

Administration of Barack Obama, 2011

Remarks at Kenmore Middle School in Arlington, Virginia

March 14, 2011

Hello, everybody! Hello! Thank you so much. Thank you. Everybody, have a seat. Have a seat, everybody.

It is wonderful to be here at Kenmore. And I want to first of all thank our principal, Mr.—Dr. John Word—Doctor; Superintendent of Arlington Public Schools, Patrick Murphy. I believe that the Arlington County School Board is represented here—where are they? There they are over there, all doing great work. We've got your own Congressman, Jim Moran, here in the house. And we've got somebody who I believe is going to go down as the finest Secretary of Education we've ever had, Arne Duncan.

Now, before I begin, let me just say that like all Americans, I continue to be heartbroken by the images of devastation in Japan. And I know all of you, young and old, have been watching the full magnitude of this tragedy unfold. I want to reiterate America's support for the people of Japan, who are some of our closest friends and allies. And I've said directly to the Prime Minister of Japan, Prime Minister Kan, that the United States will continue to offer any assistance we can as Japan recovers from multiple disasters and we will stand with the people of Japan in the difficult days ahead.

Now, I just had a chance to talk with some of your teachers as well as some students, who told me about your all-school project that's weaving the life and music of Duke Ellington into your classes. And by getting students engaged in learning, you're teaching the kinds of skills about how to think and how to work together that young people are going to need in college and beyond. That's what all of our schools need to be doing.

And in an economy that's more competitive and connected than ever before, a good job and a good career is going to demand a good education. Over the next 10 years, nearly half of all new jobs are going to require more than a high school diploma. So if you want a bright future, you're going to need a college degree or advanced training.

And as Arne mentioned, unfortunately, too many students aren't getting a world-class education today. As many as a quarter of American students aren't finishing high school. The quality of our math and science education lags behind many other nations. And America has fallen to ninth in the proportion of young people with a college degree. Understand, we used to be first, and we now rank ninth. That's not acceptable.

And turning these statistics around isn't just the right thing to do for our kids, it's the right thing to do for our economy, because the best jobs program out there is a good education. The best economic policy is one that produces more college graduates. And that's why for the sake of our children and our economy and America's future, we're going to have to do a better job educating every single one of our sons and daughters, all of them.

Now, that responsibility begins not in our classrooms, but it begins in our homes. It begins with parents who are instilling in their kids not only a love of learning, but also the self-confidence and especially the self-discipline and work ethics that are at the heart of success in school and success in life. We've got to work hard. Young people, I'm talking to you. *[Laughter]* I've got a couple of them at home. And the truth is, the world's going to be more competitive,

and nobody's going to just give success to you. You're going to have to earn it, and that means you've got to apply yourself.

So that you're going to learn at home, first and foremost. But that's not where the responsibility ends. All of us have a responsibility—not just as parents, but as citizens—for giving our kids the best possible education.

Now, for a long time we weren't sure about how to give our kids that kind of education. There were a lot of arguments for a lot of years. Some people thought, if you just put more money into education, that would solve the problem. And then on—the other side thought, money doesn't matter, what we need is reform. In fact, there were those who argued that we should just dismantle the public education system altogether. Rather than working together, both sides remained locked in this stalemate year after year, decade after decade, and nothing much changed.

And then something began to happen in States and local school districts. Instead of getting caught up in these old, stale debates, people began to agreeing—to agree that, you know what, we need both more money and more reform. We need more resources for the schools, but we've got to reorganize how our schools are doing business in order to assure success for our young people. People began coming together—parents, students, teachers, administrators, reformers, local officials—and we started witnessing amazing success stories all across America.

There's a school in Denver, Bruce Randolph School, that went from being one of the worst schools in Colorado to graduating 97 percent of its seniors last May. In Cincinnati, Taft High School went from handing out only one diploma for every five students to graduating 95 percent of its seniors and preparing them for careers in technology.

So our goal as an administration, my goal as President, has been to build on these successes across America. We know what can work. And so 2 years ago, we started doing exactly that: trying to figure out how do we incentivize success by starting something—a competition called Race to the Top. So what we're doing is we're saying to States: Prove you're serious about reform, and we'll show you the money.

And because it's a competition for less than 1 percent of what our country spends on education each year, Race to the Top has led over 40 States to raise their standards for teaching, learning, and student achievement. And these standards weren't developed in Washington, but they were developed by Republican and Democratic Governors all across this country.

So we've made enormous progress. As Arne has said, this is probably the most significant education reform initiative that we've seen in a generation. But we need to make sure we're reaching every child in America, not just those in States or districts that take part in Race to the Top. And that's why not only do we need to continue this competition, we've got to open it up. We're letting local school districts apply. *[Applause]* We're going to let local school districts apply.

And that's why we need to take the same bottom-up approach when it comes to reforming America's most important education law, otherwise known as No Child Left Behind. We have to reform No Child Left Behind.

