

NEA Reaction to President Obama's Dropout Plan (School Improvement Grants)

Background: On March 1, 2010, President Barack Obama announced new steps aimed at improving the nation's schools and graduation rates. He detailed plans that would permit school districts to choose from four reform models to improve their lowest-performing schools. They are: 1) the turnaround model, which includes firing staff 2) the restart model, which requires closing schools and restarting them under the management of a charter or school-management organization 3) the school closure model, which requires students to be placed in other high-achieving schools in the same district and 4) the transformation model, a set of comprehensive improvement strategies. *NEA supports the transformation reform model, which requires comprehensive instructional reforms and other collaborative improvement strategies.*

During the announcement, the President used the mass firings at Central Falls School District in Rhode Island to demonstrate how schools should be held accountable if schools are not making improvements, but have been given the chance to do so. NEA opposes this type of "reform."

More on the President's Plan: The administration has committed \$3.5 billion to fund changes in persistently low-performing schools around the country, with priority given to high schools with graduation rates below 60 percent. To curb the crisis, Obama's program will support "interventions" for 5,000 of the lowest-performing schools over the next five years. Obama's 2011 budget includes an additional \$900 million to support "School Improvement Grants." Schools receiving the funds will choose from four reform models.

The administration will also support dropout prevention strategies through \$50 million committed to the Graduation Promise Fund and through other reforms under the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act, which has passed the House. Those efforts include more personalized instruction, multiple pathways to graduation and better identification of at-risk students. Obama's 2011 budget also includes \$100 million for a new program to increase access to college-level, dual-credit and other accelerated courses in high-need high schools.

Key Messages:

- NEA and President Obama share the common goal of wanting to improve student learning and reduce the number of students who drop out of school.
- NEA supports the transformation reform model, which requires comprehensive instructional reforms and other collaborative improvement strategies. Educators are key partners in every successful education reform effort. The importance of collaboration must be emphasized if the federal money is to be used efficiently and effectively.
- NEA has a longstanding commitment to improving graduation rates, demonstrated by our action plan, dropout prevention publications and website, summits and partnerships with groups like America's Promise Alliance, Jobs for America's Graduates, and the Boys and Girls Clubs of America.

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- We must examine the factors that contribute to low performing schools like dated or ineffective curriculum, school safety or socioeconomic challenges.
- We must provide the kind of resources and programs needed for students to succeed. We look forward to sharing strategies that will benefit America's students.

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- This method has shown to be effective in schools like Broad Acres Elementary School in Montgomery County, Maryland. Broad Acres was the district's lowest performing school.
- The superintendent, teachers and other stakeholders worked together to transform the school.
- In just two years second grade reading scores increased by 18%, language 28%, language mechanics 29%, math 30% and math computation 25%. Details on improvements and the collaborative process are explained in a case study by the Tom Mooney Institute for Teacher and Union Leadership. (*For more details: <http://www.mitul.org/issues/school-transformation>*)
- There are other schools that work with all critical stakeholders to design and use specific strategies that are tailored to transform those particular schools: Evansville, Ind.; Chattanooga, Tenn.; Syracuse, N.Y; Alabama; Connecticut, Ohio and Oklahoma.

Washington, DC policymakers need to understand that real reform is community-based, comprehensive and collaborative. Real reform is sustainable reform; the kind that lasts past the politics and the promises; the kind that makes great public schools the permanent heart of the community.

On Central Falls School District (Rhode Island)

- The tone used to describe the teachers in Central Falls has been disparaging and unforgiving.
- It's time for federal officials to get out of the blame game and into the classroom.
- One thing is certain: Firing the entire faculty of a school that is on the path to improvement is no recipe for turning around a struggling high school.
- Relying on a magical pool of "excellent teachers" to spring forth and replace them is naïve at best and desperately misguided.

Approaches that point the finger at educators do nothing to bring about substantive improvements for students.

- To the contrary, they provide a momentary perception of correcting a problem. But in reality, we all know that the solution is not blame, it is collaboration...collaboration among school employees, management, parents and communities. There are no shortcuts to successful school improvement efforts.

- No one benefits when school staff are summarily dismissed—not communities and certainly not students. In the end all that approach gets anyone is a good sound bite.

NEA has a longstanding commitment to improving graduation rates. To compete in the 21st century, all of our citizens, at minimum, need a high school education.

- NEA has partnered with America's Promise Alliance to host and support dropout prevention summits across the country. The organization was founded by Gen. Colin Powell and is chaired by Alma Powell. President Obama applauded their efforts during his speech.
- NEA's other partners in dropout prevention are Jobs for America's Graduates and the Boys and Girls Clubs of America.
- NEA also offers a publication *Making Graduation a Priority* for educators to use as a resource to increase graduation rates. The publication is on our website at no charge. (*To view the publication:*)
- NEA mobilizes Association expertise and resources, and collaborates with external partners, to increase high school graduation rates through its newly-created Project Graduation.

Many of the President's suggestions to increase graduation rates are similar to NEA's 12-Point Action Plan for Reducing the School Dropout Rate. Some of the tactics NEA supports to combat the dropout crisis include: increasing individual attention, creating smaller learning communities, expanding graduation options and increasing workforce readiness programs.

NEA's plan:

1. **Mandate high school graduation or equivalency as compulsory for everyone below the age of 21.**
2. **Establish high school graduation centers for students 19–21 years old** to provide specialized instruction and counseling to all students in this older age group who would be more effectively addressed in classes apart from younger students.
3. **Make sure students receive individual attention** in smaller classes or learning communities and in programs (ie. summer and weekends) that provide tutoring and build on what students learn during the school day.
4. **Expand students' graduation options** through creative partnerships with community colleges in career and technical fields and with alternative schools.
5. **Increase career education and workforce readiness programs in schools** so that students see the connection between school and careers after graduation.
6. **Act early so students do not drop out** with high-quality, universal preschool and full-day kindergarten; strong elementary programs that ensure students are doing grade-level work when they enter middle school; and middle school programs that address causes of dropping out and ensure that students have access to courses that serve as the foundation for success in high school and beyond.
7. **Involve families in students' learning at school and at home** in new and creative ways so that all families can support their children's academic achievement.

8. **Monitor students' academic progress in school** through a variety of measures during the school year and help teachers make sure students do not fall behind academically.
9. **Monitor, accurately report, and work to reduce dropout rates** by gathering accurate data, establishing benchmarks in each state for eliminating dropouts, and adopting the standardized reporting method developed by the National Governors Association.
10. **Involve the entire community in dropout prevention** through family-friendly policies that provide time for employees to attend parent-teacher conferences; "adopt a school" programs that encourage volunteerism and community-led projects in school; and community-based, real-world learning experiences for students.
11. **Make sure educators have the training and resources they need to prevent students from dropping out**, including professional development focused on the needs of diverse students and students who are at risk of dropping out; up-to-date textbooks and materials, computers, and information technology; and safe, modern schools.
12. **Make high school graduation a federal priority** by calling on Congress and the president to invest \$10 billion over the next 10 years to support dropout prevention programs and states who make high school graduation compulsory.

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