



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

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Senate Kicks Opportunity out of Reach

By UCLA IDEA

Last week, IDEA's *Themes in the News* reported on President Obama's back-to-school speech urging students to work hard. If they did, he pledged, nothing would be beyond their reach. Then, on Tuesday, the U.S. Senate failed to pass the DREAM Act. Just when many students' aspirations seemed to be possible, the Senate kicked hopes and dreams beyond their grasp.

Nothing was gained by keeping exclusionary laws on the books and the lost opportunities are devastating. About 65,000 undocumented students—between 20,000 and 30,000 in California—will graduate high school this year without the same opportunities to continue their education as those afforded to their citizen classmates.

The DREAM Act would have set strict conditions for a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrant students, allowed them to pay in-state college tuition and attain scholarships for which they qualify. Many of these students have lived in the U.S. since they were small children—never knowing a home other than the United States.

By failing to pass the DREAM Act, the country, and California in particular, are losing a potential pool of college-educated adults prepared to contribute to the state in many ways, including the economy. At a rally earlier this week, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa alluded to waste of individual efforts and taxpayer dollars when denying full opportunity to hard-working and well-educated youth. Passage of the DREAM Act, he said, would provide “a great return on money we've already invested.”

The denial of the DREAM Act also diminishes civic life. The status quo puts to lie our most cherished democratic ideals—equality under the law, one person one vote. Lacking legal status, undocumented residents have limited opportunities to share their civic ideas and civic energy. In classes everywhere students discuss the responsibilities of citizenship knowing that they are excluded from fully participating in society.

Without the DREAM Act, we continue to place caring educators in an untenable position. Teachers and college counselors face the task of educating students for a future they cannot afford or might not have access to. They must explain to students why it's important to study for exams even as they can promise no payoff for these efforts.

The media and political leaders often trumpet tales of individual students who struggle and eventually overcome difficult circumstances to achieve educational success. How then are we to understand the stories of tens of thousands of *our* students who work so hard and come up empty-handed?