

They have entered schools where there are health and safety hazards, and they are trying to learn in classrooms that are overcrowded. They are competing for the time and attention of a teacher, and they are looking to us for support.

I am frustrated to say this, but as this session of Congress draws to a close, this Congress has done very little to support those children across this country. This Congress, for the first time in 30 years, has failed to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. That is a disservice to students who are trying to learn in overcrowded classrooms, to students who are stuck in crumbling schools, and to students who do not feel safe at school.

We can't pass ESEA reauthorization; it is too late. But we do have one place to make it up: in the final funding plan for the upcoming fiscal year.

There are kids out there counting on us to do the right thing, and we need to pass a budget that addresses their needs. That is why I have come to the floor today, to urge my colleagues to do just that.

As I look back on this session of Congress, I am frustrated by the way this process has broken down. We have been updating our national education policy for about 30 years. It has always been a bipartisan and productive process—but not this year. This year, the ESEA reauthorization was stalled by sharp partisanship. We had a chance to make a lot of progress, but this Congress failed.

We weren't able to update our Nation's education policy to meet the needs of today's classrooms. As a parent, as a former educator and a former school board member, that is discouraging. What is even more discouraging is some of the talk that we have heard on the campaign trail this year. Not long ago, Governor Bush said that our country is experiencing a "recession in education." I have thought a lot about that statement. To the teachers who are working harder than ever, it certainly doesn't feel like a recession. In fact, I think Governor Bush has it exactly backward. A recession is where there is a slowdown in economic activity, when production and employment decline, when there isn't much demand, when workers are idle and factories are slow. That is a recession.

But that is not what is happening in education today at all. Our schools are not slowing down; they are working harder than ever. Our classrooms aren't empty; they are overcrowded. Our teachers aren't being idle because they are not needed; they are needed more now than ever. It is not that demand has slowed. The demands on our schools are higher than ever. The problem is our investment has not kept up. Any enterprise or business that wants to stay in business invests in its people, invests in the latest equipment, in-

vests in capital projects, so that the capacity will keep up with the demand. That is what we have to do. But for some reason, when it comes to our schools, we have not made those investments. We have let schools that were built 40 or 50 years ago simply decline. We have let great educators leave the classroom because they are frustrated by a system that doesn't give them the support or respect they deserve.

Governor Bush, we are not in an education recession; we are in a period of explosive growth and growing demand in the classroom, and we need to make the investment to meet that growing demand. Governor Bush has the problem backward and that is why he has come up with the wrong solution. As a parent of two students who went to public school, I can tell you I don't want our next President to close down my school; I want him to make my school better. You don't do that by bashing public schools. You do it by investing in the things that we know work in the classroom.

I have said it before and I will say it again: Our schools are facing overwhelming challenges with inadequate resources. Our public schools are not failing, but by failing to invest in them this Congress is failing our public schools. We need to give our schools the resources, the tools, and the support to meet today's challenges.

There are important needs in my home State in classrooms. Sitting here in the Chamber, it is easy to forget the challenges that schools face across the country. If this Chamber is about to go into recess without making an investment in education, it needs to hear directly from people on the front line. So I decided to read a few letters I have received from students and teachers in my home State of Washington.

Kristen Jensen Story is a parent and a teacher at White Center Heights Elementary School in the Highline School District. At her school, the majority of the students live in public housing and come from homes where English is not the first language.

She tells me:

We have been working hard to make sure these children succeed and become contributing citizens to our great Nation. The need for Federal public education funding is greater now than ever before.

We have the money. The Federal budget is forecasted to have a \$1.9 trillion surplus over the next decade. Make the funding of public education a national priority.

Let me read another letter. This one is from Becky Scheiderer, a teacher from the Bethel School District in Washington State.

She writes:

Children cannot wait another session.

She goes on to explain some of the challenges her school is facing:

Our students need to continue the successful programs, such as Title I, special edu-

cation, and smaller class sizes to work with these students inclusively.

Our district is growing, and we need schools constructed soon.

Our teachers, students and staff need safe schools to work in for 7.5 hours a day.

The need for Federal funding is even greater now than ever before.

Those are some of the real challenges facing our schools, and you don't fix them by bashing educators; you fix them by making an investment in the things that we know work.

I want to turn to a few investments that we should be making in our final budget plan. It is our last chance this year to do the right thing for America's students. Let me start with making classrooms less crowded. We know our classrooms are overcrowded and we know that students can learn the basics, with fewer discipline problems, in less crowded classrooms.

Parents know it, students know it, teachers know it, and studies show it.

Two years ago, we made an investment in making classrooms less crowded. I am pleased to report that the investment is paying off for America's students. It is making a positive difference in their education. We gave local school districts the money to go out and hire more than 29,000 new qualified teachers for the early grades. And today, 1.7 million students are learning in less crowded classrooms.

Our goal is to hire 100,000 new teachers. You would think that with the success we have had so far, there would be no question that we would keep our commitment to reducing class size. But that is not the case in this Congress. Right now, there is no guarantee that schools across the country will have funding guaranteed to reduce classroom overcrowding. Some of my colleagues on the Republican side say we don't need to commit money for class size reduction. They say if schools want to hire teachers, let them take the money out of title VI funding.

Reducing overcrowding should not be done at the expense of something else. That money should be there—guaranteed to make a positive difference for students.

In this debate, two things have been forgotten. First, part of the Federal role is to help disadvantaged students. The class size program is set up to target funding to low-income schools. If you dump that program into a block grant, there is no guarantee that it will be focused toward disadvantaged students. Title I, homeless and migrant education programs are all targeted to ensure that disadvantaged students get the help they need. A block grant offers no guarantees.

