



Week of Dec. 5-9, 2011

Reclaiming American Values for Schools—for the Country

By UCLA IDEA

This week, President Obama gave a speech that mirrored much of the “New Nationalism” promoted by President Theodore Roosevelt more than 100 years ago. It was no coincidence that the speech was made in the very same place—Osawatomie, Kansas.

Roosevelt's domestic agenda, his “Square Deal,” sought to balance the federal government's *laissez faire* policies with greater protections for workers and the middle class. Roosevelt said the country needed federal legislation to dampen the abuses and uncontrolled power of trusts and some very large businesses. For example, he brought new authority to regulate interstate commerce and increased the government's power to protect consumers through legislation such as the Pure Food and Drug Act.

Obama pointed to imbalances similar to those of a century ago—saying that in the last decade the incomes of most Americans have fallen by about 6 percent, while top-earners have continued to increase their wealth.

“Now, this kind of inequality -- a level that we haven't seen since the Great Depression -- hurts us all. When middle-class families can no longer afford to buy the goods and services that businesses are selling, when people are slipping out of the middle class, it drags down the entire economy from top to bottom,” Obama said. Obama also mentioned that the education pathway into the middle class was in danger.

Recently, the U.S. Department of Education revealed how this inequality shows up in schools. While Title 1 funds are supposed to provide additional resources to schools with high proportions of low-income students, staffing patterns in many districts mean that this often does not happen. According to the Department's study ([pdf](#)), nearly half of schools that serve mostly low-income families spend less on personnel than other more affluent schools within the same district. The report documents what's widely known—teachers at low-income neighborhood schools, on average, have less seniority and hence are paid less than teachers at other more well-off sites.

While it is clearly inequitable for more resources to flow to more affluent schools, merely shuffling experienced teachers across schools is likely to cause disruption and yield few benefits for Title 1 schools. Problematic staffing patterns have arisen over many years due to discrimination and a failure of districts to ensure that all schools provide attractive conditions for teaching and learning. An equitable distribution of staff requires, among other things, dramatically improving these conditions in Title 1 schools.

Furthermore, school finance expert Bruce Baker points out improving the distribution of resources within districts “is only a very small piece of a much larger equity puzzle.” The biggest inequalities in



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school funding are not generally within districts, they are between districts. And funding differences across districts exacerbate inequality between the affluent and everyone else.

The threat to America's endangered middle class is both a cause and result of what has happened to America's schools: years of budget cuts, teacher layoffs, overcrowding, prohibitively expensive higher education and more. The distribution of quality schooling parallels America's distribution of wealth and income: A few are doing extraordinarily well, and the rest are or ought to be very worried about their futures.

In order to get onto a sound footing, schools need what many economists say the whole country needs—an emergency influx of new revenue. At the same time, we need to begin building a rational and moral school-funding system to go with fair and just taxes. That square deal holds as much promise today as it did a century ago.

I believe that this country succeeds when everyone gets a fair shot, when everyone does their fair share, when everyone plays by the same rules. These aren't Democratic values or Republican values. These aren't 1 percent values or 99 percent values. They're American values. And we have to reclaim them.

—President Obama

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