown the benefits of focusing on comprehension and integrated literacy activities, studies that have shown the benefits of a method known as Reading Recovery -- all these were systematically excluded from the meta-analysis. I can tell you from my perspective that the whole project was seriously flawed.

Even so, the National Reading Panel emerged from their task with some modest conclusions about the effects of phonics-based teaching and learning. These conclusions, which were never subjected to independent peer review, were then turned over to a Washington D.C. public relations and lobbying firm that translated them into wildly one-sided and distorted press releases, video presentations, briefs for policy makers, and recommendations. This is how the label ‘science-based’ became attached to the phonics way of teaching, making it



appear that phonics-based research had won the horse race in head to head competition with alternative, literacy-based instruction.

Not only was this claim false, it went unchallenged by media and the public, perhaps because of a lack of understanding of research or perhaps a lack of curiosity. Some professionals did protest and offer alternative views, but these were dismissed as unscientific.

Then the coalition really got to work. All of the administrators of the federal Reading First effort were selected to support the phonics-based policy. States had to apply for support under Reading First, and proposals were rejected if they didn't include requirements that districts adopt reading programs supportive of phonics-first. Although the Department of Education still maintains that there was no approved list of programs, research evidence shows otherwise. The federal government told states, and states told districts that if they wanted alternative reading programs, they were on their own to prove that the alternatives were also "science-based." Since few states or districts have the wherewithal to conduct their own research, they complied, at the risk of losing financial support. The Department of Education had its favored list of teacher trainers and monitors to make sure that teachers were carefully trained in a single method.

However, some scholars did raise questions. Gregory Camilli of Rutgers University, one of our best statistical minds, attempted to replicate the NRP meta-analysis. Using more fair and sophisticated procedures, he found that phonics-based methods had no advantage over literacy based reading methods. Each produced about the same degree of effect. Yet when used together, their separate effects multiplied. He also found that neither group of studies was more scientific or rigorous than the other. But by the time his study came out, it was too late to make an impact on policy.

Why should this story matter for a new administration? Schools that adopt the big phonics-based programs such as Open Court and Reading Mastery have few economic resources left over to buy materials that might broaden reading instruction to include literacy and promote comprehension. Such packages are all-encompassing and do not allow for time for teachers to engage in writing and reading real books or pursuing knowledge of science and social studies. So much time is assigned to teaching separate skills that many elementary schools never even reach lessons on comprehending real books. Teachers trained to teach narrow skills forget or never learn the deeper and difficult approaches to comprehension. Under these conditions the positive effects Camilli found for literacy-based methods are lost. Teachers trained to teach narrow skills forget or never learn the deeper and difficult approaches to teaching children to read with comprehension and enjoyment. Finally, since the foundation for Reading First is a false representation of research, and schools are focused on separate, narrow skills, reality will intrude -- reality in the form of decreased comprehension on national and international reading tests, decreased knowledge of science



and social studies. That reality is now starting to catch up with us as we already see in the trends in national scores.

What can a new administration do? Here is a case where doing nothing may turn out best. Failure to fund Reading First at its present level may flush the last of the coalition from the Department of Education and from the monitors and trainers located in the states. A lifting of prescriptions and regulations may allow room for alternative, literacy-based approaches to reading to regain authority and stature. After a period of cooling off, a more affirmative policy on reading can come about.

With good wishes,

*Mary Lee Smith*  
Arizona State University



Dear President-elect Obama,

Few investments in education hold more promise than universal access to preschool education. We as a nation face issues such as the achievement gap, over-representation of poor and minority groups in special education, academic failure, drop-out rates, and competing globally. Universal preschool education remains an untapped source of *preventing* the problems confronting us as a nation and propelling forward the future generation from the egalitarian ideal of a level playing field.

Preschool education is not a new idea. The federal government has funded Head Start – which has a preschool component – for over 40 years. Many states have early childhood education programs. How is this an untapped resource? If we consider the power of preschool education, as outlined by seminal studies, we discover that we have yet to give our full backing to an idea that has consistently demonstrated gains for individual children, for their schools, and for society as well. Offering quality preschool education universally to America’s children remains an elusive ideal despite its proven record.

There is compelling research demonstrating the effectiveness of early childhood education. You may be familiar with seminal studies such as the Chicago Longitudinal Study, the Abecedarian and the Perry Preschool projects, which individually and together reveal substantial long-term effects that represent cost savings and social benefits to a community. These studies strongly suggest a connection between investing in early education and garnering benefits and savings from increased earnings over time, greater educational attainment, decreased reliance on public assistance, and even decreased criminal behavior.

The Chicago Longitudinal Study, for instance, has chronicled the many advantages proffered young children and their families through support services in the public schools. This decades-long study has documented gains in cognitive development, educational attainment, and family functioning. It is evidence of how intervening early with educational services and support contributes to self sufficiency and resilience. These, in turn, are at the heart of a productive citizenry and stable economy. Similarly, the most recent update of the Perry Preschool Project demonstrated a \$16 savings for every \$1 invested on preschool services with poor children in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Preschool education potentially ameliorates economic and social difficulties over an individual’s lifetime. Cumulatively, this represents enormous benefit for an entire nation.

School districts, directly accountable for the education offered to children, can also realize gains from the more immediate benefits of early childhood education. Among these are:

- Increased IQ scores
- Significantly reduced likelihood of grade retention
- Significantly reduced likelihood of special education classification
- Increased graduation rates



In response to challenges about increased school budgets, educators and community members welcome programs that enhance achievement and also prevent the need for expensive remediation services.

Quality preschool education does not represent a benefit solely for poor children. There is growing evidence of the benefits to all children. In their “Entering Kindergarten: Findings from the Condition of Education 2000” report, the National Center for Education Statistics found that more than half of U.S. children are reported to have one or more risk factors for school failure, with 15% having three or more. This exceeds the proportion of poor children entering schools; universal preschool can address the needs of children of all socio-economic groups.

If more affluent children enter schools well prepared, exhibiting few risk factors, what were their preschool experiences? In “Preschool for All: Investing in a Productive and Just Society,” the Committee for Economic Development reports that enrollment in nursery programs increases as income increases. It seems the middle and upper classes have always understood the benefits of preschool education.

Increased attention to educational attainment and its impact on global competitiveness has meant that early childhood education has come to the fore across the world. The *Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development* (OECD Directorate for Education) has tracked initiatives for preschool education in 12 developed countries demonstrating the growing understanding of the cumulative benefits of investing in young children. At a global level there is a growing trend toward universal educational services for children as young as three years old.

Perhaps the idea of preschool education is neither new nor surprising. Perhaps the innovative opportunity facing us now is providing preschool education *universally* to our children. In order to reap the maximum gain and ultimately invigorate the potential and motivation of our young people, we need an approach proven to accelerate achievement for the poor, with demonstrated benefits across racial, ethnic and socio-economic groups. In the short-term and in the long-term, universal preschool stands to revitalize education by promoting achievement and it stands to reward the economy for its faith in young children.

Respectfully submitted,

*Zoila Tazi*

CUNY and Principal, Roosevelt School, NY