

President Addresses Education in State of the Union

On January 25, President Obama addressed a joint session of Congress to deliver the annual State of the Union Address. His remarks about how vital education is to our economy were near the top of the speech. Many advocacy groups lobby the administration for months ahead of time trying to get their program or favorite policy even mentioned in his speech knowing that if their pet project is referenced by the President it provides them with a, "leg up," in the process of garnering federal support. So education receiving a dozen paragraphs near the top of the speech should be good news for our schools – right? Well it all depends on what the President said.

We have copied at the bottom this column the education section of the speech so you can look it over and decide what you think for yourself. I would offer a few observations:

Family Involvement

First, it was gratifying to hear the President acknowledge that all education begins at home with families. He is clearly correct that family first instills in children love of learning and that only parents and family can turn off the TV and ensure that homework is getting done. He also supported the important concept that success requires hard work and discipline and that this responsibility must be shared by home and school.

This was a good start, however one wonders if the President's vision of parental involvement in education allows room in the public schools for a parent who has taught their children the fundamentals of our faith such as, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth," to know that their teaching on this topic will not be undermined by the public schools. Parents should not expect the biblical truth of creation, or what they believe is the proper expression of human sexuality to be taught by the schools, but they should know that what they teach at home on issues of faith and morals will not be undermined by the schools. While the President is not likely to sign any laws on these issues his Supreme Court appointees are likely to rule on them in various ways.

Race to the Top

The President then went on to laud his signature education initiative, "Race to The Top" (RTT), calling it, "*the most meaningful reform of our public schools in a generation.*" While we should certainly give the President some leeway in using grandiose language to describe his own programs – this comment was, in my opinion, way over the top.

RTT is not really the law of the land. Instead it is a series of federal regulations tied to the grant program that the Department of Education utilized to distribute about \$4 billion of the \$40 billion appropriated by the congress as part of the federal stimulus funding. While about 40 states entered the grant competition to vie for this \$4 billion, only 11 states and the District of Columbia received RTT grants. So how could Obama go on to say, that RTT, "*has led over 40 states to raise their standards for teaching and learning?*"

The answer lies in the fact that a number of states took actions such as signing on to the Common Core Standards promoted by the National Governors Association or changing state laws or policies regulating tenure, teacher evaluation or caps on the number of charter schools in the state in order to receive points in the federal grant program. So what Obama is saying is that his RTT is groundbreaking because it has opened up a whole new way for the President's department of education to influence states to change their education laws and regulations without passing a law. While the word bribery may be too strong for this tactic, at a time when schools are on fiscal hard times the enticement of billions of dollars in federal funding was a powerful and many believe inappropriate incentive. While some of the changes that states made as a result of the encouragement of RTT may be laudable, this method of skirting the tenth amendment restrictions on what the federal government can force states to do in education policy is a matter of real concern.

Support for More Teachers

After his comments on Race to the Top the President went on to make some much appreciated positive remarks about teachers and the need to encourage children to pursue teaching careers. While the economic downturn may bring many people to teaching, it was good to hear the President encouraging youth to consider a career in teaching.

Children of Illegal Immigrants

President Obama concluded his education section by making some comments in support of the DREAM Act (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act). This bill has been introduced numerous times in congress since 2001, but has never passed. The bill would allow children of illegal immigrants – who were born in another country and brought to the U.S. when they were under 16 – upon acceptance to college, graduation from a U.S. high school, or being awarded a GED in the U.S to apply for *conditional nonimmigrant status*. If they were accepted for conditional nonimmigrant status, and after meeting various other requirements including serving in the military or attending an institution of higher education for two years, they could apply after 5-10 years (depending on the version of the bill) for *legal permanent resident status* and after three years in that status apply for citizenship.

The DREAM act sets forth an interesting set of conditions for earning citizenship and it does place many policy makers and Christians on the horns of a dilemma. The question is essentially should we be more lenient with children of illegal aliens, who were brought to our country as minors and did not actually commit an illegal act themselves, than we are with their parents? It is an ongoing challenge of the Christian life to integrate, as Jesus did perfectly, the truth of the law and grace. Christian teachers while understanding how important it is to teach the rule of law are compelled by their faith and their calling to want to deal with children with compassion and understanding. One way that the schools might be able to thread this needle would be to add to the list of requirements for pursuing citizenship in the DREAM act a provision that children should declare their intent to do so before completing High School or receiving their GED. Schools could then require pre-graduation citizenship courses for these children to ensure that they are exposed to the cultural values and historic foundations of our country that make it unique.

While the content of such courses should be left up to the states, broad parameters that might be placed on them could include that the courses teach two important principles that many other countries do not hold to: 1) What we mean by “freedom of religion,” as opposed to freedom “from” religion and 2) what we mean by, “rule of law.” If our schools do not teach and model these important principles that undergird our democracy it is unlikely that we will continue as a beacon of liberty against the forces of less tolerant ideologies.

All told, the President’s message was a mixed bag as is the Congress that received it. We need to be in prayer that as the President’s programs and other education ideas are weighed by the Congress that they will consider all of their votes in light of what will best secure abundant blessings from God for our nation’s children.

