

OPINION

“What’s Possible for Our Children”

Senator Barack Obama, 4 June 2008

"It's an honor to be here at Mapleton Expeditionary School of the Arts. Just three years ago, only half of the high school seniors who walked the halls of this building were accepted to college. But today, thanks to the hard work of caring parents, innovative educators and some very committed students, all 44 seniors of this year's class have been accepted to more than 70 colleges and universities across the country.

"I'm here to congratulate you on this achievement, but also to hold up this school and these students as an example of what's possible in education if we're willing to break free from the tired thinking and political stalemate that's dominated Washington for decades, if we're willing to try new ideas and new reforms based not on ideology but on what works to give our children the best possible chance in life.

"At this defining moment in our history, they've never needed that chance more. In a world where good jobs can be located anywhere there's an Internet connection—where a child in Denver is competing with children in Beijing and Bangalore — the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge. Education is the currency of the Information Age, no longer just a pathway to opportunity and success but a prerequisite. There simply aren't as many jobs today that can support a family where only a high school degree is required. And if you don't have that degree, there are even fewer jobs available that can keep you out of poverty.

"In this kind of economy, countries who out-educate us today will out-compete us tomorrow. Already, China is graduating eight times as many engineers as we are. By 12th grade, our children score lower on math and science tests than most other kids in the world. And we now have one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized nation in the world. In fact, if the more than 16,000 Colorado students who dropped out of high school last year had only finished, the economy in this state would have seen an additional \$4.1 billion in wages over these students' lifetimes.

"There is still much progress to be made here in Thornton, but the work you've done shows us that we do not accept this future for America.

"We don't have to accept an America where we do nothing about six million students who are reading below their grade level.

"We don't have to accept an America where only 20 percent of our students are prepared to take college-level classes in English, math and science. Where barely one in 10 low-income students will ever graduate from college.

"We don't have to accept an America where we do nothing about the fact that half of all teenagers are unable to understand basic fractions. Where nearly nine in 10 African-American and Latino eighth-graders are not proficient in math. We don't have to accept an America where elementary school kids are only getting an average

of 25 minutes of science each day when we know that over 80 percent of the fastest-growing jobs require a knowledge base in math and science.

"This kind of America is morally unacceptable for our children. It's economically untenable for our future. And it's not who we are as a nation.

"We are the nation that has always understood that our future is inextricably linked to the education of our children — all of them. We are the country that has always believed in Thomas Jefferson's declaration that "talent and virtue, needed in a free society, should be educated regardless of wealth or birth."

"That's who we are. And that's why I believe it's time to lead a new era of mutual responsibility in education, one where we all come together for the sake of our children's success. An era where each of us does our part to make that success a reality: parents and teachers, leaders in Washington and citizens all across America.

"This starts with fixing the broken promises of No Child Left Behind. Now, I believe that the goals of this law were the right ones. Making a promise to educate every child with an excellent teacher is right. Closing the achievement gap that exists in too many cities and rural areas is right. More accountability is right. Higher standards are right.

"But I'll tell you what's wrong with No Child Left Behind. Forcing our teachers, our principals and our schools to accomplish all of this without the resources they need is wrong. Promising high-quality teachers in every classroom and then leaving the support and the pay for those teachers behind is wrong. Labeling a school and its students as failures one day and then throwing your hands up and walking away from them the next is wrong.

"We must fix the failures of No Child Left Behind. We must provide the funding we were promised, give our states the resources they need and finally meet our commitment to special education. We also need to realize that we can meet high standards without forcing teachers and students to spend most of the year preparing for a single, high-stakes test. Recently, 87 percent of Colorado teachers said that testing was crowding out subjects like music and art. But we need to look no further than MESA to see that accountability does not need to come at the expense of a well-rounded education. It can help complete it — and it should.

"As president, I will work with our nation's governors and educators to create and use assessments that can improve achievement all across America by including the kinds of research, scientific investigation and problem-solving that our children will need to compete in a 21st century knowledge economy. The tests our children take should support learning not just accounting. If we really want our children to become the great inventors and problem-solvers of tomorrow, our schools shouldn't stifle innovation, they should let it thrive. That's what MESA is doing by using visual arts, drama and music to help students master traditional subjects like English, science and math, and that's what we should be doing in schools all across America.

"But fixing the problems of No Child Left Behind is not an education policy on its own. It's just a starting point.

"A truly historic commitment to education — a real commitment — will require new resources and new reforms. It will require a willingness to move beyond the stale debates that have paralyzed Washington for decades: Democrat versus Republican; vouchers versus the status quo; more money versus more accountability. It will require leaders in Washington who are willing to learn a lesson from students and teachers in Thornton or Denver about what actually works. That's the kind of president I intend to be, and that's the kind of education plan I've proposed in this campaign.

"It begins with the understanding that from the moment our children step into a classroom, the single most important factor in determining their achievement is not the color of their skin or where they come from. It's not who their parents are or how much money they have.

"It's who their teacher is. It's the person who stays past the last bell and spends their own money on books and supplies. It's the men and women here at MESA who go beyond the call of duty because you believe that's what makes the extra difference. And it does.