The second point overlooked in this debate is the importance of accountability. Under a block grant, there is no guarantee this money will go to hire new teachers.

Block grants mean less accountability. Right now, we can show that

money was spent and how it is making a difference. If the money is block granted, we have no idea if it is making classrooms less crowded. Today, everybody is talking about accountability, and the best way to ensure accountability is to show that Federal dollars are being spent in a specific, targeted way to reach a specific goal. If we put Federal education funding into a block grant, there is no way to keep that money accountable. Class size is just one of the areas in which we need to invest.

Let me mention another: school construction and modernization. Today, too many students enter school buildings that are crumbling or that have major safety hazards. In fact, 7 million students attend schools with safety code violations, including the presence of asbestos, lead paint, or radon in ceilings or walls. Almost 16 million students in this country attend schools without proper heating, ventilation, or air-conditioning. And too many of our schools don't have the technological infrastructure to meet our students' needs. For example, in our poorest schools, only 39 percent of classrooms have Internet access. We need to pass legislation that will give local school districts the financial help they need to build new schools and to modernize old ones.

I want to turn to teacher quality. We can help ensure that every teacher in America is fully qualified and has the tools and the support to help our children reach their full potential. Today, there are thousands of world-class, high-quality teachers in our schools. They are professionals. They care deeply about the quality of our children's education, and any of us would be lucky to have our children learn from them. But the current system makes it harder and harder for teachers to really do their best. Instead of offering them the support they need to make a difference, the current system puts roadblocks in front of too many teachers.

Teachers and parents have told me that the main challenges are the three R's: recruiting great teachers, retaining great teachers, and rewarding great teachers.

We need to recruit young people into the teaching profession. We need effective, ongoing, professional development programs that are aligned with local standards and curricula. We need efforts to boost pay for great teachers and to raise respect for educators. In the closing weeks of the 106th session, we should be supporting efforts to improve teacher quality.

Finally, the subject of accountability. We should not accept defeat or give up on our Nation's schools. We need to identify schools that need extra help and turn those schools around.

It is late in the legislative process, and we are in a rush to end this year's

session. Let's remember one thing. America's students didn't create this rush. I am standing here today and I will be fighting to make sure that our students are not penalized because this Senate failed to do its work. I know my colleagues are eager to go home, but we still have time to do the right thing. We still have time to support the work that local educators, students, and parents are doing. The way to do it isn't to bash public schools but to put Federal dollars where they will help the most and to keep those dollars accountable. The way to do that is to invest in things that we know work, such as smaller classes, modern facilities, fully qualified teachers, and accountability. It is not too late to do the right thing.

Parents, teachers, and students across this country are counting on us to do our part as a responsible Federal partner. Let's not let them down.

Thank you, Mr. President.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. THOMAS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. AL-LARD). Without objection, it is so ordered.

#### 106TH CONGRESS

Mr. THOMAS. Mr. President, I think the focus today, as we move toward the appropriations bills, is education. It has been a focus during this whole Congress. I saw some figures that we spent a total, in the 106th Congress, of 5 weeks talking about education. That is indicative, I believe, of the importance all citizens place on education. I don't think anyone would say education isn't a very high priority for everyone.

The question is, How is the role of the Federal Government best created? In my view, one of the important things is to have some assistance from the Federal Government, to have some financial assistance. We also are in a system where people move about and are educated in one place and work in another place. There has to be some continuity or accountability that each of us is educated enough to be able to be successful.

One of the most important issues is who makes the decisions with regard to individual school systems. I think the Republicans, working on this side of the aisle, have had a very strong agenda for education, returning control to the parents for sending dollars to the classroom, dollars to States and local school boards so they can make the decisions that are necessary to be made in that particular school, give families greater educational choice, support exceptional teachers, and focus on basic academics, stressing accountability.

I have always thought, as a member of the Wyoming legislature, we cannot have a good school system without the dollars. Dollars alone do not necessarily result in a good school system. There has to be some accountability as well.

Of course, on the Federal level, the needs in Chugwater, WY, are quite different from those in Pittsburgh. Many things are that way. There needs to be flexibility; in one particular school, perhaps what is most needed is to build a new school or replace the old school; in another school, what is needed is computers, teacher training, or more academic materials. "One size fits all" does not work. Frankly, that has been the underlying difficulty in this entire debate.

The President of the United States will be here this afternoon pushing for his plan so bureaucrats in Washington can decide and dictate what the Federal dollars are spent for. On the other side of that argument, we have given more dollars to the budget than even the President asked for. We are saying those ought to offer flexibility so local people can decide the best use for the dollars, yet with accountability for the taxpayers' dollars.

The Democratic approach has been a series of mandates: 100,000 federally funded teachers, federally funded school construction, federally funded afterschool. All those are fine if that is the priority in your particular school district. However, we are not in the business of having a bureaucracy in Washington make those decisions.

There have been difficulties moving forward:

The Taxpayer Relief Act, vetoed by the President, over \$500 million in family tax relief—families could have used that money at any level to have supported schools;

Passing the Ed-Flex bill, with Federal requirements being waived if they are interfering with what they seek to do.

These are the items we are debating with regard to education.

We are, hopefully, near the end of this session. We will wind up next week. We have accomplished quite a number of things. Some people talk about a do-nothing Congress, which absolutely is not the case. The Republicans have balanced the budget, pushed forward and obtained the balanced budget in 1998, the first time since 1969 we have had a balanced budget. We saw that because of some restraints on spending, because of the flourishing economy bringing in more dollars. Nevertheless, it is the first time we have had enough dollars to balance the budget outside of Social Security dollars. We have changed the deficits to surpluses and lowered interest rates, paid down the debt \$360 billion over the past 3 years.

In addition to that, of course, at the same time, Republicans have lowered