If you have thoughts, questions or concerns about how federal education policy impacts your calling to teach we would like to hear about them. Address your comments, questions and concerns to WashingtonWatch@ceai.org.

Excerpt from President Obama’s State of the Union Address Pertaining to Education

Entire text can be found at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/state-of-the-union-2011>

Maintaining our leadership in research and technology is crucial to America’s success. But if we want to win the future — if we want innovation to produce jobs in America and not overseas — then we also have to win the race to educate our kids.

Think about it. Over the next 10 years, nearly half of all new jobs will require education that goes beyond a high school education. And yet, as many as a quarter of our students aren't even finishing high school. The quality of our math and science education lags behind many other nations. America has fallen to ninth in the proportion of young people with a college degree. And so the question is whether all of us -- as citizens, and as parents -- are willing to do what's necessary to give every child a chance to succeed.

That responsibility begins not in our classrooms, but in our homes and communities. It's family that first instills the love of learning in a child. Only parents can make sure the TV is turned off and homework gets done. We need to teach our kids that it's not just the winner of the Super Bowl who deserves to be celebrated, but the winner of the science fair. (Applause.) We need to teach them that success is not a function of fame or PR, but of hard work and discipline.

Our schools share this responsibility. When a child walks into a classroom, it should be a place of high expectations and high performance. But too many schools don't meet this test. That's why instead of just pouring money into a system that's not working, we launched a competition called Race to the Top. To all 50 states, we said, "If you show us the most innovative plans to improve teacher quality and student achievement, we'll show you the money."

Race to the Top is the most meaningful reform of our public schools in a generation. For less than 1 percent of what we spend on education each year, it has led over 40 states to raise their standards for teaching and learning. And these standards were developed, by the way, not by Washington, but by Republican and Democratic governors throughout the country. And Race to the Top should be the approach we follow this year as we replace No Child Left Behind with a law that's more flexible and focused on what's best for our kids. (Applause.)

You see, we know what's possible from our children when reform isn't just a top-down mandate, but the work of local teachers and principals, school boards and communities. Take a school like Bruce Randolph in Denver. Three years ago, it was rated one of the worst schools in Colorado -- located on turf between two rival gangs. But last May, 97 percent of the seniors received their diploma. Most will be the first in their families to go to college. And after the first year of the school's transformation, the principal who made it possible wiped away tears when a student said, "Thank you, Ms. Waters, for showing that we are smart and we can make it." (Applause.) That's what good schools can do, and we want good schools all across the country.

Let's also remember that after parents, the biggest impact on a child's success comes from the man or woman at the front of the classroom. In South Korea, teachers are known as "nation builders." Here in America, it's time we treated the people who educate our children with the same level of respect. (Applause.) We want to reward good teachers and stop making excuses for bad ones. (Applause.) And over the next 10 years, with so many baby boomers retiring from our classrooms, we want to prepare 100,000 new teachers in the fields of science and technology and engineering and math. (Applause.)

In fact, 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. Your country needs you. (Applause.)

Of course, the education race doesn't end with a high school diploma. To compete, higher education must be within the reach of every American. (Applause.) That's why we've ended the unwarranted taxpayer subsidies that went to banks, and used the savings to make college affordable for millions of students. (Applause.) And this year, I ask Congress to go further, and make permanent our tuition tax credit -- worth \$10,000 for four years of college. It's the right thing to do. (Applause.)

Because people need to be able to train for new jobs and careers in today's fast-changing economy, we're also revitalizing America's community colleges. Last month, I saw the promise of these schools at Forsyth Tech in North Carolina. Many of the students there used to work in the surrounding factories that

have since left town. One mother of two, a woman named Kathy Proctor, had worked in the furniture industry since she was 18 years old. And she told me she's earning her degree in biotechnology now, at 55 years old, not just because the furniture jobs are gone, but because she wants to inspire her children to pursue their dreams, too. As Kathy said, "I hope it tells them to never give up."

If we take these steps — if we raise expectations for every child, and give them the best possible chance at an education, from the day they are born until the last job they take -- we will reach the goal that I set two years ago: By the end of the decade, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. (Applause.)

One last point about education. Today, there are hundreds of thousands of students excelling in our schools who are not American citizens. Some are the children of undocumented workers, who had nothing to do with the actions of their parents. They grew up as Americans and pledge allegiance to our flag, and yet they live every day with the threat of deportation. Others come here from abroad to study in our colleges and universities. But as soon as they obtain advanced degrees, we send them back home to compete against us. It makes no sense.

Now, I strongly believe that we should take on, once and for all, the issue of illegal immigration. And I am prepared to work with Republicans and Democrats to protect our borders, enforce our laws and address the millions of undocumented workers who are now living in the shadows. (Applause.) I know that debate will be difficult. I know it will take time. But tonight, let's agree to make that effort. And let's stop expelling talented, responsible young people who could be staffing our research labs or starting a new business, who could be further enriching this nation. (Applause.)