Now, over these last few weeks, during what we've called Education Month around the White House, I've been traveling across the country talking with folks about education. In fact, we've actually been doing that for the last couple of years. And what I've heard, what Arne's

heard, what the rest of my team has heard loud and clear from teachers and students and parents and communities is that No Child Left Behind got some things right and got some things wrong. The goals of No Child Left Behind were the right goals: making a promise to educate every child with an excellent teacher. That's the right thing to do; that's the right goal. Higher standards are right. Accountability is right. Shining a light on the achievement gap between students of different races and backgrounds and those with and without disabilities, that's the right thing to do.

But what hasn't worked is denying teachers, schools, and States what they need to meet these goals. That's why we need to fix No Child Left Behind. We need to make sure we're graduating students who are ready for college and ready for careers. We need to put outstanding teachers in every classroom and give those teachers the pay and the support that they deserve. [*Applause*] I got some applause for that one. [*Laughter*]

We need to not only hold failing schools accountable, we need to help turn those schools around. In the 21st century, it's not enough to leave no child behind, we need to help every child get ahead. We need to get every child on a path to academic excellence.

Now, here's the good news: I am proud of the commitment by Democrats and Republicans in Congress to fix No Child Left Behind, to make this reform a reality, because they recognize education is an area where we can't afford to drag our feet. As Arne says, our kids only get one shot at an education, and we've got to get it right. So that's why I'm calling on Congress to send me an education reform bill I can sign into law before the next school year begins—before next year's school year.

I want every child in this country to head back to school in the fall knowing that their education is America's priority. Let's seize this education moment. Let's fix No Child Left Behind.

Now, last week, we got a reminder of why it's so critical that we reform this law. According to new estimates, under the system No Child Left Behind put in place, more than 80 percent of our schools may be labeled as failing—80 percent of our schools. Four out of five schools will be labeled as failing. Now, that's an astonishing number. And our impulse is to either be outraged that the numbers are so high or skeptical that they're even true. And let's face it, skepticism is somewhat justified. We know that four out of five schools in this country aren't failing. So what we're doing to measure success and failure is out of line.

In fact, the list of supposedly failing schools is—includes schools that are making extraordinary progress, including Kenmore. So yes, we've still got more work to do here at this school to close the achievement gap. I think Dr. Word would agree with that. We've got to make sure that every student is on track. But I mean, we can see here at Kenmore what—Kenmore's thriving. You guys are doing great. You got more work to do, but you're doing fine.

So what this means, though, is, is that we need a better way of figuring out which schools are deeply in trouble, which schools aren't, and how we get not only the schools that are in really bad shape on track, how do we help provide the tools to schools that want to get even better to get better.

That way of measuring success and failure, that's the first problem with No Child Left Behind that we need to fix. Instead of labeling schools a failure one day and then throwing up our hands and walking away from them, we need to refocus on the schools that need the most help. We need to hold our schools accountable for the success of every child: Black, White, Latino, Asian, students with disabilities, English language learners.

We need to make sure some of our best teachers are teaching in some of our worst schools. We need to reward schools that are doing the difficult work of turning themselves around. We're going to have to take a series of steps across a broad range of measures to not only target our most troubled schools, but also raise expectations for all our schools.

So first, we're going to have to fix how schools are labeled and identified. But we've got to do more than that. In recent years, 15 States have actually lowered their standards to make it easier for their kids to meet the targets set by No Child Left Behind. Think about that. That was—that's a pretty perverse incentive when States say to themselves, you know what, let's lower our standards so that we have an easy time—easier time passing those standards so that we don't get punished under No Child Left Behind. That makes no sense. That's inexcusable.

So instead of measuring students based on whether they're above or below an arbitrary bar, we need to set better standards to make sure our students are meeting one clear goal: They're graduating ready for college and ready for a career. That's the goal we need to set. To know whether our kids are on track to meet that goal, we need better assessments.

Now, I want to speak to teachers in particular here. I'm not talking about more tests. I'm not talking about teaching to the test. We don't need to know whether a student can fill out a bubble. We do need to know whether they're making progress. We do need to know whether they're not only mastering reading, math, and science, but also developing the kinds of skills, like critical thinking and creativity and collaboration, that I just saw on display with the students that I met here. Those are skills they're going to need for the rest of their lives, not just to be good workers, but to be good citizens.

Now, that doesn't mean testing's going to go away; there will be testing. But the point is, is that we need to refine how we're assessing progress so that we can have accountability without rigidity, accountability that still encourages creativity inside the classroom and empowers teachers and students and administrators.

Of course, we also know that better standards, better assessments, and better curriculum won't make a difference without outstanding teachers. Every day in this country, teachers are doing a heroic job for their kids—every day. They're taking on the problems that follow students into class, come in early to rewrite lessons, spending hours after school tutoring students. I know; my sister is a teacher. Now, in South Korea, teachers are known as nation builders, and I think it's time we treated our teachers with the same level of respect right here in the United States of America.

