



Week of Jan. 24-28, 2011

All Children Must “Win the Future”

By UCLA IDEA

In his State of the Union address, President Obama spoke at some length about education. It was one of the few elements of the speech that received enthusiastic support from both Republicans and Democrats.

The speech portrayed a foreboding educational crisis that the administration is addressing with productive education policies. Inevitably, there are points of tension and contradiction in such a portrayal: a crisis that is serious enough to mobilize interest and force action accompanied by solutions that provide comfort and hope in the face of education failure.

For example, the president represented open-ended and critical questions as strengths of American education. He said, “. . . *our students don't just memorize equations, but answer questions like ‘What do you think of that idea? What would you change about the world? What do you want to be when you grow up?’*” In fact, many educators worry that the competitive discourse of *racing* to the top and *winning* the future is not just about America's position in the world, but intended for individual schools and children. Such learning environments with their inevitable losers to go along with the winners are not compatible with thinking about big ideas, changing the world, or with the full scope of what children aspire to *be*.

Calling *Race to the Top* the “most meaningful reform” of the generation, Obama praised its support for local control and ownership. However, the federal program exerts a powerful influence on local education standards, reform strategies, teacher evaluations and charter school expansions. State proposals that won the competition for funds were those most closely aligned to the centralized guidelines. The president was clear about how *Race to the Top* was intended to work: a small federal investment to leverage large-scale change across America's schools—most of which will have to finance improvements in ways the president did not specify.

Obama also highlighted the importance of teachers: “*...to every young person listening tonight who's contemplating their career choice: If you want to make a difference in the life of our nation; if you want to make a difference in the life of a child—become a teacher.*” He set a lofty goal of 100,000 new science and math teachers. Clearly, policy reform is needed to create the conditions that attract and retain those quality teachers, such as adequate supply of books and other materials, small classrooms, informed and supportive school leadership, school and community cultures that value rigorous academic pursuits, and community involvement. Lastly, there is nothing inconsistent with “making a difference” and earning a competitive salary—a matter that also boosts prospective teachers' enthusiasm for entering the field.

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The president did not mention poverty or the link between children living in poverty and their chances for educational success. There were opportunities to do so. One unmentioned program that has receded from public attention and perhaps from administration priorities is "Promise Neighborhoods." This program which links school improvement with community development efforts is intended to "significantly improve the educational and developmental outcomes of all children in our most distressed communities."

"Yes, we want to 'win the future,' but for many the concern now is surviving the present," said IDEA Director John Rogers. Twenty-two percent of children below 6 currently live in poverty, and families are at risk of losing critical social services as local governments strip social safety nets from next year's budgets.

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