"And if we know how much teaching matters, then it's time we treated teaching like the profession it is. I don't want to just talk about how great teachers are. I want to be a president who rewards them for their greatness.

"That starts with recruiting a new generation of teachers and principals to replace the generation that's retiring and those who are leaving. Right here in Colorado, more than 6,000 teachers won't be returning to the schools where they taught last year. That's why as president, I'll create a new Service Scholarship program to recruit top talent into the profession and begin by placing these new teachers in overcrowded districts and struggling rural towns, or hard-to-staff subjects like math and science in schools all across the nation. And I will make this pledge as president to all who sign up: If you commit your life to teaching, America will commit to paying for your college education.

"To prepare our teachers, I will create more Teacher Residency Programs to train 30,000 high-quality teachers a year. We know these programs work, and they especially help attract talented individuals who decide to become teachers midway through their careers. Right here in MESA, you have excellent teachers like Ike Ogbuikwe, who became a math teacher after working as an auto-engineer at Ford and completing a one-year, teacher-residency program.

"To support our teachers, we will expand mentoring programs that pair experienced, successful teachers with new recruits — one of the most effective ways to retain teachers. We'll also make sure that teachers work in conditions which help them and our children succeed. For example, here at MESA, teachers have scheduled common planning time each week and an extra hour every Tuesday and Thursday for mentoring and tutoring students that need additional help.

"And when our teachers do succeed in making a real difference in our children's lives, I believe it's time we rewarded them for it. I realize that the teachers in Denver are in the middle of tough negotiations right now, but what they've already proven is that it's possible to find new ways to increase teacher pay that are developed with teachers, not imposed on them.

"My plan would provide resources to try these innovative programs in school districts all across America. Under my Career Ladder Initiative, these districts will be able to design programs that reward accomplished educators who serve as mentors to new teachers with the salary increase they deserve. They can reward those who teach in underserved areas or teachers who take on added responsibilities, like you do right here at MESA. And if teachers acquire additional knowledge and skills to serve students better — if they consistently excel in the classroom — that work can be valued and rewarded as well.

"And when our children do succeed, when we have a graduating class like this one where every single student has been accepted to college, we need to make sure that every single student can afford to go. As president, I will offer a \$4,000 tax credit that will cover two-thirds of the tuition at an average public college and make community college completely free. And in return, I will ask students to serve their country, whether it's by teaching or volunteering or joining the Peace Corps. We'll also simplify the maze of paperwork required to apply for financial aid and make it as easy as checking off a box on your tax returns because you shouldn't need a Ph.D. to apply for a student loan.

"Finally, as so many of you know, there are too many children in America right now who are slipping away from us as we speak, who will not be accepted to college and won't even graduate high school. They are overwhelmingly black, and Latino, and poor. And when they look around and see that no one has lifted a finger to fix their school since the 19th century, when they are pushed out the door at the sound of the last bell — some into a virtual war zone — is it any wonder they don't think their education is important? Is it any wonder that they are dropping out in rates we've never seen before?

"I know these children. I know their sense of hopelessness. I began my career over two decades ago as a community organizer on the streets of Chicago's South Side. And I worked with parents and teachers and local leaders to fight for their future. We set up after-school programs, and we even protested outside government offices so that we could get those who had dropped out into alternative schools. And in time, we changed futures.

"And so while I know hopelessness, I also know hope. I know that if we bring early education programs to these communities, if we stop waiting until high-school to address the drop-out rate and start in earlier grades — as my Success in the Middle Act will do — if we bring in new, qualified teachers, if we expand college outreach programs like GEAR UP and TRIO and fight to expand summer learning opportunities for minority and disadvantaged students — like I've done in the Senate — or if we double funding for after-school programs to serve a million more children, as I've proposed to do as president, if we do all this, we can make a difference in the lives of our children and the life of this country. I know we can. I've seen it happen. And so have you.

"Yes, it takes new resources, but we also know that there is no program and no policy that can substitute for a parent who is involved in their child's education from day one. There is no substitute for a parent who will make sure their children are in school on time and help them with their homework after dinner and attend those parent-teacher conferences, like so many parents here at MESA do. And I have no doubt that we will still be talking about these problems in the next century if we do

not have parents who are willing to turn off the TV once in awhile and put away the video games and read to their child. Responsibility for our children's education has to start at home. We have to set high standards for them and spend time with them and love them. We have to hold ourselves accountable.

"This is the commitment we must make to our children. This is the chance they must have. And I will never forget that the only reason I'm standing here today is because I was given that same chance. And so was my wife.

"Our parents weren't wealthy by any means. My mother raised my sister and me on her own, and she even had to use food stamps at one point. Michelle's father was a worker at a water-filtration plant on the South Side of Chicago and provided for his family on a single salary. And yet, with the help of scholarships and student loans and a little luck, Michelle and I both had the chance to receive a world-class education. And my sister ended up becoming a teacher herself.

"That is the promise of education in America, that no matter what we look like or where we come from or who our parents are, each of us should have the opportunity to fulfill our God-given potential. Each of us should have the chance to achieve the American dream. Here at MESA, you've shown America just how that's possible. I congratulate you, and I wish you continued success, and I look forward to working with you and learning from you in the months and years ahead. Thank you."