But if we're serious about treating teachers that way, if we're serious about educating all our kids with an excellent teacher, then we're going to have to fix No Child Left Behind.

What No Child Left Behind says is that teachers need to be certified before they step into the classroom. Now, certification can be an important measure of the quality of the teacher, and obviously, we want teachers to be well-qualified. But when the quality of a teacher can make or break a child's education, we've got to make sure our certified teachers are also outstanding teachers, teachers who can reach every last child.

And so what we need to do is a better job preparing and supporting our teachers, measuring their success in the classroom, holding them accountable. We're going to have to stop making excuses for the occasional bad teacher. We're going to have to start paying good ones like the professionals that they are. If we truly believe that teaching is one of the most valued professions in society—and I can't think of a more important profession—then we've got to start valuing our great teachers.

And there are a lot of ways of valuing teachers. I don't know any teacher who got into it for the pay. [Laughter] The teachers who are here, you got into it for the kids, for the satisfaction of feeling like your passing on knowledge that these young people will use and carry on for the rest of their lives.

So we need to reward you by letting you make more of a difference for your kids. We need to build on what's being done here at Kenmore: give our best teachers more time to learn from each other, more time to mentor each other, more responsibilities in their schools. And to replace the baby boomers who are retiring in the coming years, we're going to have to recruit a whole new generation of teachers, including a hundred thousand new math and science teachers over the next decade.

So these are the steps we're going to have to take to fix No Child Left Behind. And together with what we're already doing to make college more affordable for millions more students, I'm confident these reforms will help us meet the goal that I set when I took office, which is, by the end of the decade, we will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. We'll be number one again. That's my priority.

So these steps will require reforms. They'll require a change in rules and standards and even attitudes. But let me just point out, there's no avoiding the fact they'll also cost some money. Fixing our failing schools costs money. It requires reform, but it costs some money. Recruiting and rewarding the best teachers will cost money. Making it possible for families to send their kids to college costs money.

Now, after a decade of deficits, there isn't a lot of money to go around. I understand that. And for too long, Government's been spending more than it's been taking in, and we can't keep that up. We're going to have to cut whatever spending we can afford to do without.

So I've called on a 5-year freeze on annual domestic spending. That will cut the deficit by more than \$400 billion over the next decade, making that kind of spending a much smaller share of the economy, smaller than it's been in 50 years. Right now, we're sitting down with Republicans and Democrats to find other ways to get our deficits under control.

But even as we do, we can't be reckless, and we can't be irresponsible about how we cut. Let me make it plain: We cannot cut education. We can't cut the things that will make America more competitive.

I mean, think about what happens in your own family when somebody loses a job or has an illness and you need to cut back. What do you do? You start by skipping that vacation you'd been planning, or you see what's on TV instead of going to the movies. Maybe you start packing your own lunch. There are a whole bunch of things that you might do. The last thing you're going to do is to dip into your child's college savings. That's too important. You're not going to give that up.

Well, what's true for your family is true for the American family. It's the same principle. A budget that sacrifices our commitment to education would be a budget that's sacrificing our country's future. That would be a budget that sacrifices our children's future, and I will not let it happen.

So yes, I'm determined to cut our deficits. But I refuse to do it by telling students here, who are so full of promise, that we're not willing to invest in your future. I'm not willing to tell these young people right here that their education isn't a priority.

I'm talking about students like Katherine Diaz, who says, "I think I should have the opportunity to be who I want to be." And it turns out that Katherine wants to either be a professional violinist or the first woman President of the United States. [Laughter] So she's still—Katherine's still—she's not sure yet. [Laughter] She might do both. You could do it one at a time: professional violinist, President. [Laughter]

Or I'm talking about Roberto Claire. Where's Roberto? There's Roberto, right here. He says, "With good schools and good teachers, we can grow up to be anything we want." So—[applause]. It turns out Roberto wants to be the first Hispanic President of the United States. [Laughter] So you guys will have to work out, sort of, the sequence. [Laughter]

Roberto, Katherine, the millions of students like them across the country, they need us to offer them the best education possible, not only because that's how they'll succeed, not only because that's how we'll outcompete countries around the world, but because that's what we do. That's who we are. That's what America's about.

We are a place that believes every child, no matter where they come from, can grow up to be anything they want, where Katherine or Roberto or a skinny kid with a funny name named Barack Obama—[laughter]—can grow up to be President of the United States. That's who we are. That's the commitment we make to the next generation.

And I'm confident that if we fix No Child Left Behind, if we continue to reform American education, continue to invest in our children's future, that's the America we'll always be.

Thank you. God bless you. God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:24 a.m. In his remarks, he referred to his sister Maya Soetoro-Ng.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Kenmore Middle School in Arlington, VA.

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